

## BOOK REVIEW

THE AMERICAN WEST AT RISK: SCIENCE, MYTHS, AND POLITICS OF LAND ABUSE AND RECOVERY. H.G. Wilshire, J.E. Nielson, R.W. Hazlett. Oxford: New York, NY. 2008. ISBN 978-0-19-514205-1 (hardcover), US\$35.00, xii + 619 pp.

The dramatic vistas, wide open spaces, wild rivers, and seemingly endless forests of the American West cast a sheen of natural splendor across the landscape. Beneath that sheen, however, is a traumatic legacy of misuse, degradation, and alteration of the land. The growing population of the American West, coupled with increased consumption and past mismanagement has created a crisis that permeates the land, air, and water of the western half of the continent. The authors of this book marshal their knowledge of the ecological changes and consequences related to the ongoing degradation of the American West to argue that much of the West constitute a commons, subject to gross exploitation led by both the government and private corporations.

Chapters devoted to forestry, agriculture, ranching, and mining frame the first section of the book, charting the degradation associated with intense commercial use of the land. The remaining substantive chapters range from descriptions of urban sprawl, military land uses, roads, water, waste disposal, erosion, and the environmental consequences of the current boom in outdoor recreation. The conclusion attempts to chart a way forward for the West by emphasizing new technologies, a commitment to maintaining local communities, and local resources. Ten appendices fill in technical gaps in the main narrative and add a level of concreteness and concision to the previous chapters. These appendices range from a chronology of land conservation in the United States from 1781 to 1976, to a tracing of mineral resources from extraction to consumption, to the insidious ecological effects of 'Bunker Buster' bombs. The chapters all fit neatly together, telling a story of environmental degradation rich in ecological analysis and historical detail. The chapters pertaining to military and nuclear uses of the landscapes are particularly rich and insightful. The appendices also add important detail to the book and will be exceptionally valuable as student resources for those who use the book as a teaching tool.

*The American West at Risk* presents a history of environmental degradation of the American West as a long and complicated tragedy of the commons. "Western U.S. public lands, about 47 per cent of the region, are this nation's patrimony." For the authors, the free use of these lands, by capital interests, the government, and by individual homeowners and recreational users, "will mean utter destruction" (p. 7). The presentation of the specific ecological effects of industry and government disturbance of the landscape is thorough and well presented. The authors bring with them a wealth of experience in geology and other earth sciences which add a density to the book without dragging the narrative into detailed technical notes.

Occasionally, however, that technical depth comes at the expense of a greater understanding of historical contexts of specific environmental impacts. A greater engagement with the social science and historical literatures concerning the environment in the American West would have added a complexity to the overall narrative, and the tragedy of the commons approach in particular. The pervasive tragedy of the commons perspective at times dominates the narrative, overwhelming moments of cooperation, political economic manipulations, and well intentioned but profound scientific failures, and complex nature/society interactions scattered throughout Western history (see for example Fiege, 1999; Langston, 1995; Merrill, 2002; White, 1995). These stories might shift the narrative away from one centered on greed and ecological degradation to tell more complex stories that bring together histories of science, cultural conflict, and complex environmental impacts.

The inclusion of some of these complexities would have made the authors' main point even stronger. Ultimately each citizen has a stake in the environmental protection of these lands. It is only through sustained citizen involvement that the degradation of the American West can be halted, and hopefully reversed. "So this is the bottom line, and also the starting point. Americans have to start caring about the survival of small communities, their local towns, and their local resources" (p. 374). The book quite effectively documents the damage that has been done to the landscapes of the American West and that reversing these trends will require a great deal of work. The richness of the research, diversity of landscapes discussed, and documentation of the variety of ways we have contributed to their degradation should make clear the extent of the challenge in confronting these problems.

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