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Can There Be a Boutique Wilderness?

Wilderness, wildlife preservation, and a sense of ecological relationships have long defined the larger contours of American politics, policies, and places, especially in the West. Notions of “wilderness” carry a host of cultural, scientific, economic, and political forces that have helped make and remake the American West. Debates about saving lands for their ecological value, economic worth, or cultural intrigue have defined much of the twentieth century in North America and globally. And many environmental historians have noticed—more than that, they have provided the fundamental studies needed to see the problematic relationships around commodifying “nature’s value.” Other authors explore the science, technology, and ecology of creating and maintaining state and national wilderness areas. Still others have studied socio-cultural-environmental destruction wrought by these same policies, especially dispossession of indigenous lands for future wilderness—whether to preserve those areas for science or tourism.

Of course, these scholars are too numerous to name in one book’s review and these historians have long provided key interdisciplinary foundations that draw on the histories of science, public health, agriculture, and conservation. Nevertheless, one of the most written-about and debated topics is wilderness tourism—in all its forms. Numerous environmental historians such as Michael Childers (*Colorado Powder Keg: Ski Resorts and the Environmental Movement*, 2012), Lawrence Culver (*The Frontier of Leisure: Southern California and the Shaping of Modern America*, 2010), Karl Jacoby (*Crimes against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation*, 2001), Mark David Spence (*Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks*, 1999), Paul Sutter (*Driven Wild: How the Fight against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement*, 2005), and Hal Rothman (*Devil’s Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West,* 2000).
to name only a few, have revealed these complexities and fissures around tourism in national parks, wilderness areas, and state parks.

Most recently there is a digital, curated layer to wilderness tourism—perhaps most ubiquitous and insidious—that reimagines wilderness as a “boutique nature” that can be viewed and experienced in a highly selective way that fits the precepts of Instagram, selfies, and hashtag links. Indeed, most travelers to national parks will use social media filters to alter their smartphone photos to make wilderness look more appealing for digital likes (in fact, those who do not often use their social media filters employ a #nofilter hashtag to make it clear that they are not altering their photos).

Anthropologist Barbara K. Jones attempts to consider these problematic forces anew with prescriptions for readers to consider if they hope to preserve and protect environmental places in the future. Jones insists that wild nature (she views it largely as the nonhuman world) will be valued the most by the most people if it can be accessed, used, and depicted in nonrestrictive ways. This fluidity of value, especially between economic prospects and ecological values, can be tied together through various ecotourism efforts that create a middle way—tourists can find their way to be visitors of a place, rather than just consuming a certain cultural image that they’ve read about or scrolled down on their smart device to see: “Since humans are the ultimate landscape managers and modifiers, investigating how we can coexist with the natural world without destroying the natural for the artifice became the focus of my research.... We probably won’t be able to save everything, but nature never did that either. The best scenario might only be one where more and more of us see the natural world as an asset critical to our well-being and, through that lens learn to appreciate its value” (p. 2). Key to Jones argument is that “by assigning wild nature value, we move it into an understood and more predictable economic category that recognizes nature’s value through the lens of marginal choice” (p. 3). Ecotourism for Jones, then, is based on interactions between the varied desires and interests of human visitors and how much a landscape is curated for those interests: “Responsible travel thrives on the tenets of sustainability in that it considers its impact on both local communities and the environment. Key to true ecotourism, though, is education, where the power of storytelling and awareness makes saving the manatee or the gray wolf something a person living in Michigan or in Kentucky can more readily commit to doing. Ecotourism not only educates and through this education encourages conservation, but it also generates measurable values, so nature can effectively compete in the marketplace of competitive uses” (p. 4).

Early chapters explore how economics in all of its forms will act as “nature’s salvation” since for Jones, “charisma, branding, ecotourism, and ecosystem services are each defined through the lens of economics. Animal charisma is used as a marketing strategy that encourages people to connect to specific species; successful branding generates a broader shared utility across human populations and diverse ecosystems; ecotourism is a tool to measure the success of both the brand and the charisma of the marketed species; and finally, the ecosystem services model that, through a valuation process, offers a way to operationalize marginal choice in terms of human well-being” (p. 9). Jones begins by underscoring that this anthropocentric value system that interweaves the ecological and the economic is perhaps the most productive way to merge preservation, conservation, and tourism into a sustainable “ecosystem services” or “ES” system.

She insists that by blurring the lines between human interests and nonhuman interests—for example, by “attaching wildlife conservation to policies that ensured clean water, minimized soil erosion, and encouraged reforestation, wildfire is-
sues more effectively entered the conservation because they became part of the agenda that improved human well-being.... The acceptance of this shift in thinking came with the recognition that social ecological systems and natural systems are coupled, in that you can’t really understand the human experience without understanding its connection to the natural world” (p. 13). Some of Jones’s early themes around reinterpreting natural resources as public goods and the proposition that private landowners can participate in preserving ecological relationships while also pursuing profits offer a toolkit that might work in certain places and regions of the country or on a more global scale. And Jones is candid about her own experiences changing her views—whether from rethinking her cinematic view of sharks to more closely match their central place in oceanic ecosystems or considering how bald eagles served as both focus and foil to the environmental costs and agricultural advantages of pesticides, specifically the insecticide DDT.

But, for all of Jones’s case studies on ecotourism, whether through local community engagement, highlighting the values of conservation, or education efforts that show the possibilities of trying to carve out a middle ground between the scale of economic possibilities and ecological limitations of so-called wild nature, curating for natural value is curation, nonetheless. Jones maintains that “ecotourism works best when it finds values that people who might not be environmentally conscious can share. This aspect of ecotourism works extremely well with the ES model because it connects clean water, food, and economics to conservation. It makes the case for conservation solutions that benefit not only biodiversity, but people’s lives” (p. 57).

In subsequent chapters, Jones offers numerous case studies on how this common ground can be found and the possibilities that could ensue that would benefit the health and welfare of the environment while also helping to change the scope of human interest, thereby shifting attitudes and policies. Jones uses compelling sociocultural examples to make this case. From ecotourist adventure treks in the backcountry of national parks to the cultural icons that certain animals of wild nature become such as the moose, shark, or wolf, Jones is convinced that the ES model can bring sustained success in raising environmental awareness and changing attitudes by using the very things that threatens the nonhuman world: human well-being: “Since that model revolves around human well-being, those groups that considered environmental protection through the lens of our human perspective were obviously onto something. If we see no value in a forest, cutting it down doesn’t seem to be a crime against nature; yet if we assign the forest a value, its loss becomes something with significant social and ecological consequences” (p. 219). Jones sees measurable value, public engagement, and branding through ecotourism as the way forward to “commit to creating institutions that value nature as a private good owned by us all” (p. 226). After all, Jones explains, “since branding is all about good storytelling, the stories told by conservationists about the recovery of species as diverse as the grizzly bear and the bald eagle suggest that emphasizing the success makes for good messaging” (p. 226).

Wild Capital does offer some compelling suggestions for rethinking how we talk, study, and engage with a public that may be more economically minded than ecologically minded when it comes to preserving the nonhuman world. But the book has weaknesses. Ecotourism certainly has a role in educating visitors and connecting their desire for adventure and curiosity about natural places in ways that can change attitudes toward environmental protection and preservation. But does this model translate to a sustained willingness to see the complexities, challenges, and uncertain future that human practices have wrought on a nonhuman world? Unclear, perhaps, but environmental historians have long revealed significant excep-
tions to Jones’s findings. And what happens when tourism and visitor interest grow exponentially beyond what the ecosystem of popular natural places can sustain? How will restricted access due to overcrowding in national parks, for example, translate, in Jones’s words, from wild capital to natural capital? Also, do social media “likes” of images of highly curated natural spaces translate to environmental awareness and respect for ecological health—especially when those very technologies are key contributors to climate change? Perhaps some of *Wild Capital*’s weaknesses stem from its failure to engage the robust and dynamic historical scholarship that complicates many of her findings but also helps elucidate others. In the end Jones does offer important reasons to pursue a less consumptive-minded and more ecological-minded tourism model—closer to Aldo Leopold’s land ethic that “a thing is right when only when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the community, and the community includes the soil, waters, fauna, and flora, as well as people.”[1]

Note


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