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Michael M. Gunter Jr.’s 2023 book, *Climate Travels: How Ecotourism Changes Mindsets and Motivates Action*, is a well-researched and readable book about the climate crisis. Gunter, a political scientist, is a Cornell Distinguished Faculty Member and Arthur Vining Davis Fellow at Rollins College (Winter Park, Florida). This is his third book, and it is aimed at a general audience.

Gunter pulls no punches: climate change is real, is caused by humans, and affects our lives. Gunter focuses exclusively on the United States (his nation and mine), making a direct appeal to his compatriots to save their nation from the ravages of climate change. He writes in an inclusive “we” about the problems “we” face, although there is often slippage between “we” Americans and “we” humans. Nevertheless, his pointed engagement in this polemic is refreshing, given how many scholars limit their scope in similar ways but with far less self-awareness.

Gunter offers examples of places facing climate challenges, clearly outlining the science of what is happening and the specific solutions being undertaken. He makes the important argument that the climate crisis cannot be solved with a silver bullet. This is a global problem with local impacts, each requiring local solutions. I often tell my students that many small decisions got us into this mess, so we have to hope that many small decisions can also get us out of it. The true strength of the book is Gunter’s ability to show just how such small decisions concretely address local problems and add to global solutions.

The first eight chapters each address a separate aspect of this crisis: sea level rise, flooding, wildfires, extreme weather such as tornadoes and hurricanes, melting ice caps, biodiversity loss, ocean acidification, and heat. Each chapter offers in-depth examples from multiple locations. The unevenness of sea level rise impact, for example, is exemplified through Norfolk, Virginia, and
Miami, Florida. Flash flooding in Round Rock, Texas, and Nashville, Tennessee, shows how older flood models no longer provide useful predictions. The Camp Fire that destroyed most of Paradise, California, in 2018 demonstrates how climate change, increased human presence, and forest management practices intersect to create more, and more dangerous, fires. Greensburg, Kansas, a town destroyed by a tornado in 2007, illustrates the rise of more extreme weather events. Heat waves and the loss of sea ice in Alaska illustrate how fossil fuels create feedback loops that increase the heat absorbed into oceans, how the melting permafrost affects such infrastructure as roads and buildings, and how the melting glacier on Mount Denali will release decades of accumulated hikers’ excrement in melt water. Maine’s lobster fisheries are disappearing, the maple syrup season is shrinking, and Florida’s Anniversary Reef is dying.

The first part of this book is pretty depressing. But Gunter’s attention to scientific detail and local conditions makes it informative, and he offers pragmatic optimism that local action can enact real change. In the second, more optimistic, half of the book, Gunter offers solutions being proposed or enacted by local communities: using solar panels and wind power, reducing consumption (especially of plastic), and creating walkable cities. These examples are inspiring and suggest how readers can act in their own towns.

Philosophically, I agree with Gunter: there is no silver bullet, everyone needs to act now toward climate solutions, and there is no time for helplessness. But there are some theoretical gaps here, and I hope that addressing them directly will further our collective conversations about how to move toward those goals. I see three main theoretical weaknesses: namely, Gunter’s discussions of capitalism, democracy, and, most importantly, ecotourism.

My major critique centers on the claim that ecotourism (or travel in general) is a clear solution to the climate crisis. The book’s subtitle, How Ecotourism Changes Mindsets and Motivates Action, suggests that this argument would be a major theme. (As an anthropologist of tourism, this was why I picked it up in the first place.) But the subtitle is misleading; what ecotourism does to tourists is not Gunter’s research question. He is focused on local solutions to the climate crisis; he does not have (or seek) the data to address how tourism might change tourists’ perspectives, let alone their actions. Given the broad scope of climate solutions that Gunter examines, perhaps he (or his editor) had trouble deciding on an overarching framework for this book and decided that “ecotourism” would be a sufficient container for the many examples he provides. But tourism receives only passing comments: for example, “We need to see the threats ourselves” because simply hearing or reading about these threats has not motivated us to action (p. 4). We are asked to accept as a given that travel leads to more environmentally conscious, active citizens.

Tourism is often presented (in this book and elsewhere) as a panacea, a process that allows individuals to see the truth, as per the famous Mark Twain quote, “travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness” (Gunter quotes this on page 234; a closer reading of The Innocents Abroad [1869] suggests that perhaps Twain’s statement should not be taken at face value). Gunter rightly notes that tourism contributes to carbon footprints and does not necessarily lead to future action, but he does not discuss this dilemma in any depth. Let’s consider for a moment why the structure of tourism itself is a challenge to such personal transformations. Tourism is a global industry. According to the UNWTO (United Nations World Tourism Organization), in 2019 (before the COVID-19 pandemic caused a predictable but only temporary drop), tourism moved nearly 1.5 billion people across international borders and generated nearly 1.5 trillion US dollars (and these numbers do not even include domestic tourism).[1] Anthropologists like myself often focus on interpersonal
moments between “hosts” and “guests,” but tourism should also be analyzed alongside other global capitalist industries.[2] Tourism reflects the structural inequalities of societies and our world. Tourism was “democratized” in the post-World War II moment, as airfare prices dropped and became accessible to the growing middle class of North Atlantic nations. Tourism has been considered a normal and expected part of those cultures for over three generations. (And yet, despite Twain’s hopes, we still have “prejudice” of all kinds.) Meanwhile, for many, international travel—and even domestic travel—is prohibitively expensive. Not everyone gets to be a tourist.

So when we ask whether tourists will see the truth about the climate crisis and return home to enact change, we are asking about the actions of people who are, on average, the world’s highest per capita consumers of resources. Having researched tourism ethnographically in two radically different contexts—an archaeological site in rural highland Bolivia and expedition ship tourism to Antarctica—I am cautious about claims for radically transformative tourist experiences. Of course, tourists are often great individuals. Those I have met have been fun, kind, curious, and deeply concerned about not having a negative impact on the places they visit. And it is important to note that no one is a tourist by nature. This is a role that one moves through, and many tourists are engaged in creating positive changes in their own communities as residents. The question is, then, whether being a tourist allows one to better engage in those local actions, in ways that offset the impact of the travel itself. Showing this would be a real methodological challenge, and I do not fault Gunter for not having that data, only for not addressing this challenge head-on.

Tourists travel through predetermined infrastructures, structured by semi-formulaic encounters. This is not unusual; many social encounters are semi-formulaic. When we order in a restaurant, for example, we expect waitstaff to tell us about the daily specials rather than about the line chef’s divorce. When we buy food in a supermarket, we do not often ask where the food was grown or whether those who harvested it were paid fairly. Gunter had access to people and information that tourists, by virtue of their roles as tourists, do not have. He interviewed city planners and engineers, National Weather Service meteorologists, disaster survivors, mayors, nonprofit leaders, and academics. How many of us speak to people in those positions while on vacation?

Gunter occasionally does allude to the contradictions and tensions of tourism. He admits that “long flights to Alaska, like mine, should be the exception rather than the rule” because of the carbon footprints of air travel (p. 147). I would have preferred for him to analyze in greater depth this contradiction than to promote the idea that travel will magically make us better people. After all, people in the US are already traveling a great deal, including to local natural areas. If travel alone were the solution, wouldn’t we already be halfway there?

Gunter also is not explicit about how he understands the relationship between capitalism and the climate crisis. This is surprising, given that many of those writing about this topic take a clear position on this issue. Some scholars argue that neoliberal capitalism (e.g., “free market”) is the main problem leading to the climate crisis and that solving the latter requires transforming the former and reinforcing democracy.[3] Meanwhile, many businesses turn to carbon offsets, green accounting, and triple bottom line accounting as capitalist solutions to the issue, hoping that quantifying and commoditizing environmental damage and externalities will lead to an overall reduction of harm.

In contrast, Gunter does not address the role of capitalism in the climate crisis in any systematic way. He contradicts himself about whether the “free market” is a viable solution to the climate crisis or whether governments can play a major
role. He oscillates between a cultural ideal of rugged US individualism and the realities of the political decision-making processes that he describes. In some moments, Gunter expresses faith in the free market to solve the climate crisis and claims that our government cannot save us. For example, he avows that “paternalism” will not convince anyone to conserve resources, although he came to this conclusion after “forcing” his children to take a bus as required in Denali National Park (pp. 139-40). LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified buildings are touted, in a quote from Thomas Friedman, as a “perfect example not of government down, but society up,” but in Gunter’s accompanying case study, LEED standards were actually imposed on public buildings by vote of the city council (p. 172).

Gunter actually presents many convincing examples of successful government policies. He provides details about states’ policies on third-party providers of electricity and net metering and points to how these affect the economics of home solar panels. He shows how Republican legislation paved the way for wind power in Texas. He proposes that the “Break Free from Plastic Pollution Act,” introduced into Congress in 2021, would be an important part of the solution to microplastic contamination and lauds municipal regulations banning plastic bottles and bags. He notes that gasoline should be “accurately priced” to include “externalities” (presumably through taxes, although he never states how) and that public transportation should be more accessible (p. 148). All of these are government policies, regulations, and projects, which he states are “instrumental” (p. 179). It is difficult to square Gunter’s actual data, which suggest that governments can and should have an important role in mitigating the climate crisis, with his statements that “we” will not accept such solutions or interventions.

Gunter’s feelings about democracy are equally unclear. In the introduction, he states that “national leadership has failed us, plain and simple.... On revolutionary issues, from women’s suffrage to civil rights to gay rights, voters consistently lead politicians instead of the other way around” (p. 2). He suggests that public will is reflected directly in governmental policy, and therefore if the public wants environmental solutions, policy and politics will fall into line. He then offers responses to President Jimmy Carter’s policies in office (1977-81) as indicative of how the US public feels about government action, although this situation has changed immensely in the last forty-plus years.

This is too simplistic a model, although it might be a useful gloss to motivate people. The Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education (1954), for example, was an unpopular ruling among many white people in the South; the civil rights of women and LGBTQ+ peoples are still legally unsettled today despite popular support. Such social transformations are better understood as dialectical processes involving different government institutions, agencies, elected officials, and multiple publics. We cannot expect climate change to be an uncomplicated issue, and Gunter’s data point to that reality. There is a shift in public opinion about climate change underway, most clearly among younger people in the US, but we cannot assume that this process will lead to a straightforward representation of the will of the people in government without concerted political action at multiple levels.[4] Changing mindsets alone is never enough, particularly with the deep corporate interests at play.

Nevertheless, I believe that the shortcomings of this book, coupled with Gunter’s excellent data, will make this work useful as a teaching tool. If we hope that today’s college students will lead us to a better, more environmentally friendly future, we could do far worse than to give them Gunter’s careful research and pragmatic optimism as a guide to action. The drawbacks I outline might become generative, serving as a platform to motivate students to move away from the conventional wisdom of their predecessors, both within the
classroom and outside of it. And as a fellow professor and teacher, I cannot imagine a worthier goal for any book.

Notes


3]. See, for example, Naomi Klein, This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate, rep. ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).


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