



Is the energy that drives protests such as this sit-in actually sapped by corporate sustainability?

SUSTAINABILITY

Laying waste

Edward Humes weighs up an analysis of dangerously partial solutions to environmental damage.

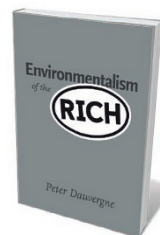
Peter Dauvergne's *Environmentalism of the Rich* is fascinating and infuriating. In it, Dauvergne examines the destructive power of our voracious consumer economy, and lauds activists who risk everything to slow down the plundering of resources that is perpetuated every time we click 'buy it now'. The book ends with a powerful but flawed argument that, for all its good works and intentions, modern environmentalism is too limited by a wealthy, privileged point of view to redirect the consumer juggernaut.

Environmentalism of the Rich convincingly lays the responsibility for our worst ecological problems — from climate change to ocean pollution — firmly on the doorstep of reckless consumer capitalism. Dauvergne diagnoses the West's economic system as fundamentally unsustainable, owing to its fixation on growth as the engine of prosperity. He links the resulting destruction of habitats and exhaustion of resources in developing countries to a modern, slickly promoted (but no less ruthless) form of colonialism by market share. The wealthiest half-billion humans commandeer most of the resources, then extend the devastation by marketing their excesses far and wide. Here, Dauvergne treads some of the same territory as Naomi Klein in *This Changes Everything* (Simon & Schuster, 2014),

her critique of "predatory capitalism" and the "extractive mindset" as drivers of global warming.

At his best, Dauvergne outrages us with tales of rainforests levelled to make toy packaging, or the island nation of Nauru, laid waste by foreign phosphate mining. His devastating commentary on the once-lauded Thomas Midgley Jr — the inventor who plagued the world with leaded petrol and ozone-destroying refrigerants — makes a strong case that our failure to put the onus on innovators to prove that products are not harmful is an ongoing scandal from which we may never recover.

Dauvergne leaves these discussions with stories of ecowarriors. Swiss activist Bruno Manser paraglided onto the lawn of the political leader of Sarawak in Borneo, and parachuted into a stadium-sized global conference to plead for a halt to deforestation. Dauvergne credits him with raising awareness of the cost of razing rainforests but, poignantly, the activist went missing in 2000, thinking that his



Environmentalism of the Rich
PETER DAUVERGNE
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impact had been "less than zero".

Yet Dauvergne concedes that Manser's lament had a point. Neither activism nor the pollution regulations that it has inspired have arrested destruction of nature; and most of the immediate consequences have been heaped on the poorest communities. Despite noting repeatedly that environmentalism of all types has failed, Dauvergne singles out for special criticism that promoted by the rich.

This is where his thesis becomes oddly contradictory. His definition of environmentalism of the rich is multilayered, but based mainly on the business case for sustainability. That includes green products, recycling, corporate sustainability and partnerships between environmental groups and corporations to monitor, say, fisheries protection or fair trade. He derides the "seductive" idea that buying ecoproducts makes small changes that can add up to major progress, dismissing the benefits as paltry beside the decimation caused by global consumption. Indeed, he suggests that the profits from new lines of sustainable products are used to propel destructive sales and growth. (Companies would frame it in the opposite way, arguing that their efforts are genuine and offset growth.)

The book reserves its harshest criticisms for environmental organizations and public figures (including, jarringly, primatologist Jane Goodall) for extolling such environmentalism as a source of optimism. And he makes a leap, arguing that the environmentalism of the rich saps the energy and outrage that drive protest, and encourages complacency.

This is where Dauvergne muddles his case. It is one thing to say that we have little reason to be optimistic. It's another to assert baldly, and with no real data, that the business world's new-found interest in sustainability is interfering with old-school activism. Elsewhere in the book, Dauvergne concedes that recycling, organic and sustainable products, and coalitions that certify sustainable seafood and forestry are making a positive contribution. And his claim that the environmentalism of the rich is destroying direct environmental protest is contradicted by his admiring litany of victorious protests and interventions throughout the world.

Dauvergne paints himself into a rhetorical corner. Would he prefer a return to the past, when big companies ignored environmentalists? What his evidence really shows is not that an interest in sustainable products is harming the environmental movement, but that it's not enough. Nor is activism, regulation or the combination of all three. Dauvergne is correct that making consumer products less bad doesn't make them good. He just can't admit what seems obvious to others: it's a start. ■

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