

David L. McConnell,
Marilyn D. Loveless,
*Nature
and the Environment
in Amish Life.*

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The issues of environmental protection and damaged relationships in nature have become unavoidable — from personal and family levels to corporations and global politics. Regardless of worldview differences, the vast majority of people are aware that the human impact on the environment is large and often negative. Many ways of solving this problem are offered, but so far not one has been found that would initiate a sufficient number of satisfied and persistent people in a way that would yield good results.

In searching for ways to solve those problems, people are more and more inclined to see the simpler, slower, agrarian life as a way forward in a hectic, urbanized world cluttered with necessary and unnecessary things.

The authors of *Nature and the Environment in Amish Life*, David L. McConnell and Marilyn D. Loveless observe that the sentiment about Amish people as “in tune with nature” is persistent and strong among the American public. The intention to see how the Amish really see nature and how they impact the natural environment are central questions that they ask as stated in the preface of this pioneering book, which studies the religious realities of Amish people and the way it informs and leads them to act with the environment.

The methodology used in this work was diverse. It involved seven years of fieldwork with authors speaking to hundreds of Amish and non-Amish people, conducting formal interviews and surveys, observing and participating in the everyday life of some families, and using available documents.

The book has twelve chapters divided into four parts. After the preface, the first chapter, *Deciphering the Amish Relationship with Nature* stands outside of those four parts and is an introduction to the subject matter. The authors lay out two extreme outside views on Amish and their way of looking and acting upon nature — one that is “the idealization of the Amish as models for how the rest of us should live”, and the other as “outright dismissal of the Amish way of life as limiting human potential”. Throughout the work, authors fairly and sensitively work to uncover the reality of the situation. As always, answers are far from simple and straightforward, but more complex, layered, and depend on lots of factors.

Amish are part of the Anabaptist group of Christians who originated in what is today Switzerland. The main characteristics include adult baptism and a very cautious attitude to the use of modern technology, concerned mainly with how it affects the quality of family and community life. They are a protestant group that was not well accepted by the rest of the reformers. After grave persecutions in the 16th and 17th centuries, a group of several hundred ancestral families came to the USA in the 18th century. These days, Amish are not as coherent a group as they initially appear to be. They are divided mainly on the issues

of technology use and on the degree as to how much of *this world* they can be. The authors state that there are around forty affiliations of Amish people, with the main ones studied in this work being Swartzentruber, Andy Weaver, Old and New Order, listed from more conservative (or “low”) to more progressive (“high”) groups. This division is important because it influences how a certain group acts in everyday life, and how it affects the local or brotherly environment.

In the first part, *Growing up Rural*, through two chapters (*Raising Children at Nature Doorstep* and *The Amish Ecological Footprint*) the authors examine how Amish children experience nature differently from most non-Amish children today, and how Amish stand on the mathematical calculation of “ecological footprint” — the number of environmental effects of everyone’s choices. In lots of aspects, Amish children have dramatically different childhoods compared to average 21st-century Western children — they spend way more time outdoors, experiencing weather, plants, and animals more directly. As stated in the book, the Amish are accustomed to the heat, humidity, and seasonal changes in daylight, and are very aware of the night sky. All of this is lived through the work children do from a young age and hobbies that are mainly outdoor activities. In schools that have eight grades, Amish children do not learn about nature from a scientific aspect, but rather from a strongly religious one, in which God is the creator of all things in the world, and people are merely creatures with souls, acting as stewards of all nature.

The ecological footprint account yielded very interesting results. Tak-

ing into consideration transportation, household economy, diet, and consumption it was shown that all Amish groups had statistically lower per capita carbon impact compared to their non-Amish rural neighbors. Amish’s main method of transportation is a horse and buggy. Their commitment to growing their own food and not fully embracing the consumerist mentality is shown as a good way to make less of a negative environmental impact. The authors notice that the Amish are also changing, and it is harder and harder for them to resist letting the modern way of life into their households.

In the next chapter, *Working with Nature*, the authors wanted to take a closer look at some specific ways Amish interact with nature through three chapters about Amish agriculture, the wood-products industry, and alternative animal breeding.

Amish still very much adopt the agrarian culture, although in the last few decades, more non-agrarian jobs have emerged, like shops and woodwork-related jobs. Their way of farming has always been diverse, with lots of families having different plant cultures and domestic animals on the farm, far less negatively impactful to the environment than intensive modern farming of a small number of annual crops. The usage of chemical pesticides and genetically modified seeds was where they gave way to modern technology. Lately, there has been a growing number of Amish farmers opting for certified organic farming, as a way to become more economically sound and sustainable. Apart from farming, woodworking and furniture-making are also typically recognized Amish professions. This is a very nature-impacting industry that

saw a rise in regulations from government agencies, with some of them colliding with the Amish way of using forests. The authors show examples of how Amish manage to adapt their way of working to be more in accord with the regulations, but also with the idea for better forest stewardship. The alternative animal breeding in Amish communities was something I was not aware of. They are a big part of commercial breeding of popular dog breeds (or their combinations), some exotic birds, whitetail deer, and horses that expands their needs for transportation and working animals. All those activities are powered with good earnings that allow families to live more comfortably and are not without criticisms from within Amish communities.

In the third part of the book, *Reconfiguring Leisure and the Outdoors*, there are three chapters about gardening and herbal and natural medicine, nature-based recreation, and Amish literal and visual artists and their work regarding nature.

Gardening is still an essential part of the Amish way of life, emphasizing the role of women. Most families still produce vegetables that they use themselves, but apart from producing healthy and fresh meals, Amish view gardening as a way to be *closer to God's heart*. The strong belief that God gives humans what is needed through nature, especially through plants, is shown in the vast knowledge about herbal remedies and ways of natural healing. This sometimes collides with conventional medicine, but most Amish do combine both ways of healing. With the Amish becoming more affluent and prosperous, new challenges appear — too much free time for young people, who do not have to

work so much at home anymore. That led to new ways of using free time in Amish communities which still have a lot to do with nature — hunting and fishing, birding, and horseback riding. Amish were always occupied by those activities, but more for existential reasons and needs. Now they do it more and more as recreational activities, but still show closeness of connection to nature as the central tenet of Amish life. The spread of literary writing and visual arts is also quite a new reality in most Amish circles. Their insistence on not being too worldly and individualistic was the reason that up until recently not many writers and drawers/painters were in Amish communities. With more free time, more Amish people started to travel, write diaries, and do drawings about it. Nature proved to be a good and safe inspiration which offered lots of ways to connect it with theology and to give a morality tale.

In the last part, *The Amish as Environmentalists*, the authors conclude their research with a deeper focus on Amish attitudes toward environmental issues locally and globally.

Amish are culturally oriented towards their own community with less custom and interest in looking more globally. The authors showed that with the open and soft approach from outside groups like agencies and environmental initiatives that showed local and global benefits of some changes, the Amish will adapt.

The last chapter, *Parochial Stewards: The Amish Encounter with the Nature and the Environment*, is a sort of conclusion of the research, where authors summarize the findings to the questions from the beginning of the book, and give answers that flow right through the middle of two ex-

treme looks at Amish — they want to demystify the Amish, which includes a realistic and informed insight that accounts for a variety of different factors shaping their interaction with the natural world in their own context, but also, they do emphasize that Amish “remain among our last living examples of a society that consciously chooses to resist being co-opted by a hypermodern world”.

McConnell and Loveless conclude that “to see Amish approaches to nature, can be a good catalyst for self-reflection”. This work offers a great

starting point for that, as all those interested and involved in environmental protection, ecoethical subjects, religious and anthropological studies can find detailed and rich resources to look into the Amish world.

Although their way of living is not intentionally environmentally conscious, the results of their life which emphasizes family and community life over material things prove to be environmentally positive.

Zvonimir Kvesić