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Review: Forging a West That Works: An Invitation to the Radical Center

By The Cuivira Coalition (Eds.)

Reviewed by [Scott Bucher](#)

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The Quivira Coalition (Eds.). *Forging a West that Works: An Invitation to the Radical Center*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2003. 150 pp. ISBN 0-9708264-1-9 (paper). US\$18.95

Forging a West that Works represents a genuine dialogue between diverse stakeholders, including ranchers, land managers, environmentalists, and scientists, seeking to maintain and reclaim the health and vitality of the West's rural lands. Eschewing any attempt to present an overarching solution, *Forging a West that Works'* seventeen essays are united only by a common humility based upon first-hand experience of the complexity of the West's ecosystem. Perhaps it is because none of the authors rigidly advances any single perspective or solution that the reader is left with so many valuable lessons, not only regarding the West, but also for sustainable development more generally.

Forging a West that Works is organized into three sections, each consisting of about six chapters/essays on ranching, conservation, and science (respectively) "in the Radical Center." The section on ranching primarily presents the authors' perspectives and experiences with more environmentally beneficial and/or financially stable ranching methods, including "marketing conservation value" (p. 11), regional collaborations, the creation of more drought-resistant landscapes, and so forth. The section on conservation generally represents a critique of pure conservation by providing numerous examples of how ranching has been beneficial to aspects of the environment (e.g. watershed restoration, mine reclamation, "soil stability, biotic integrity, and watershed function" (p. 54)).

The section on science primarily briefly presents the finding of studies regarding the effects of land use and land management (e.g. residential development, and surface fires). However, none of the essays falls neatly into the aforementioned categories; at most they are indicative of slightly different perspectives. For example, "The Southwestern Flycatcher and Me" describes an owner-manager's experience of a burgeoning population of a near-extinct bird on his ranch, in defiance of popular ideas regarding the relationship between agriculture and wildlife, while "Holy Cow! Biodiversity on Ranches, Developments, and Protected Areas in the 'New West'" compares the population densities of numerous species dependent on land

use types.

Despite the diversity of topics and perspectives presented within the seventeen essays, collectively they effectively challenge beliefs that ranching lies at the heart of environmental problems in the West; rather, working land can and must be a key component of a healthier ecosystem. At the same time, the authors recognize that there remains much room for improvement. Moreover, what constitutes a healthy environment is ambiguous (e.g. exurban land may allow Black-billed Magpies and Brewer's Blackbirds to thrive, while being detrimental to Brewer's Sparrows, yet the latter may be found at high densities on ranches) and at some level ultimately socially defined. Thus the desirability of environmental decisions founded upon open-minded dialogue among diverse stakeholders (the radical center).

Ultimately, *Forging a West that Works* proves to be a valuable resource not only for readers seeking a fresh, dynamic approach to achieving a more sustainable West, it provides real-world case studies illustrating many environmental paradigms in action (e.g. environmental justice, holistic land management).

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