In the 1920s, while teaching law at Columbia University, William O. Douglas worked at a prestigious law firm. He wasn't happy. The partners, he noted, "couldn't climb a mountain, couldn't tie a dry fly; they knew nothing about the world that was closest to me, the real world, the natural world."

Douglas returned briefly to his beloved Yakima before settling in the East, as a professor at Yale, chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission and then associate justice of the Supreme Court.

But he never lost his passion for nature. In "The Environmental Justice: William O. Douglas and American Conservation," Adam Sowards, a professor of history at the University of Idaho, examines how Douglas used his prestige and power to reshape the conservation movement in the U.S.

The protest hikes Douglas led in the 1950s, along the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal near the nation's capital and in Olympic National Park, slowed or stopped road construction. They lent credibility to conservation when it wasn't on the radar screen of many Americans.

Realizing that only structural political change could guarantee a clean, healthy environment, Douglas advocated preservation of and access to "pure water streams, virgin forests, the woodchuck and the antelope," as entitlements "enshrined in our Bill of Rights."

He wasn't very successful. Impatient and arrogant, Douglas "did not laboriously construct arguments based on received legal wisdom," Sowards writes. Instead, he lashed out at the "manufacturing-industrial complex" for creating "technological sewers" and bringing the nation -- and the world -- to the brink of environmental disaster. He indicted the Environmental Protection Agency, Congress and the White House as well for doing the bidding of "those with enough money."

Passionate personal pleas about shoddy fulfillment of environmental impact statements or the dangers of DDT, however, did not persuade Douglas' colleagues to sign on to his opinions. Nor did his dissents "matter greatly to the canons of environmental and constitutional law."

Nonetheless, Sowards prefers to emphasize Douglas' efficacy as a public intellectual and his prescience. Certain that wilderness would vanish unless a dedicated minority secured a mandate from the majority, he kept hope alive. These days, moreover, his demand that animals and inanimate objects "about to be despoiled, defaced and invaded by roads and bulldozers" have legal rights (like ships and corporations) doesn't seem all that crazy.

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Adam M. Sowards
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