

# Book Review

Journalism & Mass Communication Educator  
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David B. Sachsman and JoAnn Myer Valenti, eds.

*Routledge Handbook of Environmental Journalism*. London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2020, 442 pp., \$250 (hardback), \$47.65 (ebook). ISBN: 978-1-138-47850-3 (hbk); ISBN: 978-1-351-06840-6 (ebk).

**Reviewed by:** Katherine E. Rowan , *George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, USA*.

DOI: 10.1177/10776958211034684

The biggest stories of our lifetimes. That is what many environmental journalists say they cover. But despite its importance, environmental news is often undervalued.

This volume battles that reaction. It does so by sharing stories about environmental dangers, and the persistence, pride, and pain environmental journalists around the world experience reporting these dangers. Edited by David B. Sachsman, George R. West Chair of Excellence in Communication and Public Affairs at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, and JoAnn Myer Valenti, founding academic member of the Society of Environmental Journalists and *Fellow* of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, many of its 37 chapters offer first-person accounts of environmental journalists' challenges, triumphs, and lessons learned. While every section of the book is important, its firsthand accounts by reporters and academics worldwide make this volume an important resource. I recommend its purchase by academic libraries.

The ebook (\$47.65) would be an excellent text for courses on environmental journalism, environmental communication, environmental education, sustainability, or global affairs. Selected chapters would illuminate instruction in environmental science, business, engineering, and clean production.

Regarding textbooks, if you need a book that covers AP style, this is not it. On the contrary, for faculty who want to inspire students, the ebook works. One could kick start an environmental journalism class by assigning a paper on what counts as environmental journalism and the social conditions that make this reporting possible. For this article, an instructor might assign the co-editors' introduction, along with several other chapters. I would include Pulitzer Prize winner Mark Schleifstein's chapter on how covering Hurricane Katrina shaped his view of bias (is it possible to avoid bias concerning hurricane management, he writes, when there is 15 feet of water from Katrina in your basement?). The third chapter students might read for this assignment could be Angela Posada-Swofford's compelling story of the melting ice in Antarctica

and its impact on Argentina's climate, or Maitrejee Mishre's account of environmental journalism in India, where traditional print outlets still thrive along with social media, or Fiona Macleod's on Oxeckers.org, an investigative journalism organization. Oxeckers use satellite data and drones to cover stories like rhino poaching and badly managed mines in Africa. Nearly all chapters in this volume describe environmental journalists covering dangers while they themselves, as the book's co-editors note, have become an endangered professional species with the decline of traditional news outlets.

The book has six sections and an introduction. In the introduction, the co-editors explain environmental news reporting is difficult in part because "the stories tend to be more negative than positive, reporting on problems more than solutions" (p. 1). This means that a weather forecast showing the next day will be pleasant is unlikely to garner attention, but a peer-reviewed scientific paper showing dramatic decline of insect species is major news.

This example illustrates another challenge. Many environmental stories need to include at least some explanatory text. When reporting a scientific paper that shows three quarters of flying insects have vanished in nature reserves across Germany over 25 years, one cannot assume readers know why this matters. Many dismiss insects as trivial. In fact, as reporters covering this story for *The Guardian* explain, insects are essential to the world's ecosystems. They provide food to many other animals and pollination that makes about one third of human food possible. Occasionally authors in this volume underexplain key concepts. For instance, reporter Craig Pittman does a fantastic job of explaining why laws passed to protect wetlands in Florida failed. His chapter also needs a brief account of what counts as a wetland (wetlands are not simply puddles but rather areas where prolonged presence of water creates distinct plants and soils that, like kidneys in humans, filter impurities). This information helps explain why widespread destruction of wetlands in Florida was a terrible idea. Fortunately, other chapters put this explanatory challenge front and center. Author Jane Kay titles her chapter, "What was tritium? Conquering our own ignorance." Her account says learning about health effects of radiation was hard. Regardless, her coverage helped shut down a Tucson, Arizona, plant releasing radiation found in children's cafeteria food and local gardens. Tritium emits a type of radiation that, if inhaled, ingested, or absorbed through the skin can cause cancer.

## What Else Readers Learn

The first section of this volume offers chapters by prominent scholars and well-known journalists. Professor Mark Neuzil covers the history of environmental journalism from nature writing in the Hebrew Bible through current perils. Pulitzer Prize winner Eric Freeman reports on environmental journalists worldwide who lost their lives covering environmental news and the motivations of many still alive. Freeman also discusses varying cultural expectations. In some parts of the world, payment to sources for information is an expectation, while in many U.S., U.K., and European news organizations that practice is viewed as unethical. Other chapters explain how to use audio

storytelling (Judy Fahys' chapter), documentaries (Valenti's), and tweets (Bud Ward's) to share environmental news in compelling ways.

Part II covers environmental journalism in the United States. Pulitzer-Prize winner Rae Tyson describes reporting Love Canal, where unsuspecting homeowners had their neighborhoods and lives upended by toxic emissions. Also in this section are chapters by other giants such as Len Ackland describing his coverage of the now-closed nuclear bomb factory at Rocky Flats, 16 miles from Denver, Colorado.

Perhaps the most eye-opening sections are parts III through VI, where environmental journalists from around the world—the U.K., Europe, Ukraine, Russia, Asia, Australia, Africa, the Middle East, and South America—describe their challenges and triumphs. This volume introduced me to Ji Li's environmental reports in China, Mariana Verbovska's in Ukraine, and Masako Konishi's in Japan.

The more the importance of environmental news is felt worldwide, the more it may be understood. This volume educates and inspires us to learn about environmental dangers so we address them.

### **ORCID iD**

Katherine E. Rowan  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6397-6674>