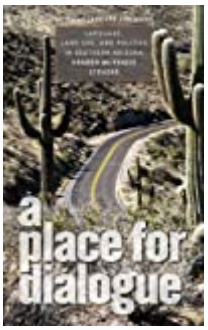
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Sharon McKenzie Stevens. *A Place for Dialogue: Language, Land Use, and Politics in Southern Arizona.* Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007. x + 181 pp. $37.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-58729-534-8.

Reviewed by Kira Bauer (Department of Political Science, Northern Arizona University)

Published on H-Environment (August, 2007)

The Importance of Evaluating Rhetoric in Western Grazing

In her book, *A Place for Dialogue: Language, Land Use, and Politics in Southern Arizona*, Sharon McKenzie Stevens directly addresses the dialogic contention between cattle ranchers and environmentalists. This book is important because it comes at a time when deliberative planning is common in the field of land use management. Stevens's purpose is to show that an understanding of rhetoric is necessary, and that without this understanding, deliberation between ranchers and environmentalists is ineffective. Within this context, she fulfills her purpose well.

In the arid American West, the issue of grazing has been highly contentious. Ranchers claim that they provide a desired consumer good while environmentalists claim that that production comes at the cost of environmental degradation through loss of native species and soil erosion. Although soil erosion develops relatively slowly, it has been estimated that in the next fifty years there will be a loss of 25 to 62 million acres of topsoil in the United States.[1] This loss will significantly decrease the amount of arable land. Grazing is not the sole reason for erosion, but it does contribute to the problem.

Due to these concerns, many environmentalists have called for the eventual elimination of grazing, especially on public lands.[2] Ranchers view the environmentalist position with obvious animosity, stating that elimination of grazing would deplete cattle production. In addition, ranchers contend that a traditional way of life in the West would end.

The content of the dialogue between these two parties lies at the core of Stevens's analysis. She believes that it is necessary to evaluate rhetoric before deliberative planning can occur. Although deliberative planning is the goal of effective rhetoric, Stevens makes an important delineation that some situations lie beyond the scope of accord. Stevens makes the necessary point that there are, in fact, some instances in which views are solidified and prejudices so ingrained that parties can find no common ground. In these cases, deliberative planning is useless because rhetoric only serves to disqualify an opponent and further erode possible relationships.

Historically, the cases in which ranchers and environmentalists are willing to find common ground leave ranchers in the position of becoming grass farmers. Al-

though this seems to define the issue as a win for environmentalists, ranchers have long known that preservation of their business depends on management of their resources. Stevens suggests that the ways in which habitat management occurs provides the critical element for effective rhetoric about ranching.

In addressing rhetoric, Stevens's book challenges the often dualistic nature of the current dialogue about ranching. She reminds the reader that language shapes minds and creates the symbols from which we form our ideals. She contends that these ideals become part of the political landscape, which includes the power to cooperate and negotiate, and are thus transformed into policy.

Stevens addresses dialogue about ranching on several grounds. Her most important discussions focus on science and culture. Stevens's discussions of science are well grounded and provide excellent insight into rhetoric. Unlike many current writers, Stevens does not discount science, but she does address its limitations within the field of rhetoric and consequent negotiation. She contends that science has attained the popular status of a "truth-based form of knowledge beyond interpretation" and that it is generally deemed apolitical (p. 5).

According to Stevens, the rhetoric of science includes absolute certainty, which has the outcome of creating winners and losers. She contends that this causes polarization and does not lend to deliberative planning. It becomes obvious that within the context of science and conservation, rhetoric from both ranchers and environmentalists must be chosen and evaluated carefully. One illustration in particular shows how specific words changed the direction of a public meeting. Ultimately the meeting was adjourned because the words used during the course of the meeting created a polarized atmosphere in which cooperation was no longer possible. Stevens makes the important assertion that scientific truth can be situational, and she cautions against using scientific data broadly.

Interpreted narrowly, it would seem that scientific data is only used for purposes of self-interest. Stevens states that the term "self-interest" is "a particularly damaging form of rhetorical boundary work" (p. 81). In other words, there is no standard that is valid universally for judging the scientific data. What one discipline might see as valid might be unsound to another. Again, this creates polarization. Stevens advocates "fence-sitting," or the "granting of multiple beliefs and inventions" (p. 107). This opens up possibilities that cautious rhetoric may have limited.

Rhetoric involving culture tends to be used by ranchers and, according to Stevens, involves the use of identifying actors. This identification allows one to view the drama of the participants involved and creates the symbolism of tradition. Cultural values tend to form from these symbols, and ranchers tend to benefit from this rhetoric. Stevens cautions that visions of land use often define the difference between truth and values.

Stevens's methodology is credible. She provides ample criticism of her own approach, and her candidness inspires the reader's trust. She states her biases up front, and she further elaborates on material she has chosen to exclude. The book could benefit, however, from a charted description of the people she interviewed. The narrative description of these people is confusing at times.

Stevens points to socioecology as a tool for allowing us to understand how culture and nature shape each other. As such, she highlights the interplay between what humans want and how ecology shapes human ability. In addition, she stresses the fact that humans shape their environment to attain that desire. The interaction between people and land is not merely based on the institutionalization of policy. It is based on individual use or overuse. According to Stevens, rhetoric is essential to our understanding of socioecology because of the ideals it promotes and the policy produced by it.

Stevens employs stasis theory to explain how language, including scientific terms, can be effectively evaluated. First, she presumes that interviewees speak "in good faith" (p. 83). Then she considers contradictory statements using a method called symmetrical analysis. In doing so, she can acknowledge ongoing rhetoric about scientific claims. In Stevens's chosen method, it becomes essential not to know the truth about the science, but what the informants believe and how they advocate those beliefs.

One of the interesting points she makes in discussing the scientific claims involving native grasses is that grasses in southern Arizona are no longer truly native; the original ecosystem no longer exists. Because there is no baseline in this realm, one must be realistic in interpreting scientific data involving "restoration." Short- and long-term ecosystem management develops from these points of view.

During the course of the book, Stevens highlights the use of pictures that create symbolism. Although her intended purpose is not to interpret or evaluate the use of pictures as they influence our thinking, a future study

involving still and moving photos would be interesting. This type of study would further allow us to view the creation of our ideals and how policy evolves.

Overall, Stevens's book adds much to the existing literature that addresses the field of ranching. In fact, her main message could also be carried over to deliberative planning in other environmental realms. Her book convinces us that the understanding of rhetoric is critical to ongoing discussions and that policy ultimately benefits from an understanding of this nature.

Notes

[1]. Zachary A. Smith, *The Environmental Policy Paradox*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: 2004), 217.

[2]. See, for example, Debra L. Donahue, *The Western Range Revisited: Removing Livestock from Public Lands to Conserve Biodiversity* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment

Citation: Kira Bauer. Review of Stevens, Sharon McKenzie, *A Place for Dialogue: Language, Land Use, and Politics in Southern Arizona.* H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. August, 2007.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13530

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.