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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Angela C. Halfacre. *A Delicate Balance: Constructing a Conservation Culture in the South Carolina Lowcountry*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2012. 344 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-61117-071-9.

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Published on H-Environment (November, 2013)

Commissioned by David T. Benac



The specific ecological realities of most coastal landscapes often receive their most widespread public scrutiny in the context of natural disasters and environmental degradation. Hurricane Katrina, for example, was the first time many in the United States became aware of the delicate hydrology and complex engineering underpinning contemporary life in the Mississippi River Delta. Such seaborne storms provide vivid illustrations of the fragility of coastal development and serve as reminders of the valuable buffer functions of a coastline's marshes, barrier islands, and mangroves. However, lessons learned in the immediate aftermath of a storm show only one part of how people manage and understand coastal environments in a world of increasing risk.

Angela C. Halfacre's *A Delicate Balance: Constructing a Conservation Culture in the South Carolina Lowcountry* begins with the aftermath of 1989's Hurricane Hugo, which devastated South Carolina's coastal landscape, termed the Lowcountry. Halfacre focuses not on the storm itself, however, but on how South Carolinians have managed that coastline in the years since Hugo passed. Land ownership patterns and population pressures have made the Lowcountry ripe for housing and golf course development in recent decades, prompting struggles to rein in the scope of change. The author, a political scientist, uses focus group surveys, historical research, and extensive interviews with residents and policymakers to shed light on the region's complicated, and often contradictory, attitudes toward conservation.

One of the most valuable aspects of *A Delicate Balance* is its careful dissection of the political conservatism embedded within much of the conservationist

effort it describes. Lowcountry conservation has been done through maneuvers palatable to the strongly right-wing voters of the state. Halfacre describes the connections between this conservative conservation and the region's longstanding cultures of fishing, duck hunting, and other traditional outdoor pastimes. Political conservatives' concern for private property rights has at times inspired resistance to Lowcountry development. The book describes conservation organizations' maneuvers to work with, rather than against, the political realities of the region.

Halfacre also examines the strong cultural presence of African Americans in the Lowcountry and the Sea Islands, and examines the role of race in the region's conservation efforts. African American farmers of the Lowcountry have been vocal in resisting the spread of development and the loss of the Lowcountry agricultural way of life. Contemporary Gullah, African American descendants of enslaved West Africans, have maintained their cultural connections to the region's landscapes and resources. Halfacre focuses one chapter on the Gullah use of wild sweetgrass in traditional basket weaving, and their struggle to continue harvesting it as Sea Islands like Kiawah are overtaken with resort development.

Halfacre defines the post-Hugo Lowcountry "conservation culture" as encompassing diverse approaches to conserving this fragile coastal landscape. That definition allows her to cast a wide net, incorporating many entities and individuals who are unconventional conservationists, but this wide net at times also incorporates some who perhaps should receive more scrutiny. The book argues that recent regional design trends in suburbs and

golf resorts reflect the growing conservation culture, but does not sufficiently demonstrate that their intention is to conserve. Ecological integrity does not necessarily accompany aesthetic beauty. The discussion falls short of dispelling a reader's suspicion that what is termed "nature" in the midst of a resort development is for the most part merely a tool to sell homes. Nevertheless, these chapters constitute a valuable historical examination of regional developers on Hilton Head and elsewhere.

A Delicate Balance makes excellent contributions to

the scholarship of environment and social change in the Southeast. Halfacre artfully describes the look and feel of the Lowcountry landscapes while also explaining the science of the region's delicate ecology. The author is studiously neutral in her assessments of her subjects, although the downside of this welcome neutrality can be underdeveloped analysis of larger trends. The book brings together disparate threads in the recent history and current politics of the Lowcountry, revealing unexpected patterns of conservation woven into the region's culture.

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Citation: Emily Brock. Review of Halfacre, Angela C., *A Delicate Balance: Constructing a Conservation Culture in the South Carolina Lowcountry*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. November, 2013.

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