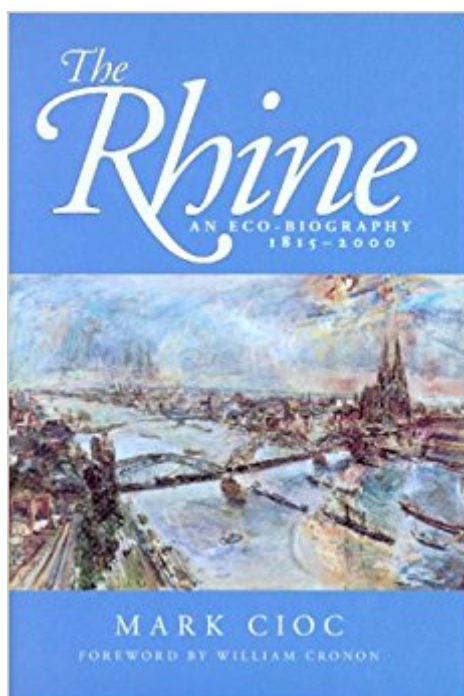




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# The Rhine: An Eco-biography, 1815-2000 (Weyerhaeuser Environmental Books)



## 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

In 1815, the Congress of Vienna placed the Rhine under an "international regime" and, seeking to promote free trade among the nations along its banks, established the Rhine Commission to manage it. From an economic standpoint, the scheme worked, but from an ecological perspective, the same engineering feats that made the river profitably navigable also sapped its natural dynamism, making it "Europe's romantic sewer." As demonstrated by historian Cioc (Pax Atomica: The Nuclear Defense Debate in West Germany during the Adenauer Era), the defilement of the Rhine is a case study in the tragedy of unintended consequences. But it is also a fascinating story because the river today is the product of the complex interplay among all of the major forces that shaped modern European history-industry, technology, economy, politics, and, finally, ecology. As such, its story is similar to those that could be told about many other major rivers. (At present, under the oversight of the Rhine Protection Commission, the river's environmental health is making modest but measurable progress.) This piece of impressive scholarship is suitable for academic libraries. Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"As demonstrated by historian Cioc, the defilement of the Rhine is a case study in the tragedy of unintended consequences. But it is also a fascinating story because the river today is the product of the complex interplay among all of the major forces that shaped modern European historyâ • industry, technology, economy, politics, and, finally, ecology. As such, its story is similar to those that could be told about many other major rivers. . . . Impressive scholarship."â •Library Journal"This enjoyable, scholarly and well-written book is a very welcome addition to the literature in English on the environmental history of Continental Europe, and students as well as professionals will certainly read it with profit and pleasure."â •Environment and History"Sometimes ironic and humorous, consistently clear and persuasive, Cioc's 'life story' of the Rhine deftly weaves together politics, economics, and river ecology.. A compelling study."â •Environmental History"A concise and remarkably authoritative overview of the Rhine..Compelling reading."â •American Historical Review"An impressive book..It is erudite, well-written, and informatively illustrated, and it will unquestionably serve for years to come as an obligatory point of departure for further research into the environmental dimensions of the Rhine's turbulent history."â •Technology and Culture"As the

first true environmental history of a major European river, Mark Cioc's stimulating new book is a sign that European environmental history is entering a period of maturation; his eco-biography will serve benchmark for future scholarly work in the field. By tackling the Rhine, the classic European river, Cioc offers an environmental history that transcends national histories."â •H-German Reviews

The title - an Eco-biography - makes the book sound like it would only be interesting to people obsessed with ecology. Instead the book is more of a history of how the Rhine has changed since 1815. I read the book because I am going on a cruise on the Rhine. I recommend the book to anyone who is doing that or has some other connection with the river.

This book is not a good choice for an introduction to the Rhine river communities which is what I was looking for. Instead it is a study of the evolution of the river.

What an unexpected pleasure. The title of this book caused me to expect some very dry reading, but as I am planning a Rhine river cruise, I thought I'd best tackle the job as there seemed to be no other "biographies" of the Rhine. I thought the history of the Rhine would be a history of geopolitics, war, and other essentially human events. Not so. This book is the story of the river, and the story is told in a way which is both scholarly and engaging. The author is skilled in managing what appears to be a prodigious amount of research which he presents in a style which conveys a warm respect for the life of the river.

Very technical

Hydrology oriented, the book helps us understand why we reengineer rivers for progress and profit, straighten and control them to our subsequent regret.

Plenty of information and well researched.

This is an in-depth chronicle of the re-engineering of the Rhine from its natural form to a polluted, rammed, canal. The Rhine was straightened, used as a dumping place for chemicals and sewage, and lost its ability to sustain living things. Unlike the American west, there is work being done to rehabilitate the Rhine. However, like the American west, the existing dependence of the people on the current situation will not allow it to be restored to the Rhine of the mid 19th century. A well

researched book told in a scientific manner stating facts without hysteria.

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. Seeing the river as an "imperfect canal," countries and companies attempted to straighten the river, standardize its flow, and eliminate its floodplains. All of these efforts to tame and harness the Rhine had incredibly deleterious effects on the rivers' diverse ecosystems. Cioc argues that these attempts to simplify the river into a commercially useful tool effectively destroyed the diversity of habitats, flora and fauna that once populated its banks and waters; this is not unlike William Cronon's argument that European colonizers simplified and thus de-diversified the natural environments of New England (*Changes in the Land*). The coal and chemical industries, particularly in Germany, polluted many tributaries to the point of biodeath, as did the use of the waters as an urban sewer and waste product repository. Efforts to reshape the river eliminated floodplains and other important natural habitats like islands, which not only eliminated a great deal of animal and plant life but also increased the risk of flooding in many areas. As Cioc reveals, those who failed to see the Rhine as a natural system and instead perceived it as a machine were responsible for creating long-term environmental damage in exchange for short-term political and financial

gains. Cioc's book is sometimes difficult for a reader without any scientific training; his close examination of the river's biological profile is thorough, but often challenging to follow. The non-chronological organization of many of the historically-focused chapters also makes it hard to keep track of the historical context in which changes to the river were made. And Cioc's rather gloomy tone often makes humans out to be the evil destroyers of nature - although it's possible that this feeling was unavoidable on his part after discovering the wholly negative effects of industrial use on the Rhine. But Cioc ends on a more hopeful note; his cautious optimism about current Rhine restoration projects is certainly heartening, and shows that humans can actually encourage biodiversity as well as eliminate it. In general, the book is a comprehensive and fascinating account of a very important world river.

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