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Peer reviewed

Guadalupe Mountains National Park: An Environmental History of the Southwest Borderlands.

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Jeffrey Shepherd's new book grew out of a National Park Service contract: it is an authorized biography, so to speak, of a relatively unknown national park. Pressed against the New Mexico border in a remote stretch of west Texas, Guadalupe Mountains National Park contains the state's highest point—a towering scarp called El Capitán, formed by an uplifted Permian barrier reef—and as the crow flies it's not far from the much more famous Carlsbad Caverns National Park to the north. The book's nine chapters open with one on geology and climate and another on pre-contact indigenous peoples. Then Shepherd proceeds chronologically, from the Spanish and Mexican periods, through Anglo conquest and fitful settlement, to the present, with the last two chapters focused on the creation of the national park and its subsequent development.

The Southwest Borderlands region is rich in fascinating biophysical and cultural stories, and Shepherd weaves together an impressive array of them. The book has the interdisciplinary breadth of cultural geography, albeit with only a single, insufficiently detailed map. However, the specific place that Shepherd is assigned to treat—the land within today's national park—played no more than a “peripheral” (p. 180) role in these stories. With limited perennial water or arable soil, it had little to attract people other than some salt flats and the sublime landmark of El Capitán itself, and even the era of its densest settlement produced only “a very scant documentary record” (p. 123). This puts Shepherd in a difficult position. In most of his first six chapters, one or two paragraphs summarize the historical records for the study area itself, while

the rest of the narrative recounts events unfolding as far afield as Santa Fe, El Paso-Juarez, Chihuahua, the Rio Grande or Pecos River. As historical context, these are indeed important and interesting, but their effects on the Guadalupe Mountains are often indirect or unclear. Moreover, Shepherd has neither the space nor the remit to examine them in their own right.

The result is a limited local case study intermixed with an intriguing but unconsummated regional history. Chapter five covers the immediate post-Civil War period, for example, when mobile bands of Apaches and Comanches, Hispano elites displaced from Santa Fe, emancipated former slaves, Texas Rangers and ex-Confederate vigilantes, and Union and Mexican military forces all pursued their various objectives across a mosaic of jurisdictions and shifting property regimes. To condense all of this into just nineteen pages is a feat. But the interpretation Shepherd offers—that the consolidation of Anglo power by 1881 resulted from “a combination of ingenuity, hope, persistence, and new technologies” (p. 85)—sits rather awkwardly beside the layers of empirical evidence he assembles, which instead point to white supremacist ideology and extra-legal violence as more decisive factors.

The final three chapters benefit from a much fuller archival foundation. Chapter seven recounts how two successful oil men, J. C. Hunter and Wallace Pratt, bought up bankrupted properties during the Depression, eventually aggregating them into a pair of large ranches around El Capitán. After Carlsbad Caverns became a national park in 1931, Hunter and Pratt began to envision a similar future for the Guadalupe Mountains. Chapter eight describes the successful campaign, in the 1960s, to persuade Congress and President Lyndon Johnson to buy out Hunter’s son and combine the two ranches into a national park (Pratt donated his). This history merits comparison to two other recent books about similar campaigns (one successful and the other not): Laura Alice Watt’s *The Paradox of Preservation*, about Point Reyes in California, and Paul

Sutter's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies*, about Providence Canyon in Georgia. Compared to both books, though, Shepherd's conclusion—attributing the park's creation to the “sheer willpower” (p. 150) of its promoters, rather than their wealth and structural power—seems conspicuously anodyne.

Shepherd's last chapter and conclusion reflect on the challenges confronting Guadalupe Mountains National Park in an age of “video games and the internet” (p. 192), multiculturalism and declining visitation. He is cautiously optimistic, but one gets the sense that the National Park Service does not know how to move forward with this “engaging and enigmatic place” (p. 200). One wishes it had given Shepherd more rein to articulate a stronger verdict than this.

--Nathan F. Sayre, Department of Geography, University of California-Berkeley