

Preserving the Desert: A History of Joshua Tree National Park. By Lary M. Dilsaver. Staunton: George F. Thompson Publishing, 2016. 472 pp. Illustrations, maps, appendices, notes, index. Paper \$38.50.

In 1936, President Franklin Roosevelt signed a proclamation creating Joshua Tree National Monument, marking an important milestone in the preservation of American deserts. As author Lary Dilsaver explains, the designation came despite protest from miners, ranchers, developers, and those within the National Park Service (NPS), where even staunch preservationists struggled to understand the value of this type of arid landscape and place it within the established hierarchy of worthy nature.

Joshua Tree sits at a critical confluence of the Mojave and Colorado Deserts. It was long inhabited and appreciated by indigenous peoples, served as a critical transportation corridor, and was the site of significant mining and ranching booms and busts. Dilsaver documents this early history and profiles important preservationists, but he notes that well into the twentieth century this now treasured landscape was dismissed by most as a wasteland, “lacking in any distinctive, superlative, outstanding feature that would give it sufficient importance to justify its establishment as a national park” (p. 125).

Dilsaver’s detailed, lushly illustrated, and insightful history uses the complicated history of Joshua Tree’s preservation and the vexing administrative challenges the park faced throughout its history to reveal larger issues of changing cultural perceptions of deserts and arid landscapes. In three sections and eight chapters, he shows as much as he says with extensive custom maps and color illustrations, including a beautiful gallery of historic and contemporary images.

This book began as an administrative history of the park commissioned by the NPS. The origins of that project and the purpose and use of administrative histories are nicely presented in a preface that also discusses the author’s long relationship with California’s parks and his important contributions to national park history. Not simply a history of Joshua Tree, *Preserving the Desert* offers an excellent example of the growing sophistication of “grey literature” studies of public lands and offers a model for how those practical products can become significant scholarly publications aimed at far broader audiences.

By keeping the cultural context clear throughout, Dilsaver shows how even the most detailed administrative histories can reveal new insights about important environmental history research questions. Internal NPS debates about workaday issues like infrastructure, for example, show tensions within the service about the hierarchies of natural value as the agency matured during the mid-twentieth century and grappled with lands beyond the “crown jewels.” Likewise, early surveys expose entrenched NPS bias toward a certain type of spectacular nature as public attitudes toward preservation sometimes shifted ahead of the agency. The story of Minerva Hamilton and

her successful advocacy for preservation of desert flora and the iconic Joshua Tree nicely encapsulates larger evolutions of American appreciation for once-scorned nature. And detailed illustrations of water infrastructure around the palm oasis of the park offer early examples of how encroachment of development and overuse by visitors can threaten a park and force limitations on visitation and use, which were later confronted at most units of the NPS.

Dilsaver also provides comprehensive coverage of the role of recreation-craving Los Angeles residents linking Joshua Tree's history to broader twentieth-century regional trends. The book paints a picture of a "tortured process" of consolidating inholdings, fighting for boundaries, reconciling competing constituencies' dreams and desires, and balancing the use and preservation of a fragile ecosystem. All of the ideological and administrative challenges at Joshua Tree portended a new reality for the national park ideal as the agency expanded its reach and faced a set of complicated issues still plaguing the agency at its centennial in 2016.

Some of the most innovative environmental histories of the past two decades began as contract histories like this one and are an important trend in the field. Like the best of those efforts, *Preserving the Desert* offers rigorous detail and a clear and accessible chronological structure that is useful to park and resource managers and general readers grounded in broad historical context and important research questions important to scholars. *Preserving the Desert* will inform generations of Joshua Tree visitors and appeal to those interested in park history in general, to graduate students in environmental and public history courses, and to a wide range of readers interested in the complicated history of desert cultural landscapes.

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Cattle Colonialism: An Environmental History of the Conquest of California and Hawai'i. By John Ryan Fischer. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015. xiv + 266 pp. Illustrations, table, notes, bibliography, and index. Paper \$27.95, e-book \$19.99.

While the role of cattle in transforming ecosystems and cultures in the Americas has received significant attention by historians, *Cattle*