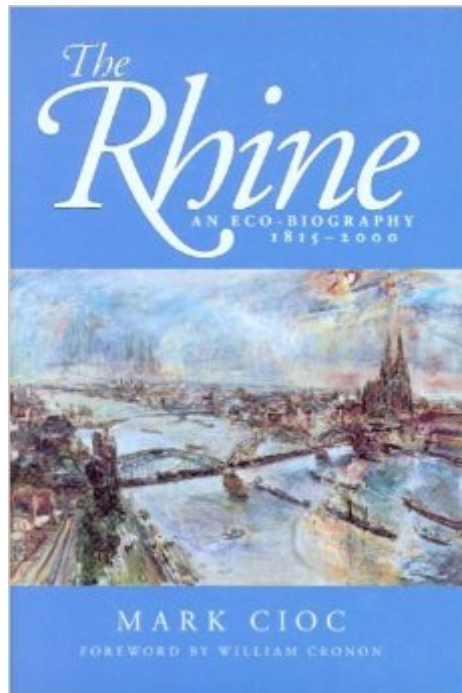


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The Rhine: An Eco-biography, 1815-2000 (Weyerhaeuser Environmental Books)



Synopsis

The Rhine River is Europe's most important commercial waterway, channeling the flow of trade among Switzerland, France, Germany, and the Netherlands. In this innovative study, Mark Cioc focuses on the river from the moment when the Congress of Vienna established a multinational commission charged with making the river more efficient for purposes of trade and commerce in 1815. He examines the engineering and administrative decisions of the next century and a half that resulted in rapid industrial growth as well as profound environmental degradation, and highlights the partially successful restoration efforts undertaken from the 1970s to the present. The Rhine is a classic example of a "multipurpose" river -- used simultaneously for transportation, for industry and agriculture, for urban drinking and sanitation needs, for hydroelectric production, and for recreation. It thus invites comparison with similarly over-burdened rivers such as the Mississippi, Hudson, Colorado, and Columbia. The Rhine's environmental problems are, however, even greater than those of other rivers because it is so densely populated (50 million people live along its borders), so highly industrialized (10% of global chemical production), and so short (775 miles in length). Two centuries of nonstop hydraulic tinkering have resulted in a Rhine with a sleek and slender profile. In their quest for a perfect canal-like river, engineers have modified it more than any other large river in the world. As a consequence, between 1815 and 1975, the river lost most of its natural floodplain, riverside vegetation, migratory fish, and biodiversity. Recent efforts to restore that biodiversity, though heartening, can have only limited success because so many of the structural changes to the river are irreversible. *The Rhine: An Eco-Biography, 1815-2000* makes clear just how central the river has been to all aspects of European political, economic, and environmental life for the past two hundred years.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Marc Cioc's book *The Rhine: An Eco-Biography* is a detailed case study of the impact of human engineering on arguably the most important river on the European continent. It is a history of both the Rhine and of the Rhine Commission, the international body created in 1815 to oversee the river and mold it into what amounts to a commercial canal. Utilizing a variety of scientific sources as well as historical accounts of the various agencies that had control over the Rhine, Cioc reveals that human changes to the river that took into account only the immediate, commercial impacts of their actions severely damaged its biodiversity and vitality. However, he argues, recent efforts to compensate for earlier destruction of the river's ecosystem are achieving moderate success. In his book, Cioc traces the history of efforts in the past two centuries to control the Rhine and make it more useful for human commercial and industrial ventures. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries, he argues, were a time of great ecological change for the river, the most dramatic since the Ice Age. The Rhine was seen as a "multipurpose" waterway, using by the various countries through which it flows for a variety of purposes, from urban sanitation and transportation to industrial production and power generation. Under the guiding hand of various commissions and communes, river engineers took on the Rhine and tried to shape it into a more commercially useful river. Just as John F. Richards argues in his book *The Unending Frontier*, European colonizers were awed into wastefulness by the abundance of natural resources they found, most politicians, business people, and scientists believed for decades that the Rhine was simply too vast to ever be harmed by waste or overuse.

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