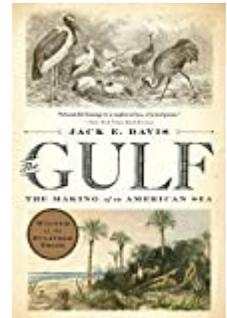




Jack E. Davis. *The Gulf: The Making of an American Sea.* New York: Liveright, 2017. x + 592 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-87140-866-2.



Reviewed by William D. Bryan (Independent Scholar)

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Over the past century the Gulf has been moving steadily inland. Not the waters of the Gulf, though these too are rising and inundating coastal lands, but the geographic meaning of the Gulf. Seemingly shared politics and cultures have led “The Gulf” to become synonymous with the states of Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. The Gulf of Mexico is too often forgotten until events like the 2010 Deep Water Horizon oil spill suddenly focus global attention on the Gulf’s watery realms.

This trend has also been true of historians. The Gulf as a region is overrepresented in scholarship on the southern environment, but the Gulf of Mexico itself is “lost in the pages of American history,” as historian Jack Davis argues (p. 6). His Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Gulf: The Making of an American Sea*, offers a valuable corrective to land-bound visions so prevalent in popular culture and historical scholarship.

Davis offers a history of the Gulf that begins with the sea and only then looks inland. Using the

lens of environmental history, he shows how the Gulf of Mexico has shaped and been shaped by humans over thousands of years. This history of the Gulf is focused on competing ideas about how to best use and manage the sea’s resources, and each chapter explores the ways that insiders and outsiders have sought to use and/or protect the “natural characteristics” of the Gulf, from fish to marshes to birds to barrier islands (p. 10).

Human uses of the Gulf began with Native Americans, who adeptly relied on the abundance of the region and their knowledge of the environment to pattern their lives around the seasonal resources of sea and shore. European settlers were initially unable to recognize and use this natural bounty, but efforts to exploit the Gulf’s resources gained momentum as the region was mapped and settled under the aegis of the United States’ Manifest Destiny.

As the Gulf became an “American Sea,” commercial fishermen reduced populations of red snapper, oysters, sponges, grouper, mullet, and

shrimp to supply restaurants and kitchens around the nation (p. 10). Sport fishermen traveled to new coastal resorts in pursuit of dwindling stocks of tarpon. A booming market for fashionable women's hats in the early twentieth century led commercial hunters to devastate populations of plumed birds that migrated through Gulf flyways. The tourism boom led to the dredging and filling of valuable mangrove forests and the hardening of coastal infrastructure that exacerbated problems like erosion. As oil and gas companies transitioned to deep-sea drilling, they were responsible for hundreds of leaks every year that imperiled the Gulf's diverse flora and fauna. Industries like petrochemical manufacturing have so dominated the region's policymaking that they have carved out "petrocolonial" states like Louisiana amenable to industry interests (p. 511). State policymakers have licensed these companies to pollute air and water and erode human health. Coastal communities have responded to the destruction wrought by major hurricanes like Camille (1969) and Katrina (2005) by building permanent structures that do not respect the inherent mobility of the Gulf's environment.

Environmental degradation was countered at times by localized efforts to preserve the threatened natural resources of the Gulf. Overfishing of tarpon by sport fishers, for instance, led the Izaak Walton League to advocate for catch-and-release tactics, though it took a century until Florida—the only state to act—required all tarpon caught to be released. Gulf states passed model laws promoted by the Audubon Society to protect migratory birds like egrets in the early twentieth century, and commercial plume hunting was outlawed nationally in the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. Private sportsmen and the federal government provided additional protections by creating bird sanctuaries along the Gulf coast. In the twentieth century, oyster and shrimp fishermen repeatedly brought lawsuits against oil and gas companies over seismic testing and pollution that threatened their fishing business. More recently, activists like Diane

Wilson, Charles Lowery, and Joy Towles Ezell have called out polluters who are degrading the water quality in the Gulf. Author John Barry has even sought—so far unsuccessfully—to divert funds from the massive profits of Exxon, BP, and other energy companies to wetland restoration.

At more than five hundred pages, Davis's book extensively addresses the key issues in the Gulf's storied history and provides a much-needed perspective on an ecosystem that is too often forgotten. Yet for all the answers the book provides, I was left with questions about how to interpret the Gulf's history and what role this history should play in how we address current and future risks to this critical body of water.

For one, despite the book's attempt to recenter the Gulf of Mexico itself in history, it is curious that Davis frames the Gulf as a singly American space. The Gulf of Mexico is a geographic borderland, and three different nations touch its waters. Davis argues that there are "geopolitical, geographic, economic, and especially ecological circumstances that make the Gulf largely American" (p. 10). He is no doubt correct that individuals, corporations, and governments in the United States have played the most significant role in transforming the Gulf. Yet environmental history narratives do not neatly conform to national borders. Just as the Gulf has been harmed by the fertilizers—among other pollutants—flowing down the Mississippi River from America's heartland, the ecological transformations of the Gulf have extended beyond the sea's northern coast. Showing how American policies and practices have impacted coastal communities beyond the United States is vital to show the scale of these changes. Excluding these communities from historical narratives also has the potential to hinder efforts to develop successful solutions to the Gulf's woes, since any solution must include stakeholders beyond the United States.

The Gulf also misses an opportunity to connect transformations of the Gulf of Mexico with national discussions about how to address Ameri-

ca's many environmental injustices. Davis ably recounts the stories of a handful of activists who sought to address the release of toxics and other threats, but he spends little time framing the Gulf's history as a tale of environmental injustice.

Yet the ecological changes to the Gulf that Davis recounts occurred in a region still burdened by racial injustices and cut communities of color deeper than anyone else. Activists in the region have long recognized that Gulf pollution is a threat to justice, and thousands of people have worked to head off threats to their communities and gain a voice in the management of the Gulf. Even at the dawn of the environmental justice movement in 1988, hundreds of activists marched through the heart of "Cancer Alley" from Baton Rouge to New Orleans to protest environmental and health risks from toxics released by the oil and petrochemical industries—risks that continue to be disproportionately borne by Black southerners. Since the Great Louisiana Toxics March, the Gulf of Mexico has been at the center of some of the most pressing debates over how to rectify American environmental injustices, and activists in the Gulf have shaped the national agenda in key ways. Recent threats, including sea level rise and powerful hurricanes, only confirm that the region will continue to be where some of the most pressing environmental justice campaigns are concentrated. These issues, in short, must be a central thread in any history of the Gulf.

Finally, Davis's book raises a critical question about what role environmental history should play in efforts to address current crises. Although Davis seemingly takes heart from the Gulf's ability to endure multiple tragedies, the few success stories in his narrative are eclipsed by the tales of declension that make up the backbone of the book. As Davis himself notes, "every day in the Gulf is an environmental disaster" that exceeds the scope of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill (p. 10). In this, the book fits squarely within the tradition of south-

ern environmental history, where declensionist narratives are still the norm.

As residents of the Gulf cope with the dramatic effects of climate change and sea level rise—concerns that Davis admits have influenced the book—it is critical to consider what role history can and should play in addressing the region's potential futures. Do narratives of environmental declension like *The Gulf* offer lessons that we can use to address these issues? Or do they close off such possibilities by painting the region's past as only the legacy of multiple failures to address environmental challenges?

In the end *The Gulf* does not satisfactorily address this issue because it is limited by the conventions of narrative history. The book succeeds in shedding light on how the Gulf has changed across a vast area and time, but it does not say enough about the motivations behind, and the steps that led to, these changes. This ultimately makes Davis's book useful for broad historical and ecological context, but less effective for helping us think about how people can fashion new and better relationships with the land, water, and wildlife of the Gulf.

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