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Scout Calvert

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## Book Review

# West of Eden: Resource Wars and Nature-Cultures in the American West

Scout Calvert

School of Library and Information Science, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, USA

Correspondence – Scout Calvert, School of Library and Information Science, Wayne State University, 106 Kresge Library, Detroit, MI 48202, USA, email [scoutcalvert@wayne.edu](mailto:scoutcalvert@wayne.edu)

***The American West at Risk: Science, Myths, and Politics of Land Abuse and Recovery*, by Howard G. Wilshire, Jane E. Neilson, and Richard W. Hazlett, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 619 pp., \$35**

By the end of the nineteenth century, Americans were grieving the close of the western frontier and the promise that anyone could carve out a little piece of dirt to live on by the sweat of the brow. The legacy of westward expansion is in the public lands system, which stands as a living testament to this loss. Roughly one third of the land in the United States belongs to the public and is held by the federal government, mostly in the 11 ecologically diverse western states from Colorado to the Pacific Ocean. The richness and variety of the western landscape is what is at stake in hot political contests for the resources of the West: much of this public land is available to economic activity, including for mining, grazing, logging, and recreation. These uses threaten to outpace the land's ability to renew these resources along with others, like air and water. Now in the first decade of the millennium with a new environmental awareness emerging partly from media coverage of global warming and peak oil, *The American West at Risk* offers a wide-ranging look at the degradation of the environment in the western states, primarily on public lands.

*The American West at Risk* is ambitious, possessing a breadth that is the source of both the text's strengths and weaknesses. Its 13 chapters, plus introduction and conclusion, each

serve as an entry point into a particular use (with accompanying abuses) of western land. Each chapter is topically organized, covering forestry, farming, cattle grazing, mining, road building, military use, nuclear testing, housing development, water use, recreation, oil extraction, and soil erosion.

Readers of this title, however, should not be fooled. Despite the subtitle, which might beguile a reader into thinking that the interplay of science, myths, and politics will be analyzed as a frame for understanding land use in the West, the text is a rather flatfooted effort to convey the urgent need to protect lands in the western states from further environmental degradation. This is still an important purpose for a text but one that the title is only partially successful at fulfilling, largely because the text is incognizant that its own premises are born out of the same myths and politics it attempts to debunk. Science itself is not the topic of the book but a remedy to the myths and politics that, in the text's perspective, sully efforts to settle land use policy once and for all. The science versus politics and science versus myths division mirrors other divisions in the text, including a nature-culture split that puts humans always outside of and at odds with nature. This debilitating stance precludes the building of strategic and durable coalitions of invested actors who are instead doomed to persistent opposition in this analysis.

The myths of the West are potent, as the authors argue: "In the nineteenth century, penny pamphlets and dime novels mythologized the American west, making icons of its prospectors, 'cowboys,' northwestern loggers, and wide open spaces" (p. 3). The authors jab at these, as evinced by the snicker quotes in the passage above, but neglect the histories in which their particular call for environmentalism are situated. In "The Trouble with Nature," William Cronon (1995) explains that "It is not too much to say that the modern environmental movement is itself a grandchild of romanticism and post-frontier ideology" (p. 72). Indeed, *The American West at Risk* is premised on the myth of pure, virginal nature separate from and set against exploitative humans; this is simply a mirror image of the fraught personification of Nature as female, antagonistic to "man" whose work it is to tame her. This view, held by those European settlers of the West, has long been criticized by ecofeminists and other scholars attuned to co-constructing binaries (Sturgeon, 2009). The masculinist story of the rape of the earth puts humans in the role of either aggressors or rescuers rather than long inhabitants of earthly ecosystems whose interaction with the environment has shaped the very thing we think "nature" is.

This human/nature split has important consequences for the arguments of *The American West at Risk*. Since nature can be despoiled only by human activity, the narrative of victimization of the West's ecosystems serves as the necessary and sufficient rationale for ending the use of the land, full stop, for the co-authors, with no attention to the barriers and consequences of this kind of conservation policy. Consider the history of forest fire suppression, which is conceivably among the biggest threats to the West's forests because it is implicated in the general health of woodlands while putting them at risk for massive wildfires. Forest fires were bad for nature, or so the official accounts went, and fire suppression was thought to protect and preserve nature. Only later, with dense forests devastated by wildfire and disease, did policy makers reckon with the practical knowledge of the necessity of fire for flourishing forest ecosystems; and paradoxically, the unhealthy state of

overgrown forests leaves them vulnerable to the kinds of pro-logging and pro-grazing arguments Wilshire et al. work to confront.

To simply “leave [forests] alone” (p. 37), isolating “nature,” is also a way of interfering with nature, shaping it by withdrawing certain kinds of interactions from it. As Rebecca Solnit (1994) argues, understanding the role of controlled burning by the indigenous inhabitants of California in creating the landscapes that were idealized by early European visitors to the West is

to suggest that the people in question created the environment that sustained them. In this picture, they not only reaped the bounty of the land but helped to generate it—not only with burning, but with many other techniques which make it hard to regard agriculture and hunting and gathering as such neat opposites (pp. 304–305).

The nature/culture split critiqued by Cronon and Solnit is evident elsewhere throughout *The American West at Risk*. Chapter 3, titled “Raiding the Range,” attempts to set the stage for understanding the role overgrazing has in damaging ecosystems, a role that has been difficult to deny even as the details are debated. Here, the authors claim to present the perspective of “proponents of public lands grazing” who “argue that cattle have not changed anything,” but without citing any sources that might justify this statement or lead readers to more information about what it is, exactly, that cattle ranchers claim (p. 77); but this is not the location of the contention, which is rather over what kinds of changes grazing causes and whether some might be beneficial. Cattle ranchers disagree about the nature of the cattle’s impact on the range. This characterization of the cattlemen’s point of view is given the lie later in the chapter, when the authors mention holistic range management—a land use philosophy premised on the kinds of effects grazing can produce—only to dismiss it.

In her analysis of similar divisions in land use policy disputes in Kenya, Charis Thompson argues that for conservation efforts to “produce durable and widely agreed-on conservation gains” they “need to be pluralist in a way that the notion of complexity helps to elucidate” (2002, p. 167). In the US West, land use debates are highly fraught because they often line up white collar, urban environmentalists against rural farmers, loggers, and miners, or at those whose incomes and livelihood depend on these activities. Though the authors of *The American West at Risk* claim that environmental “issues do not necessarily pit environmentalists against landowners or named political parties against each other,” the text devotes little attention to some of the solutions emerging from unlikely alliances (p. 5).

Indeed, the text’s framing of the issues often derides those communities that derive their living from the land. One suspects that what Cronon says of the birth of the ideal of wilderness is true of the authors’ perspective:

Only people whose relation to the land was already alienated could hold up wilderness as a model for human life in nature, for the romantic ideology of wilderness leaves precisely nowhere for human beings to actually make their living from the land (p. 80).

Yet every facet of human life depends on natural resources and the labor used to extract them. Not using resources is not an option; changing how we use them is the only option, and out of this unlikely coalitions can emerge. In recent years, the positive role of cattle, sheep, and goat grazing in fire suppression and carbon sequestration is now being given a second look in a search for complex responses of the sort Thompson promotes, and which are absent from *The American West at Risk*.

While the text's authors deride holistic range management without explaining what it is, they also overlook solutions like grass banks that have emerged over the course of the last decade or so, as citizens of western states look for solutions to check unwanted development. Though no doubt imperfect, projects like the Matador Grass Bank (Robbins, 2006) and the Malpai Borderlands Group (Malpai Borderlands Group, 2010) are just two examples of conservation projects that can arise when nature is understood differently. Relying on an inherited mythology of nature and culture, the authors miss opportunities for trenchant critiques of the systemic causes of environmental abuse (including corporate incentives and global politics) in the United States and elsewhere, and offer only bland solutions (like making conscientious purchases and appealing to elected representatives) to problems that are increasing in magnitude.

In *The American West at Risk*, the bad actors who abuse the land are caricatured; scientific knowledge that is supposed to demonstrate the need to fence off and leave "nature" "alone" is offered to counter the romantic mythologies of the West, but the science on offer feels strategically incomplete. There is tantalizingly little information about how ecosystems function to satisfy a scientifically curious reader or render a picture of the vitality of landscapes that may seem empty—and hence not worth protecting—to readers unfamiliar with the West. This is consequential: desert tortoises in the Mojave Desert appear as a barrier to needed solar energy projects because policy makers in lush states can't see the desert teeming with life (Woody, 2010). The text's attempts to offer science in the place of myths and politics falls flat because it doesn't deconstruct or historicize the interplay of its title objects of inquiry: science, myths, and politics. The reasoning and science that the bad guys in the black hats might offer if given a chance to explain their positions are nowhere in view, while the incomplete scientific inquiry of the text leaves environmental mythology to fill the gaps. In this modern myth, the abusers of the land play politics while the good guys play science—"free from the influences of special interests" (p. 4). When both sides wear white hats, a gun battle at noon can't resolve the problem.

Recognizing western mythologies is unlikely to cause the West's residents to wake up to scientific reasoning as if from a bad dream and walk away from their cultural inheritance; yet the authors seem genuinely to believe that merely showing the constructedness of worldviews is sufficient to show that they are false. As Donna Haraway (1990) and other historians of science argue, showing how a fact is made is not the same as showing it is therefore simply made up. Science, too, is full of its own potent myths, and attending to these does not disprove them. More of this mode of attention, a promise held out by the subtitle, would have been valuable in the text. Readers seeking such approaches can instead turn to a growing body of science and technology studies literature that addresses the co-construction of nature and culture, and investigates the role of science in settling

matters of public concern, including Haraway (1990, 1997, 2008), Wynne (2002), Jasanoff (2004), Latour (2004), Franklin (2008), and Edwards (2010), to name a very few.

No doubt some issues with *The American West at Risk* relate back to the authors' efforts to cover so many aspects of land use in a single text. The main problem with Wilshire, Nielson, and Hazlett's ambitious work isn't that it is wrong to look at these uses of land as sites of environmental degradation, but that it precludes many of the interesting solutions invested actors in the West have been working on over the last 20 years or more. This contributes to the sense that the book is already outdated. By posing the problem as one of antagonism—people who care for the land who have science on their side versus people who abuse their land and who play on ignorance and mythology—the authors miss some of the interesting and unlikely alliances that have emerged in recent years. The premise of the text—that the West's beautiful, fragile, and unique resources are at risk and in many circumstances mismanaged and ill-used—is amply supportable, but as Thompson asks, "How can one move beyond adversarial deadlock, where entire 'moral universes' face off, neither side even being able to engage the other?" (2002, p. 186).

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