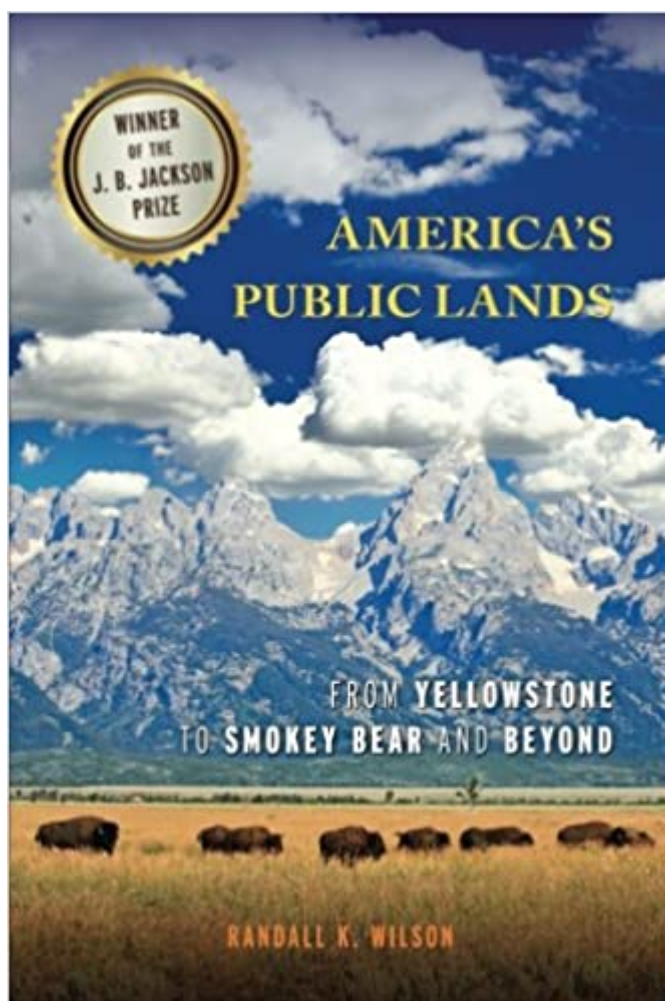


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# America's Public Lands: From Yellowstone To Smokey Bear And Beyond



## Synopsis

How is it that the United States—the country that cherishes the ideal of private property more than any other in the world—has chosen to set aside nearly one-third of its territory as public lands? Considering this intriguing question, Randall K. Wilson traces the often-forgotten ideas of nature that have shaped the evolution of America's public land system. The result is a fresh and probing account of the most pressing policy and management challenges facing national parks, forests, rangelands, and wildlife refuges today. The author explores the dramatic story of the origins of the public domain, including the century-long push toward privatization and the subsequent emergence of a national conservation ideal. Arguing that we cannot fully understand one type of public land without understanding its relation to the rest of the system, he provides in-depth accounts of the different types of public lands. Including chapters on national parks, national forests, wildlife refuges, Bureau of Land Management lands, and wilderness areas, Wilson examines key turning points and major policy debates for each land type. He considers questions of bison and elk management and recent disputes over fire policy, roadless areas, mining claims, and grazing fees. This comprehensive overview offers a chance to rethink our relationship with America's public lands, including what it says about the way we relate to, and value, nature in the United States.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Essential reading for those interested in how Americans value nature and how they use their collectively owned lands. (Forest History Today) America's Public Lands is a wonderful

introductory book for those interested in federal land management practice and law. It contains enough detailed analysis of contemporary issues to engage those familiar with the subject while it is broad enough to give nascent readers to the field a fine single volume that encapsulates much of what has been argued on the subject over the last several decades. The book's most interesting premise is that public lands need to be addressed as one system and not a collection of fiefdoms divided by bureaucratic borders. Wilson's unifying concept is being advocated at the highest levels in Washington, D.C., and it was voiced by Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack in his first policy speech on the national forests in Seattle in 2009. (The American Historian) Effective. . . . Admirable. . . . By placing these public lands institutions in tension with one another, Wilson does something more than provide an up-to-date history and mission analysis of the agencies that oversee public lands; America's Public Lands, perhaps for the first time, combines these histories and contemporary contestations in a single text, situating each of the institutions within a larger ideology, discourse, and practice of conservation and intentional management. . . . Wilson envelops these conceptualizations into lived realities and practices, ultimately demonstrating how ideas turn into institutions that are dynamic, but also deeply rooted in their pasts. . . . The first text in nearly two decades . . . to treat the public land system as a coherent whole, part of a larger ideological and managerial project. In this regard, the text has no contemporaries, as it provides a single academic resource that revels in these lands' existence, but does so in a way that does not avoid the paradoxes, incongruities, struggles, and inequalities that help formulate their contemporary management. . . . Wilson's book offers readers a chance to reconsider our complex, multifaceted, and often ironic relationships with public lands in the United States. . . . Appropriate for a wide variety of academic and popular audiences. While scholars will find usefulness in having the text as an up-to-date reference point, it will provide a substantial contribution to undergraduate and postgraduate courses as well. Widely diverse courses in public land management, environmental planning, environmental policy, environmental politics, environmental history, environmental law, environmental social studies, wilderness, and the environmental humanities will find this text to be valuable. Wilson's book neatly and creatively packs a great deal of information and analyses into just over 300 pages. (Society & Natural Resources) Randall Wilson's America's Public Lands provides a useful introduction to the history and politics of the vast array of federal land programs. . . . Wilson has fashioned a readable, well-informed volume that builds on existing scholarship (including his own research on collaborative management) to construct a framework for understanding the essentially contested nature of our public lands as the setting for both resource exploitation and natural preservation. . .

.The book is well designed as an introductory text for courses on federal land policy or western environmental history. It offers a clear and inviting narrative, an extensive bibliography to guide student research, and a sophisticated analytical blend of institutional politics and cultural change. . . .Wilson's comprehensive view offers much to engage experts as well, showing the political and ideological underpinnings of land issues that span all these agencies. (Environmental History)America's Public Lands: From Yellowstone to Smokey Bear and Beyond considers how it's come to be that a nation that cherishes the ideal of private property has methodically set aside nearly a third of its territory as public lands, and provides a history of the making of America's public land system. Chapters do more than chart the usual evolution of parklands and policies: they consider the origins of the idea of public domain and access, considering forces towards privatization and conservation and how they interacted to produce the parklands system we have today. Chapters cover national parks and forests, wildlife refuges, and wilderness areas and provide discussions surrounding policy debates and establishment processes for many of country's top wildlife areas, making this a far more wide-ranging survey than the usual parklands history approach, and a highly recommended pick for any who would understand the bigger picture involved in parklands creation, history, and management. (Midwest Book Review)Wilson offers a well-written, thoughtful, and ambitious synthesis of the story of America's public lands that (literally!) covers a great deal of ground clearly and concisely. In addition to providing a historical narrative of how the nation's public lands system came together, Wilson contextualizes the story more broadly, seeing how the various components of the system (the National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, etc.) reflect different notions of nature and economic development. He also offers a framework for examining current issues that involve public land policies and uses. Wilson's personal enthusiasm for America's public lands runs clearly throughout the book and his hope is that this overview will add to greater public and scholarly awareness of the system and the settings it protects. . . .The book should be required reading for North American historical geographers, historians of the American West and public lands, employees in a wide assortment of public agencies, and for anyone interested in why one-third of the United States looks the way it does. (Journal of Historical Geography)Wilson provides a complete history, from colonial times, of what it took to build the national commons.... He tells a compelling and disturbing story of hunger, greed, and hubris in the history of land acquisition in the United States and in the disposition of these lands into private hands. (Public Administration Review)Unprecedented in scope and depth, this important work traces the American public lands system to its origins and in the process challenges the ways we think about our vast heritage.

Meticulously researched and artfully written, the book is essential reading for anyone interested in the 650 million acres of federally managed lands in the United States. (Howard R. Ernst, United States Naval Academy) At long last! A single-volume history of America's public lands that celebrates the miracle of their existence but never shies away from the messy contradictions, conflicts, and injustice that make up their history. This is the plain-language, people's political ecology of our treasured landscapes. (Paul Robbins, University of Wisconsin "Madison) This book is a treasure for those looking for a thoughtful and efficient introduction to the history of our nation's public lands. Wilson successfully captures the drama of this still-unfolding story and challenges us to engage with the incredible legacy that public lands represent as well as the innate difficulties that come along with managing and protecting these areas. (Neil Kornze)

Randall K. Wilson holds the Thompson Chair of Environmental Studies at Gettysburg College.

This book has given me a real appreciation of parks and the journey so many people have gone through to make them a reality today.

A good and informative read. Wilson presents the facts and history in a relatively unbiased fashion in readable fashion.

good!

thank you, this book is exactly what I was looking for, great read.

The previous commenter must have read a different book, or perhaps read Mr. Wilson's book without taking the time to critically think about the management issues covered in "America's Public Lands." Considering the amount of economic revenue that our public lands generate annually, it would be foolish to limit public enjoyment. The vast majority of environmentalists know this, and also like to get outdoors and utilize our birthright as Americans in a variety of activities. However, surely anyone who has recently visited a national park would agree that the traffic and congestion is an issue that should be better managed. Discussing these nuanced issues certainly does not equate with "an elitist exclusion of people from the parks, an anti-human tendency," as is stated above. In conclusion, some John Muir quotes do not a book destroy. I found this book to be an encompassing, easy-to-follow guide to the history and management of our public lands, complete

with excellent maps. Give it a read, you won't regret it.

This is an excellent book, but be aware that it is a slow read, even though written well. The book details a great deal of policy, government department relations (and infighting such as between the Park and Forest services), public relations, opposition to federal landholding, activists of various kinds (there are a couple of dozen figures, some of them quite memorable, such as John Muir and David Brower, and the evolution of various groups (such as the Wilderness Society and various Sagebrush Rebellion outfits). In other words, a bit more than a century of debate over the public lands. I emphasize that this is all covered well, and clearly, but we're talking about dozens of groups, several conflicting ideas, a number of presidents, policy evolution and political controversy--it's complex and this is not a book one can skim much of, so be prepared for two or three times the usual time it takes for a book of this length. It's also a book that develops the author's view, which is that much of our history, we Americans have seen Nature in terms of using it, and that the more recent concept of inherent worth of nature conflicts with that in a basic way. Much of the public lands are used for economic purposes, particularly BLM lands--grazing cattle, cutting timber, mining, extracting oil and gas, hunting, boating, off the road vehicles, and so on. He sees a sort of grouping, with BLM seeing nature more in utilitarian terms, and the Wilderness system as seeing nature in terms of inherent worth, with other land managers falling somewhere in that range. It's an interesting point, but of course hiking, camping, bird watching and appreciating beauty are all using nature just as much, although with far less physical alteration, than a clear-cutting timber outfit. The issue of grazing on the public lands is explored at some length in several sections; the debate goes back a century and forms a major element in the long-standing Western opposition to many public land policies. Grazing involves a quite large area. The book has some interesting detail. As an environmentalist from college days, I have been little exposed to the ranchers' side of grazing on the public lands, but Wilson examines the arguments of both sides, and in some cases there are clear and substantial benefits to grazing, including why ranchers probably should not be forced to pay market-rate grazing fees. He also discusses the problems of defining what "wilderness" means, rather more complex than usually thought- if it's true wilderness, how can it be managed? The public lands are immense, six hundred million acres--a bit over a million square miles, with that total separated into lands administered by BLM, the Forest Service, the National Parks Service and others agencies (Indian reservations and military bases are not counted in the book). A million square miles is more than Spain, France, Portugal, Germany, Italy and Poland together. The book first describes the public lands, and then chapters look at various categories of the public lands, how

they came to exist and how they have been and are currently administered. Chapter 1 is titled "Building the National Commons," and 2 is "Disposing the Domain," discussing how we got all the land and how over time much of it was distributed to private hands, essentially building the nation. Chapter 3 looks at the emerging public lands system (roughly after the Civil War until around 1900, with a fast and huge change under Teddy Roosevelt). Chapter 4 examines the national parks, Chapter 5 at the National Forests, Chapter 6 discusses National Wildlife refuges, Chapter 7 discusses--at length--Bureau of Land Management lands. Chapter 8 examines the wilderness preservation system--trails, rivers, wilderness areas. All of these feature issues based on private versus public use of the lands. Chapter 9 discusses the overall theme and offers the suggestion that collaborative cooperation offer a tool that can overcome the current environment of political impasse. He defines that as ecosystem management that takes into account that the lands have communities in and around them, and these must be taken into account. It's a surprisingly optimistic ending to a book that often considers raw political power and use principals often at loggerheads. The book has a couple of appendices (tables) that will be of use to some readers.

A wonderful book summarizing the extensive forms of US public lands including national parks, national forests, wildlife refuges, BLM lands, and scenic rivers and trails. Dr. Wilson does an excellent job describing each type of US public land, their history, and current management challenges. I would highly recommend this book for students studying environmental studies, public policy, US history, and those generally interested in American public lands!

We brought this book on a family trip to Yellowstone this summer. It was the perfect companion for reading by the campfire in the evenings. A highly readable and fascinating treatment of the history and current issues surrounding the national parks, forests, wildlife refuges, etc. The author brings these unique and special places in the American landscape to life in rich detail. Ideal for anyone interested in America's "Greatest Idea."

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