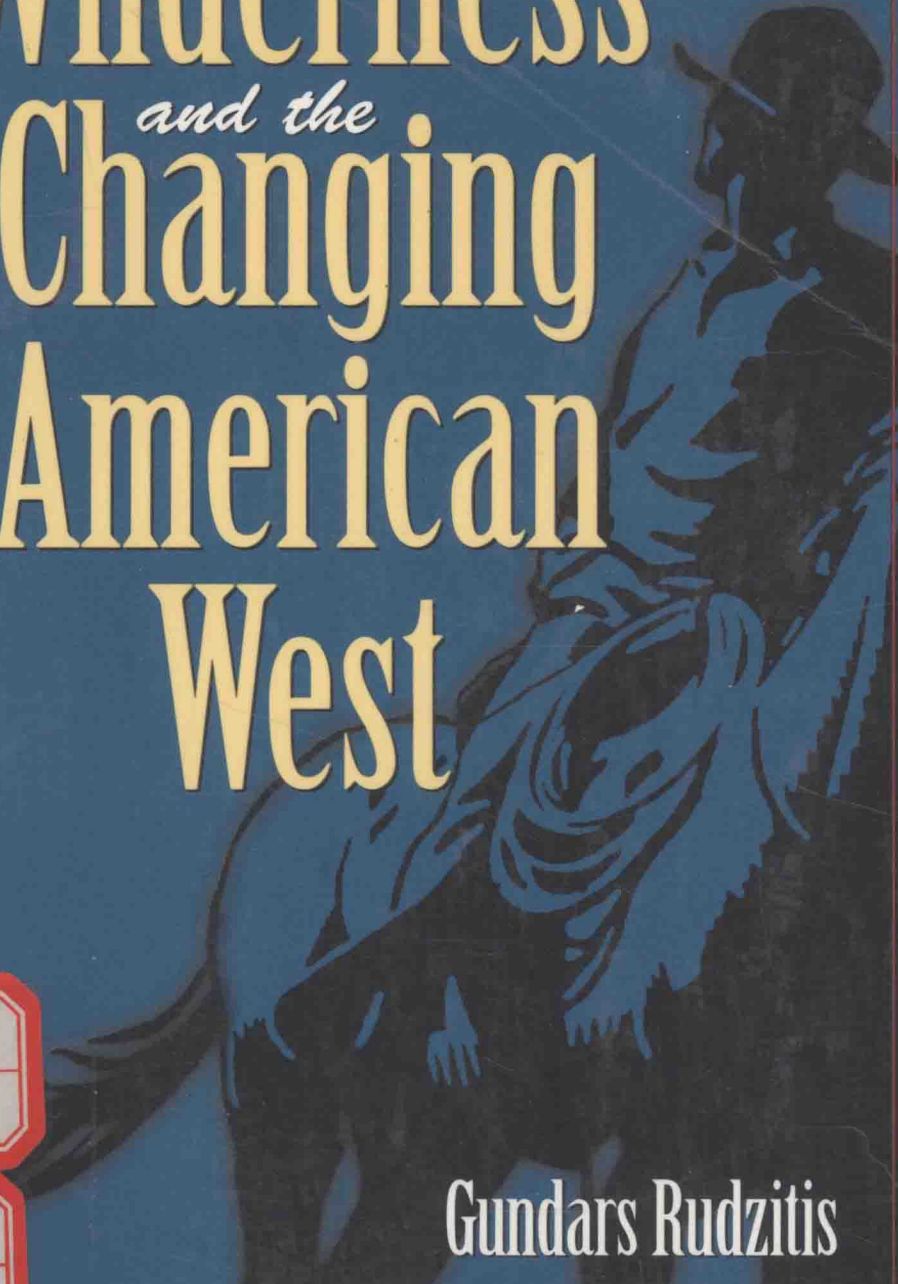


Wilderness *and the* Changing American West

A dark silhouette of a cowboy riding a horse, positioned on the right side of the cover. The cowboy is wearing a hat and a long coat, and the horse is in a dynamic pose, possibly galloping or turning. The entire scene is set against a dark blue background.

Gundars Rudzitis

Wilderness and the Changing American West



Gundars Rudzitis

University of Idaho



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Preface



Twenty years ago, armed with a Ph.D., I drove from Chicago to Austin, which I thought was the heart of the American West, to teach at the University of Texas. There I found people who wore cowboy boots, but the male students were more likely to drive a Buick Regal than a Ford pickup. The female students were more likely to wear high heels and perfume than Levis. The typical Texan student came not from a ranch, but from suburban Dallas or Houston. I had arrived in the urban West, where the influence of mythology still prevailed. The school mascot was a longhorn steer, but an oil well would have been more symbolic of the “real” Texas. And although open spaces were plentiful, they were private, fenced-off spaces. Public lands were scarce.

I was in the heart of the privatized modern West. It was a New West, to which people were flocking from other parts of the country. There were many instant Texans, as people would declare by wearing caps that said they were “Naturalized Texans.” Being Western and Texan was critical to one’s identity. Remnants of an older West remained even as people wore pinstripe suits, cowboy hats, and boots to conduct their everyday business.

I arrived at a much different West when I moved to Idaho, the state that outsiders think of as the home of the famous potatoes, but that those who live here experience as a living reflection of the Old West. Students wore boots (cowboy, logging, or hiking) and jeans, and drove pickups. Most were from rural, not urban, areas. Atten-

dance dropped every year when hunting season opened. In Texas, as expected, controversies revolved around keeping energy prices high and the consequences of rapid urban-suburban growth. In Idaho and throughout the Old West, the issues were how public lands were managed and what restrictions were either inappropriate, unjustified, or just plain idiotic. The presence of public lands and the agencies that managed them dominated the debates at local and state levels.

The Old West also appeared to be under attack from both within and without. An Old West rooted in conquest and the extraction of resources was becoming more and more of an anachronism, because a New West based on preserving the "wildness" of the Old West was challenging the destruction of that "wildness." An American West born out of wilderness needed to have federal legislation enacted both to protect wilderness and to keep it from disappearing.

Once protected, the wilderness had to be managed. Ironically, it has been managed by the very agencies that initially did not want it designated as a protected resource. Despite the sometimes best efforts of the managing agencies, the old management system rooted in the West of the past has not worked well. Until recently, most Americans have not been well informed or have trusted too much those who manage our national wildlands. Reform is overdue, and simply updating old proposals for coordination or agency restructuring will not work. I discuss some of the more innovative approaches to reform and present my own proposals as well. Some approaches, such as those to give the federal wildlands to the states or to privatize them in the name of efficiency, I find both intellectually lacking and potentially destructive of the fabric and soul of the American West.

The attitudes toward our wilderness lands and their value to us has changed as we have matured as a nation. In the past, public wildlands have been managed without consulting the American public. This is apparent in the increasing number of conflicts about how these wildlands should be used that are being reported by the national media. Decisions that used to be made quietly—whether they were about preserving wildness for spotted owls, opening up wilderness areas in Alaska to oil drilling, or making wilderness more "wild" by reintroducing grizzly bears and wolves to appropriate habitats—have become part of a national debate.

Preface

People throughout the United States and in communities in the West are becoming more supportive of keeping our federal lands wild. New people have been moving into the American West in record numbers, and they have changed the economies of their adopted communities. This phenomenon has been called the New West, and how and why it has come about is only beginning to receive the serious attention that it merits. One reaction, though clearly a minority one, is the rise of movements and even hate groups who see the Old West as a refuge where they can hide.

I try to discuss what all these changes, reactions, and counterreactions mean for the American West, the people who live there, other Americans, and people outside the United States for whom the region represents the promise of what our country can be. To my dismay, much of the discussion of federal land management issues or of why the West is changing ignores the original settlers, the Native Americans. I have tried, however imperfectly, to provide some possible ways for us not to ignore our predecessors, but to learn from them. How we choose to live with our wilderness in the future will say a lot about the direction our society takes, and there are forks in the road immediately ahead that will require us to make important decisions.

To me, the American West is wilderness, yet wilderness and the wild mean different things to different people. There is a capitalized, majestic Wilderness and a wilderness that exists on a smaller scale, but is no less valuable. I begin with the image of a raw wilderness that presented itself to the Europeans who first encountered it, and discuss the designation of a federally specified class of wilderness. Despite this designation of an "official" wilderness, it is an artificial distinction to argue that the other federal lands, however heavily used to produce commodities are not, or cannot be, part of the greater public lands wilderness. Fortunately, though wildness of these lands may be diminished and abused, it has not totally disappeared. So, I hope to be forgiven for moving back and forth in referring to both "official" designated wilderness and the rest of the federal estates as our wildlands.

The American West and its public wildlands is a region both unique and easy to love. Though I concentrate on the Northwest and the Northern Rockies because those are wildlands through which I have trod the most and have become increasingly con-

cerned about, the issues and the conclusions drawn should apply to other parts of the West as well. Fortunately, the West is full of people who, though they may disagree about many things, agree that federal wildlands are perhaps the defining feature that gives their lives meaning and characterizes a Western culture past, present, and future.

Acknowledgments



I wanted to write this book soon after I moved to Idaho and became interested in public lands and especially wilderness. Growing up in the East and living and traveling mainly in the Midwest and South, I was more accustomed to environmental issues of air and water pollution and hazardous substances. Upon my arrival at the University of Idaho, I was fortunate to meet and subsequently become friends with Michael Frome, who was at the time Conservation Writer in Residence at the College of Forestry. Michael both inspired and encouraged me to write about issues relevant to the West. He was also an example of someone who is not afraid to take a stand after looking at the facts. I have tried, however imperfectly, to do the same and have avoided the traditional academic approach of playing it safe. I have followed my interpretation of the “facts” to where I think they should lead me, knowing that others may disagree with my conclusions and recommendations. That is how it should be.

It doesn't seem that long ago that I was having a beer with fellow geographer John Alwin while talking about how both of us wanted to write books that reached out to the general public as well as to traditional academic and public policy audiences. He has already done so with books about Washington and Montana. As I was talking about the need to read and to do more research about wilderness, John said something to the effect, “Come on, you could just sit down and write this book.” I was taken aback but realized

that he was right. Later, foolishly I announced in my fall 1994 seminar that I would have the book done before the end of the semester. It has taken longer and would have taken even longer without the help of various people, some of whom I would like to thank here.

I wish to thank my students, who in many ways were my instructors as I started writing this book and tried out ideas and asked many questions along the way. They also suffered at times from ill-informed ideas and responded with many wise insights and personal experiences. Perhaps because of the nature of geography and the subject matter, my seminars and classes attracted people from a wide variety of disciplines in the social and natural sciences, as well as the humanities, which led to wide-ranging discussions. In particular, among those who enlivened my teaching and learning, I would like to thank Marty Anderson, Scott Birkey, Anne Black, Bill Carlson, Jason Doolittle, Jack Erb, Karen Feary, David Fosdeck, Steven Gill, Mark Haugen, Karen Kaasik Dean, Lance Krull, Erik Kummert, Eversley "Teddy" Linley, James Mackey, Shaun Maxey, Russ McCabe, Bill Owens, Ken Preston, Christina Sanders, Philip Smith, Cynthia Tauber, James "Smokey" Thompson, Chris Wall, and Courtney Watson.

I benefited greatly from discussions with a wide variety of people who are concerned with the future of the West. I especially thank Bob Greene for having the best bookstore in the "Real West." He has guided me to many a good book, and his friendship, conversation, and wit, and those of his staff and patrons have made Bookpeople an institution in Moscow, Idaho, without which the town just would not be the same.

With apologies to those whom I have inadvertently left out or who wish to remain anonymous, hearty thanks to Mike Anderson, Sue Armitage, Dennis Baird, Roger Bolton, Sam Couch, Dale Crane, Bob Dale, Don Dahman, Tim Eaton, Cindy Fisher, Jim Fisher, Inese Gruber, Frank Gruber, Joel Hamilton, Bob Hautala, Paul Hirt, Harley Johansen, Jerry Johnson, Tom Kovalicky, Paul Lindholt, Dick Morrill, Jon Miller, Scott Morris, John Norton, Tom Power, Gunita Pujate, Ray Rasker, Karel Stozek, Bill Swagerty, Christiane von Reichert, Paul von Reichert, George Tolley, Tom Lamar, Nancy Taylor and the rest of the gang at the Palouse Clearwater Environmental Institute, Jim Reece, Al Rouyer and the infamous DeMoura

running team. I especially benefited from the comments of Olen Paul Matthews on the entire manuscript and Mike Scott on the ecosystem chapter. My colleagues in the Geography Department, where humor is the rule of the day, provided a relaxed atmosphere.

This past year I have been fortunate to have John Hintz and Christy Watrous as research assistants; they have provided invaluable assistance, some of which is reflected in these pages. They have made the writing of several chapters much easier and more pleasurable. John Hintz also did an outstanding job of providing the maps for the book in a timely fashion. I also benefited greatly from the support of grants from the National Science Foundation.

Judith Scott took my individual chapter files and put them all together in a file that was useful to my editors. Dean Harshbarger solicited my book proposal. My editor at John Wiley & Sons, Philip Manor, took my original proposal and got it approved in what must be record time, and he has prodded and coaxed me along the way to keep me near deadlines. He kept reminding me that the West is indeed changing rapidly and the sooner I documented some of these changes and their implications, the better. I hope the book proves him right. The production process was expertly guided by Donna Conte. Warren Freeman corrected and sharpened my prose without changing the tone or content, to the ultimate benefit of the reader.

Despite all this wonderful help, I am fully responsible for any errors of fact or interpretation. My apologies also to those whose advice I did not take and to some who tried to convince me gently and otherwise of the folly of my ways. I believe strongly in the need to keep the landscape of the West wild but respect the rights of others to disagree about just what that means. Let them write their own books, or, more important, participate democratically in the public debate to which I hope this book contributes. The West is a region that is easy to romanticize and love, and there is nothing wrong with romance or love. We need more of it in our public discourse.

Finally, without the indulgence and support of Rosemary Streatfeild and my children, Kristine and Erik, writing this book would have been less fun. They supported me in a variety of ways that is difficult to put into words. Rosemary got me out into the wild when I needed to be there, though often behind her on the trail.

She kept me on track when I threatened to falter, procrastinate, talk, and not write. She also did frontline editing and had the uncanny ability to know when I had written something after midnight.

I wrote much of this book on laptop computer. One day I overheard my daughter telling a friend, "you can always find him on the couch writing on his laptop." One reason I wrote this book was in the hope that our public lands would remain wild for Kristine and Erik, their generation, and others who follow seven generations and beyond. Writing about wilderness is one thing; spending time with loved ones, family, and friends in the wilderness is another. People may prefer different kinds of wilderness, but diminishing our choices can only do us all harm.

Gundars Rudzitis
Moscow, Idaho

Wilderness
and the Changing
American West

Contents



<i>Preface</i>		<i>viii</i>
Chapter One	Wilderness and the American West	1
Chapter Two	History and Management of Wilderness	20
Chapter Three	Ecosystem Management and Beyond	35
Chapter Four	What About Native Americans and Their Lands?	52
Chapter Five	Why Not Sell Off America's Wildlands?	72
Chapter Six	How Does the American Public Want Wilderness Managed?	91
Chapter Seven	Wilderness and the Communities of the American West	104
Chapter Eight	Wilderness and Economies of the Old and New West	123
Chapter Nine	"It's My West, Not Yours"	143
Chapter Ten	Future Directions for Wilderness	173
<i>Notes</i>		<i>195</i>
<i>Index</i>		<i>215</i>

Chapter One

Wilderness and the American West



The controversy over wilderness lands of the West can provide a glimpse into the future of the United States. In the American West, more so than in other regions of the country, that controversy has a direct impact on the landscape, much of which is not a private landscape, but a national one that belongs to all the citizens of the country. What happens to the Western landscape reflects how the mythical American past is forced to confront a present-day reality and to form the outlines of a future American West.

A conversation in a cafe-bar in a small town in Northeast Oregon expresses typical complaints about how and why changes are taking place on the Western landscape. Mike, an employee of a large corporation, is complaining that he was given two weeks' notice to relocate to California or Georgia or lose his job. "I told them I wouldn't go, and so I sold my house and moved down here. What gets me is the company lied to us for three years about not moving and then just like that you get two weeks to get up and leave. It is good old-fashioned greed. The company doesn't give a damn about us and our families."

Dan, the owner of a local logging company, sympathizes with Mike. "It used to be you could make a good living out here. Now with all the restrictions on logging or, worse, not allowing us to log

on large parts of our public lands . . . making a living is getting harder and harder." For people like Mike and Dan, pursuing other types of jobs is undesirable because it would mean giving up a way of life they would find hard to duplicate outside the inner West.

Conversations such as these can be heard all over small towns in the West. They make clear that private, corporate, and federal government decisions continue to have a major impact on the landscape of the West. This uncertainty is nothing new. Boom and bust cycles, ghost towns, and controversies are an integral part of the history of the region.

What is different about the hostility toward government management and ownership of Western lands is that it is being more and more openly expressed. Often an implied threat lurks beneath the surface: "Save the West or else." Fear of job loss and change drives the local hostility toward the federal government. Saving the West really means "save our jobs." The hostility is directed at the federal government because most of the lands are in the public domain. The frustration felt by the people is emphasized by journalists and the media as well as by politicians hoping to use it for their own purposes. And yet the anger is often misdirected, because it ignores the inevitable changes or places the old West in a mythical context.

There are federally designated wilderness areas in many states, but most of them are in the American West. Originally these were the lands that could not be used or developed commercially, and therefore were set aside to be conserved or managed for people mainly "back East."¹ There were fears that, if public lands were not set aside, the private timber companies would cut and run, creating a vast denuded landscape. Such overcutting would create perpetual timber shortages in the United States. To prevent this, a professional government cadre of forest managers was established.

The timber shortage argument echoes through time right up to the present. In the 1990s, overcutting on public lands, technological change, and increased productivity—combined with past neglect of environmental considerations and changes in public awareness and attitudes—have all contributed to making less timber available from public lands and temporarily driving up prices. A cyclical pattern for timber and other resources in the region is an ongoing phenomenon. This is all part of a changing American West. Some of the

changes are quite contentious, because they are forcing a reevaluation of many of the myths that have been accepted as defining not just the West, but the United States as well.

WHERE IS THE WEST?

What is the American West, and why do we hear about the Old and the New or Changing West? To a nation raised on stories about pioneers, cowboys, and Indians, the American West is both a place and a part of our history. It is a more exciting history than that of the East, with its stereotypically elegant New Englanders, or of the South, imbued with the remnants of slavery, plantations, and racism. Contrary to some of the negative images in other regions, the American West represents space, freedom, individuality, and conquest—qualities idealized in movies and television programs.

Just where is the American West? When people are asked to define it, a wide variety of responses are evoked, ranging from climatic and other descriptions of the physical geography of the region, to those rooted in an historical, cultural, or “the West as a state of mind” rhetoric. There is some agreement on what has been described as the “Unambiguous West” (Figure 1.1).² At the heart of the Unambiguous West are the Rocky Mountains. The eastern edge is defined by the semi-arid farmlands from Montana to New Mexico, while the Western edge is characterized by the Cascade and Sierra Nevada Mountain chains stretching from Washington to California.

The Unambiguous West is the “wild” cowboy West of the Madison Avenue Marlboro Man imagination. It is the interior American West, which historically has been perceived as a region dependent on resource extraction. This is dramatically shown in Figure 1.2. The Unambiguous West becomes “The Empty Quarter,” or “The Marginal Interior.” For Westerners, regional designations such as the “Empty Quarter” have a pejorative ring. This is not how they see the land of mountains, rivers, arid lands, and the wide-open spaces. But to outsiders this is the sparsely populated West, the image of the Old West that was built on extracting mineral, forest, and energy resources, and that was dependent on boom-and-bust cycles as recent as the 1970s and 1980s. Today the “Marginal Interi-

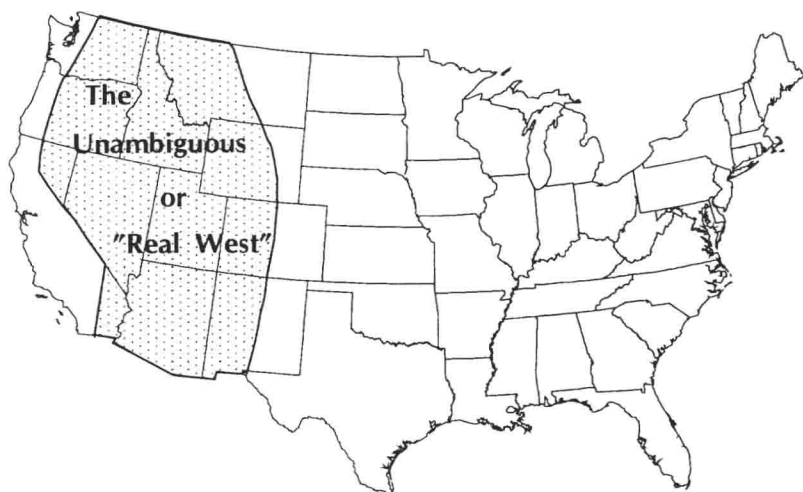


Figure 1.1 The Real West? *Source:* Adapted from Nugent, 1992. See Note 2.

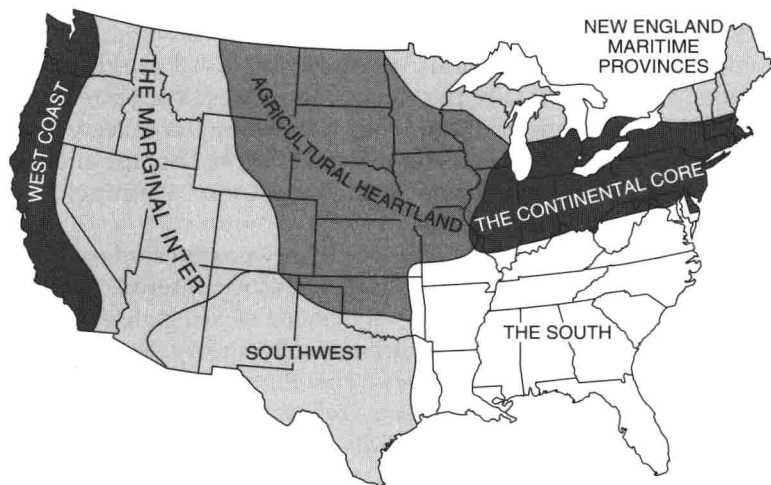


Figure 1.2 The Marginal Interior. *Source:* Modified from H.J. DeBlij and Peter O. Muller, *Geography: Realms, Regions, and Concepts*, 7th ed., John Wiley & Sons, 1994, p. 210.