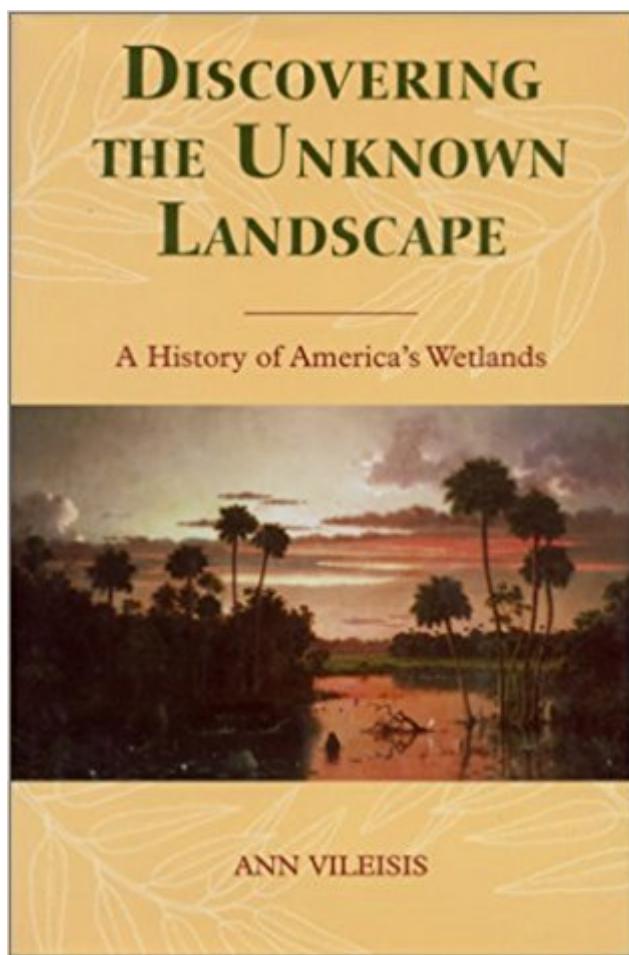


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# Discovering The Unknown Landscape: A History Of America's Wetlands



## Synopsis

The rapidly disappearing wetlands that once spread so abundantly across the American continent serve an essential and irreplaceable ecological function. Yet for centuries, Americans have viewed them with disdain. Beginning with the first European settlers, we have thought of them as sinkholes of disease and death, as landscapes that were worse than useless unless they could be drained, filled, paved or otherwise "improved." As neither dry land, which can be owned and controlled by individuals, nor bodies of water, which are considered a public resource, wetlands have in recent years been at the center of controversy over issues of environmental protection and property rights. The confusion and contention that surround wetland issues today are the products of a long and convoluted history. In *Discovering the Unknown Landscape*, Anne Vileisis presents a fascinating look at that history, exploring how Americans have thought about and used wetlands from Colonial times through the present day. She discusses the many factors that influence patterns of land use-ideology, economics, law, perception, art-and examines the complicated interactions among those factors that have resulted in our contemporary landscape. As well as chronicling the march of destruction, she considers our seemingly contradictory tradition of appreciating wetlands: artistic and literary representations, conservation during the Progressive Era, and recent legislation aimed at slowing or stopping losses. *Discovering the Unknown Landscape* is an intriguing synthesis of social and environmental history, and a valuable examination of how cultural attitudes shape the physical world that surrounds us. It provides important context to current debates, and clearly illustrates the stark contrast between centuries of beliefs and policies and recent attempts to turn those longstanding beliefs and policies around. Vileisis's clear and engaging prose provides a new and compelling understanding of modern-day environmental conflicts.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Whether seen as "bugs and mud" or as breeding grounds for countless species of fish, birds and other organisms, wetlands have borne much of the brunt of our development as a nation, argues environmental historian and naturalist Vileisis. Here, her painstaking research into the changing ways people thought, wrote about and thereby legislated wetlands throughout the many stages of the country's development makes a compelling case for their central role in our history. Vileisis takes us through our many uses of wetlands resources, from the filling of Boston's marshes, early rice-milling dams and the travels in search of "rare and Useful productions" of 18th-century botanist William Bartram, to the "great Florida land giveaway" of the 1870s and the over-logging of Southern swamps. Nearly two thirds of the book deals with our own century, including the formation of the Army Corp of Engineers (and their rise to power in controlling wetlands alteration) and the enactment of the National Environmental Policy Act in the late 1960s, as well as the expanding role of concerned citizens in policy making after WWII. Along the way, Vileisis shows how America's explosive population growth and subsequent housing development decimated the habitats of waterfowl as well as those of other species. In her fine book, Vileisis provides a comprehensive account of a not so slow-motion natural disaster. Illustrations. Copyright 1997 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

In this timely, well-documented work, environmental historian Vileisis explains the confusion and contention surrounding wetlands preservation in terms of the differing cultural values Americans have historically assigned to these problematic habitats, which are half public water, half private land. In the early chapters, she traces traditional beliefs stemming from the Colonial era that swamps are worthless unless drained to create private wealth. She then explores the more positive attitudes that emerged in reaction to pollution and impoverished landscapes and the scientific evidence of the valuable role of wetlands in providing clean water, flood control, and viable fish and wildfowl populations. From the salt marshes of Colonial New England to the recent efforts to restore the Florida Everglades, Vileisis discusses not only the changes in common practices, laws, and regulations but also the shifts in cultural and social attitudes. Highly recommended for most environmental collections. ?Joan S. Elbers, formerly with Montgomery Coll., Md. Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc.

We've all heard the statistics. As Vileisis puts it, "Overall, 221 million acres of wetlands once graced our nation's lower forty-eight states with a rich mosaic of life. More than half of these important landscapes no longer exist." This book traces a history of loss and chronicles the changing attitudes of the settlers from Europe and their descendants about wetlands. Caught up as we frequently are in controversies about how to identify wetlands, how to preserve them and mitigate their loss, this book provides a long perspective and calls for no less than a change in culture if we are to stop the inexorable downward trend. Vileisis describes how, to the first European settlers, what we call wetlands were "dismal swamps," linked by images such as Pilgrim Progress' "slough of despond" to whatever is dark and evil. Later wetlands represented opportunity: drain them and make a lot of money, whether selling real estate in Florida or planting more and more crops. This is more than a book about wetlands, however. It is a history of water policy in the United States. It tells the history of the great American institutions that grew up to deal with wetlands issues: the Soil Conservation Service, the U.S. Corps of Army Engineers, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and others. She also tells of the federal legislation that shapes our current ways of dealing with wetlands; how these laws got passed and how they have been enforced. Anyone attempting to understand the changing role of the Corp of Engineers in wetland protection, for example, should read this book. The book is also gracefully written and filled with great stories about entrepreneurs and dreamers who saw opportunities in controlling the rivers and draining the swamps, and how their plans almost always went awry. It also tells of those who helped change the cultural attitude toward wetlands, people like Mrs. Augustus Hemenway of Boston, who, with William Brewster, founded the Audubon Society and groups like Ducks Unlimited, who saw dramatic decreases of wildlife in their favorite hunting areas. When scientists began to understand the values of wetlands in the early 20th century, long-entrenched attitudes began to change. Vileisis points to the essential difficulty for understanding and dealing with wetlands: land is property, and our thinking is guided by concepts of "property rights." The waters of the country, on the other hand, have been understood as belonging to all of us. But wetlands are both land -- we can put a fence around it -- and water -- it flows and knows no boundaries. This is the key to why it has been so hard to shape public policy and attitudes about wetlands. As Vileisis puts it, "Americans were stuck somewhere between the conventional view of wetlands as property and the ecological view of wetlands as a life-support system." Vileisis takes heart from the resiliency of nature, but in her closing chapter she says, "...while there have been changes in attitudes, policies, and laws, and marked decrease in the rate of wetlands loss, the destruction of wetlands continues because powerful interests cling to the status quo that calculates

its profits in the ledger of short-term private gain with little concern for the common good." For those of us who work to change this cultural attitude, this book extends our sense of interconnectedness to those who lived before us. Vileisis says, "Informed by history, we can remember the trade-offs already made and turn away from the mistakes and misunderstandings of a time when we knew no better."

Ann Vileisis' award-winning book is a terrific primer for anyone who wants to learn about society's changing attitudes toward wetlands and the always controversial topic of wetlands protection. Her groundbreaking research is matched by a keen grasp of both the details and the big picture. For anyone who wants to learn more about what's gone wrong with the nation's wetlands protection system, try the newly published *Â Paving Paradise: Florida's Vanishing Wetlands and the Failure of No Net Loss* (Florida History and Culture)

This is a great primer for anyone interested in the history of our wetland ecosystems- from armchair ecologists to the PhDs. It helped me enormously in understanding how our wetlands came to be what they are today. Vileisis' style is engaging and clear, making this a real page turner. I didn't want to put it down.

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