

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



O. Alan Weltzien. *Exceptional Mountains: A Cultural History of the Pacific Northwest Volcanoes.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016. xiv + 246 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-6547-9.

Reviewed by Rachel S. Gross (University of Wisconsin-Madison)

Published on H-Environment (November, 2016)

Commissioned by David T. Benac (Western Michigan University)

The cover of O. Alan Weltzien's *Exceptional Mountains* shows a snowy mountain peak in shades of gray and white, crowned by a slate blue sky. Weltzien's goal is to show how even the marketing decision to use an un-peopled blue and white wonderland as a book cover reflects a centuries-old legacy of the promise and problem of the mountains of the Pacific Northwest. In *Exceptional Mountains*, Weltzien delves into the many meanings people have attached to their mountains as a part of the urban skyline and as the destination for their outdoor adventures. Readers might be attracted to the mountain imagery, but Weltzien cautions that too much entitlement to accessing wilderness experience becomes an issue when many seek it at the same time and place (p. 41). At stake in this assessment is how Americans should manage their beloved natural treasures.

Using literary accounts, travel narratives, park records, and clubs and company histories, Weltzien establishes the central tension of the book, between democratic access and preservation. His goal in the book's six thematically organized chapters is to explain just how residents of the Northwest have established a regional identity around these exceptional snow-peaks. Weltzien also critiques the consumerist attitude of wealthy tourists: as he explains, some mountaineers climb for status more than personal transformation (p. 69). Scholars of environmental history will recognize the broader conversations on consumption, recreation, and cultural conceptions of wilderness in which Weltzien seeks to participate. Weltzien suggests that modern Americans want the impossible: both high culture and high mountains (p. 76). They want accessibility and

personal freedom but are unwilling to accept the costs. Ultimately, Weltzien argues, the proximity of cities like Seattle, Tacoma, and Portland has had a baleful legacy on the mountains (p. 44).

Weltzien begins his book by exploring travel narratives of the late nineteenth century that helped build a regional psyche complete with an inferiority complex about the Pacific Northwest's place in the American West (pp. 12, 20). In subsequent chapters, Weltzien explores the ambivalent influence of nearby cities on the mountains. Because of the flow of traffic, these volcanoes were protected and preserved; cities brought a flow of capital to build infrastructure and concessions. Ironically, though, the success of this infrastructure now places the volcanoes' very preservation at risk. For instance, standard mountaineering routes are so crowded as to no longer evince wilderness. One of the most successful examples of this bottleneck problem are poop bags, blue bags the National Park Service gives to climbers to encourage adherence to a carry-in and carry-out policy for all matter, including human waste. Though most follow this rule, every year some climbers leave blue plastic bags or piles with no bag at all along the standard routes. Mountain climbing is well on its way to becoming as much an example of industrial tourism as a cruise ship (p. 69).

In the middle chapters, Weltzien argues that Americans' relationship with the volcanoes became increasingly commodified in the years after World War II. The outdoor industry, like photography and climbing clubs, embraced the paradox of the mountains: it advocated for

both "conservation *and* access" (p. 111). For example, the gear industry "accelerated public interest" in outdoor recreation but diluted the purer "close-knit community" of the early twentieth century that privileged function over fashion and private transformation through outdoor sports over the status tourism of the upwardly mobile (pp. 110, 113).

Weltzien concludes his book by advocating directly for policy-based solutions. He argues that we must consider how to best balance access and the demand for "primitive and unconfined" wilderness recreation (p. 185). Potential solutions to "recreational carrying capacity" include quota systems, reservations for permits, and shared stewardship (take the poop bag with you!).

While Weltzien's concrete solutions for how to manage wilderness more effectively are a welcome political engagement, his evidence does not always support his argument about the reductive consumerist attitude of modern outdoor recreation. Weltzien argues that many people climb for status yet his evidence base includes more

sellers than consumers, making the shift from "personal transformation" to "status badge" difficult to judge. Indeed his personal account of a recent climb on Mount St. Helens seems to conflict with his argument: as Weltzien writes, he felt "part of a wilderness, not a crowd" even though he was on the standard route and saw others along the way (p. 212). That feeling of truly being in nature, which persisted despite Weltzien's critiques of status-hungry hikers, suggests we have even more to learn about the potential for resistance or the development of new identities from within the consumer mindset.

Outdoorspeople will likely find much in *Exceptional Mountains* that will help them rethink their outdoor experiences. Likewise, anyone interested in understanding regional American identity, park management, and changing uses of wilderness will find stories of interest. While Weltzien's focus is strictly on the Pacific Northwest, his argument about the carrying capacity of the land will carry readers far beyond the yellowing snow of Mt. Hood and Mt. Rainier.

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

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

Citation: Rachel S. Gross. Review of Weltzien, O. Alan, *Exceptional Mountains: A Cultural History of the Pacific Northwest Volcanoes*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. November, 2016.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=47513>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.