

Review: Big Box USA: *The Environmental Impact of America's Biggest Retail Stores*

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Big box stores have become one of the most popular places for shopping in the United States, particularly in the last several decades. The editors of *Big Box USA: The Environmental Impact of America's Biggest Retail Stores* provide several essays to examine how these very large retail stores have physically impacted the environmental landscape. Additionally, the last two essays address cultural aspects of these stores. Using the "tools of environmental history" (p.7) this book does not completely cover the topic, instead provides an opening with some examples. In the introduction, the editors state this volume is an invitation for further research and discussion. Focused on the environment or the consumer, the essays do not consider other aspects such as big box store employees, except for a single mention.

The book starts with Walmart and the company continues as a strong focus throughout, which is natural since the big box format began with Sam Walton and his vision for his stores. With the new technologies and placement of Walmart stores, the company has grown to become the largest retailer in the United States and one of the top in the world. Thus, it sets the stage for other retail businesses to follow this model. The model focuses on locations in small towns near highways, which the book demonstrates has detrimental effects on the environment.

This slim work is divided into three sections, splitting unevenly the six essays, and framed by an Introduction and Conclusion. Each essay, or chapter, is written by a different author; the three editors author one chapter each. Every chapter contains several photographs, which help illustrate the arguments, and conclude with a notes section. An index in the back finalizes the book.

It strongly showcases the relationship between big box stores and the environmental effects. Several examples include: how small towns are affected with increased traffic, wider roads and increased pollution; and a deep look into development on wetlands and how mitigation measures have increasingly become offsite. One chapter is devoted to Walmart's goal of buying only certified sustainable seafood. This deep look into how the Walton Family Foundation helped shape the certification process by donating millions of dollars to the organization

certifying suppliers through Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), which “an increasing number of scientists and conservation groups [has] found fault with MSC practices” (p.87).

The book’s last section took a different approach with a cultural view of big box outdoor equipment stores. These stores, along with incurring the same problems as other big box stores, also shape the conversation of who the outdoors is actually for. One could say these stores are selling the outdoors to consumers, and primarily catering to a white male consumer. One essay delves into political bias as revealing that some of the merchandise sold entails “coded messages of brands popular by those with a certain political ideology, which are items unrelated to hunting or fishing” (p.165). An analysis of catalog models of gender and race are compared between several stores, which strongly points to how these big box retailers assert who is allowed to recreate in the outdoors.

One cannot find any solutions in this book, other than changing one’s own personal shopping habits. The summation found in the conclusion may reach a bit further than some of the essays may warrant, but does show a way forward for more research and discussion. An environmental studies course or scholar interested in the environmental effects of retail could do well to read this book as a starting point.

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