

THESE AMERICAN LANDS: PARKS, WILDERNESS, AND THE PUBLIC LANDS

Dyan Zaslowsky and T.H. Watkins

A REVIEW BY WILLIAM TWEED

FOR AS LONG AS OUR REPUBLIC HAS existed, critics have remarked upon its lack of a sense of history. Nowhere is this more true today than in the management of our public lands. The current intense political debate over the fate of these lands seldom pays much attention to history. Political discussions about issues like the ancient forests, spotted owls, public lands grazing, or Alaskan North Slope oil almost never dwell at any length on the historic origins of these controversies. Generally, we are much more interested in where we are going than in where we have been.

In *These American Lands* authors Dyan Zaslowsky and T.H. Watkins address this issue by presenting a history of federal public land management in the United States. This is not a simple story, and to make it more approachable, Zaslowsky and Watkins have abandoned the historian's traditional strategy of integrated chronology for a more topical approach. Rather than attempt a broad synthesized history of federal public land management, the authors provide separate histories for each of the major federal land management programs. Separate chapters summarize the histories of the national park system, national forest system, national resource lands (Bureau of Land Management), national refuge system, national wilderness preservation system, national wild and scenic rivers and national trails systems, and the national interest lands of Alaska. Appendixes document critical legislation and list the units of each system.

In pursuing this approach the authors have both provided a major resource to anyone interested in public lands and produced a flawed book.

The value of the book is that it provides quick and relatively simple access to the basic events that have shaped our public lands policy and the institutions that carry it out. The book's flaws, which are not fatal, result from how it approaches the discipline of history.

An essential starting point for understanding *These American Lands* is that the book is an advocacy document not a neutral analysis. Counselor to the Wilderness Society Gaylord Nelson's foreword details how the conservation organization came to publish its vision of federal land management history. The theme is further reinforced by the fact that each chapter ends with Wilderness Society recommendations for the future management of the resources in question.

Because the book represents an advocacy organization's view of public land history, it offers not so much analysis as carefully honed interpretation. The story has clear heroes and villains. It also has a strong sense of historical direction that verges on inevitability. In attempting the admittedly difficult task of condensing these complex stories into simple narratives, the social context of American thought and behavior has been largely left behind in favor of a story line in which aware people slowly wear down and outwit wasteful, destructive opponents.

This sense of the inevitability of the right thing eventually happening shows especially in Nelson's foreword, written in April 1994, which suggest that with the

election of Bill Clinton, "a new age of responsibility and stewardship clearly has begun." As the past year has clearly demonstrated, American history is far too complex and unpredictable to fit well into

any simple deterministic pattern. We are a large and complicated people, and we have a long way yet to go before we resolve the question of how we are to balance the goals of individual freedom and collective good.

Read with caution, *These American Lands* is a useful introduction to how preservationists view the evolution of public lands management. It is not, however, the same sort of high quality analytical history that coauthor Watkins has produced on other

occasions, most notably in *Righteous Pilgrim*, his superb biography of Harold Ickes.

PS

*Revised and
expanded
edition,
published by
Island Press
for the
Wilderness
Society,
1994.*

William Tweed is Management Assistant at Sequoia and Kings Canyons National Parks, California. His phone number is (209) 565-3102.