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## BOOK REVIEWS: American Serengeti: The Last Big Animals of the Great Plains. Dan Flores.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

**American Serengeti: The Last Big Animals of the Great Plains.** Dan Flores. 2016. University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, USA. 213 pages. \$24.95 (hardcover), \$19.95 (paperback). ISBN: 9780700622276 (hardcover), 9780700624669 (paperback).

Before describing what Flores' book is, I must state what it is not. It is not a technical book designed for scholarly readers. Sources are not fully cited, and the bibliography is of limited scope. Nor is it a comprehensive book of all the megafauna of the Great Plains. Although chapters are devoted to extant species such as American bison (*Bison bison*), pronghorn (*Antilocapra americana*), and coyote (*Canis latrans*), there are only passing references to mule and white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus hemionus* and *O. virginianus*, respectively), elk (*Cervus canadensis*), and bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis*). Rather, Flores devotes chapters to grizzly bears (*Ursus arctos*) and wolves (*Canis lupus*), two species that are essentially absent from the current Great Plains. Interestingly, the modern horse (*Equus caballus*), recently returned to the region by Europeans, is afforded a chapter. The somewhat arbitrary list of species could have been selected by the author because he viewed them as the epitome of Great Plains wildlife, or because they best told the story of the relationship that humans have had with large Great Plains animals, or because the author simply had a personal interest in those species. Flores mentions, but doesn't weigh in on the sensitive topic of what caused the extinction of most of the region's megafauna about 10,000 years ago (e.g., aboriginal people), when the Great Plains truly rivaled the Serengeti in terms of large animal diversity.

I think it fair to say that this isn't really a book about the large animals of the Great Plains, but rather, is about the people and cultures that essentially destroyed one Great Plains ecosystem and replaced it with another. Ultimately, this is a book about societies, cultural attitudes toward nature, and the psyche of the people who pulled the triggers. For that goal, it succeeds.

Flores has a rich vocabulary, and his writing is eloquent and heartfelt. He shows a sharp mind, able to process complex situations, and often puts them in a unique perspective. For example, he points out (but not with contempt) that post-Columbian bison were, in an evolutionary sense, a "weed" species, able to flourish on the Great Plains once their Pleistocene competitors (mammoths, camels, primitive horses) disappeared. Flores shows a willingness to dig deep and apparently expose as false some long-accepted beliefs. For example, he persuasively questions whether General Philip Sheridan ever actually said to the Texas legislature that the bison hide hunters were doing good by "destroying the Indian's commissary" (a quote I've accepted as fact, perhaps erroneously). Flores follows that up by raising doubt on

whether there ever was a wide government-lead effort to exterminate bison.

Flores appears to be most familiar with the southern Great Plains, and his story is biased toward that region, although not to an extent that the book is without value to people interested only in the northern Great Plains. I do question a few of his ecological statements. For example, he asserts that bison made north and south migrations, something I view as conjecture. And he states that during wet periods the "overflow bison populations" were "pushed" or "spilled out" eastward and westward of the Plains. Because he doesn't cite sources, it's not possible to tell if these statements are his original ideas or if they came from other sources. Similarly, he states that "elk and even deer had mostly fled the plains to the safety of the mountains": perhaps he meant it more metaphorically than literally, but it's not clear. There are a few outright errors (e.g., he erroneously placed the disbanded Sullys Hill National Park [re-designated as Sullys Hill Game Preserve] in Nebraska although it occurs in North Dakota), but they are few and far between and do not detract from the value of the book.

What Flores does accomplish, in impressive fashion, is telling the recent history of what was arguably North America's most sublime ecosystem, especially in terms of large animal abundance. But regrettably, the fertility that once fed the vast herds of wildlife is now monopolized by agribusiness. The few remnants of Great Plains dedicated to conservation are able to maintain small populations of some native fauna, but not the essence, the grandeur, and the ecological diversity of the pre-European settlement Great Plains. In promoting the Great Plains, Flores is adding his voice to a line of scholars who see the need, the opportunity, and, in his opinion, the morality for landscape-level ecological restoration in the region. The declining human demographics, the millions of acres idled in government programs, the impoverished tribal reservations, and changing societal needs all seem to lay the foundation for ecosystem restoration at a magnificent scale. The idea first gained wide popularity (and notoriety) by Frank and Deborah Popper (1987) in their Buffalo Commons model. That was followed by Coffman et al. (1990) who proposed the creation of a large wildlife reserve in central Montana, by Manning (1995) in his eloquent essay of the spirit of the prairie, by Callenbach (1996) who saw a Great Plains future of bison and wind energy, by Licht (1997) who wrote a technical assessment of the region's ecology and economy, by The Nature Conservancy (1999) who identified potential restoration sites based on existing biodiversity, and by the World Wildlife Fund in their *Ocean of Grass* analysis (Forrest et al. 2004). Some on-the-ground progress has already been made, most notably by the American Prairie Reserve in central Montana. Flores titled his book *American Serengeti*, referring to that iconic region in east Africa. However,

a more relevant region from the African continent might be South Africa, where large swaths of marginal cropland and rangeland have been restored to large eco-reserves, benefiting wildlife, local economies, and the general public. Perhaps the South Africa model can be applied to parts of the North American Great Plains. Although Flores book focuses on the past, one senses that he is really looking toward the future.—*Daniel S. Licht, Midwest Region Wildlife Biologist, National Park Service, 231 East Saint Joseph Street, Rapid City, South Dakota 57701, USA. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Department of the Interior.*

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