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"The Isthmus of Panama and the Knowledge Anthropocene"

Sutter, Paul S.



Open-pit coal mine, Hambach, Germany.

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In the final chapter of *Man and Nature*, his landmark 1864 study of an earth transformed by human action, George Perkins Marsh looked ahead to a series of "projected or possible geographic changes by man," including the "cutting of marine isthmuses." He had in mind efforts like the Suez Canal, then under construction, which he celebrated as "the greatest and most truly cosmopolite physical improvement ever undertaken by man." While Marsh was an early critic of the human capacity to upset nature's harmonies, and the founder of a modern conservation movement aimed at blunting human improvidence, he could be surprisingly sanguine about such megaprojects. As his biographer David Lowenthal noted, Marsh "was an absorbed observer—now admiring, now alarmed—of huge engineering works." Indeed, *Man and Nature*, though a cautionary book, often praised humanity's escape from the determinist powers of nature. As Marsh put it in an 1860 letter to Spencer Baird, while many leading geographers of the era taught "that the earth made man"—that human history and culture were deeply shaped by environmental forces and circumstances—his book would show that "man in fact made the earth"—that humans finally had become, as he put it in *Man and Nature*, "truly a geographical agency." (From the article)

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