



Summer 2006

A People's History of Wilderness, Edited by Matt Jenkins

Laura Pritchett

Recommended Citation

Laura Pritchett, *A People's History of Wilderness, Edited by Matt Jenkins*, 46 Nat. Resources J. 831 (2006).

Available at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nrj/vol46/iss3/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Natural Resources Journal by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu, lsloane@salud.unm.edu, sahrk@unm.edu.

BOOK REVIEWS

A People's History of Wilderness. Edited by Matt Jenkins. Paonia, CO: High Country News Books, 2004. Pp. 495. \$22.95 softcover.

First, a disclosure: I'm a huge fan of the *High Country News*. As a newspaper for "people who love the West," as their tagline announces, they do a fine job of covering issues pertaining to the area: cultural, environmental, community, policy, with some odd-ball gossip thrown into the mix. Since it's one of my favorite publications, I'm game to read any book that they publish, too.

This book doesn't disappoint. But it is different than the paper, primarily because it doesn't have the wild-and-crazy *range* of an average bi-monthly issue. No, this book has a clear, sharp focus: the Wilderness Act. And what a relief, because this piece of legislation has spawned some of the most complicated and diverse battles in land use management since President Lyndon B. Johnson signed it into being on September 3, 1964. At that time, the National Wilderness Preservation System was established to "secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness." Since then, there has been a lot of debate on just what exactly that means, and where it applies – and boy, does it get *messy*.

A People's History of Wilderness was published to honor the fortieth anniversary of the Wilderness Act, and the book offers three decades of wilderness coverage from the *High Country News*. This fact alone makes it a must-read for anyone interested in the Act itself, because Matt Jenkins, editor, has gone and done all the research and work for you. He's compiled the most important, substantial pieces about the movement, its early visionaries, the rise of citizens' proposals, and the exhaustingly complicated battles about grazing, oil and gas drilling, and vehicle use. In this way, the book presents the competing philosophies, complexities, and passions – and how all this mess resulted in the protection of over 104 million acres of wilderness.

So the greatest strength of the book lies in its comprehensive overview that even Wilderness Act aficionados will gain from. But it's also a good read for those of us – myself included – who have never been directly involved in this movement. In my case, it simply wasn't my main "topic of concern," and in addition to that I simply didn't come on the Wilderness Act scene until the 1990s, so I missed all that stuff that had gone on in the 70s and 80s (hey, what can I say? I was born when I was born!). That's what I love about anthologies like this: they bring back to life worthy writing and give a more complete idea of the movement, and the progress (or lack of) that we've made.

One of the best parts of this book, too, is its myth-busting. In particular, for me, it negated the idea that wilderness protection was,

and is, advocated by the elite. Far from it. I was pleasantly surprised to read accounts of construction workers, fishermen, hunters, and ranchers doing the hard work of fostering and applying the act.

Finally, the last third of the book is especially useful in illustrating the more recent battles and clarifying, once and for all, why almost no new wilderness has been protected since 1994. Citizen proposals have made little headway, but it hasn't been for lack of trying—and that's because, as this book confirms, wilderness politics are anything but simple.

And that's because of national politics, of course. Though for a while, things were looking pretty good for wilderness advocates. The idea of wilderness grew as the discipline of conservation biology did. In the 1990s, ecology was fully integrated into wilderness proposals—the idea being to create large ecoregion-based visions. Then-President Clinton announced the Roadless Area Conservation Rule, which placed 58.5 million acres of roadless national forest lands off-limits to road-building, logging, and oil and gas development—and that was something.

But new wilderness areas? No. There was a lack of cohesive national support, and the political climate was changing. In the 1994 elections, the Republican party won a majority in the U.S. Senate and House and, as Matt Jenkins notes, “wilderness went into a state of suspension.” Later, Gale Norton (then secretary of the Interior under George W. Bush) signed an agreement that allowed states to claim ownership of backcountry roads and later scrapped the interim protection of areas that had wilderness proposals pending. Then, in 2004, the Bush administration announced what was essentially a repeal of Clinton's roadless rule. Since then, for advocates of wilderness protection, it's been downhill ever since.

But the debate and the push are not over—and this book goes a long way in reviving the conversation. We need to know where we've been so that we might influence the direction we're heading.

Laura Pritchett

Ph.D. Purdue University

Author and co-author of several books, including *Sky Bridge*
and *Home Land: Writings for a West That Works*, respectively

Capers in the Churchyard: Animal Rights Advocacy in the Age of Terror.
By Lee Hall. Darien, CT: Nectar Bar Press, 2006. Pp. 162. \$14.95.

Political and spiritual leader Mahatma Gandhi once said, “However much I may sympathize with and admire worthy motives, I am an uncompromising opponent of violent methods even to serve the noblest of causes.” Further, the pioneer of Satyagraha (the philosophy of