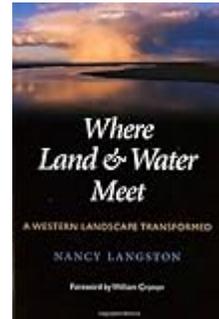


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Nancy Langston. *Where Land and Water Meet: A Western Landscape Transformed.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003. xiv + 230 pp. \$26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-295-98307-3.



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The Poetics of Conflict

In a field full of cautionary tales about humanity's uncanny ability to bring about totally unintentional environmental circumstances, Nancy Langston's scholarship is unique. In her first book, *Forest Dreams, Forest Nightmares* (1996), a sympathetic yet critical examination of forest management in Oregon's Blue Mountain National Forest, Langston moved beyond the tragic stock-narrative of environmental history by sketching a program of practical management solutions to the often disastrous interactions between humans and the non-human world. Work to account for complexity, Langston urged her readers. Her latest book, *Where Land and Water Meet: A Western Landscape Transformed*, is in many ways the second chapter in a larger project. Langston, an environmental historian, professor of forest ecology, and management at the University of Wisconsin has produced a careful cultural, social, and natural history of human management of wetlands in eastern Oregon, specifically the riparian areas of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. The book is also a lesson in what Langston calls "pragmatic adaptive management." To the theme of complexity, Langston adds conflict as a necessary component of sustainable natural resource management.

Birders and sportsmen familiar with great basin wildlife know Malheur's marshes quite well; egrets, ducks, Canadian geese, herons, and trout, are but a few of the animals that depend on the refuge's riparian marshlands during the year. Langston traces the history of this landscape from the arrival of the first white settlers near the end of the nineteenth century to the present day, identifying two overlapping eras of land management: cattle ranching and federal wildlife management. In both eras, Malheur residents tried to engineer the wetlands to produce different empires. Ranchers shaped the land to create imperial cattle concerns. Henry Miller, of Miller and Lux, set up an operation in the basin, while Peter French and Hugh Glenn used the marshes and surrounding area for their P Ranch. These ranchers turned their visions of cattle empires into reality by manipulating the wetlands and the flow of water across them to create more and more property for cattle grazing.

Ironically, the story of federal refuge management is not terribly different. Refuge officials, like ranchers, were equally single-minded in their manipulation of the environment. Once the federal government wrested control

of Malheur Lake and the Donner and Blitzen River from rancher control, creating the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, managers tried to create an “empire of ducks,” a vision based on their romantic notions of the cattle empires of the “old West.” Refuge managers used complex science to engineer the wetlands into “better” marshes capable of “producing” more of what the marshes were famous for, ducks and trout. The result, no surprise to environmental historians, was a weird hybrid landscape, part human, part natural. Beavers were trapped out, their dams replaced with concrete. Riverbank willows were eradicated, planted, and eradicated again. Predators were systematically eliminated and then reintroduced. Throughout the story, Langston provides a nuanced account of the cultural context in which the people of Malheur operated, drawing a direct line between their perceptions of the land and their actions.

At the heart of this story are the power relations between competing social groups looking to control the wetlands and dictate land-use policy. In the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth, ranchers had the upper hand, controlling the vast majority of property in the basin. By the 1930s, after an intense struggle between cattle barons and refuge managers, the balance of power shifted, and the federal government was increasingly able to shape land-use at Malheur. Both groups tried to eliminate each other’s influence in the basin, yet at no point was the power held by either ranchers or refuge managers very secure. Throughout Malheur’s history, ranchers and managers had to gain popular support for their policies. Small farmers in the basin, urban bird-watchers in Portland, and sportsman throughout the mountain West felt as if they had a stake in Malheur as well. Both ranchers and wildlife managers tailored their message to these groups, seeking to build coalitions that might tip the balance of power one way or the other.

This power struggle provides the story with dramatic tension, but it also provides Langston’s argument with necessary analytical tension. *Where Land and Water Meet* shows how sustainable management was only possible when no one single social group monopolized the landscape and its use. “For generations,” writes Langston, “first ranchers and then refuge managers were able to gather enough power so that they did not need to acknowledge viewpoints other than their own” (p. 9). The solution to such narrow-minded management practices and their resultant disastrous landscapes, Langston maintains, is conflict. The story of Malheur teaches us that “both environmental lawsuits and environmental change forced open a door through which new sto-

ries, new perspectives, and new assumptions could enter” (p. 9). Conflict is the key to successful management policies. “For many people conflict is a dirty word,” Langston writes, “yet conflicts among different users of Malheur Lake Basin eventually improved refuge management [and] disrupted the hold of narrow orthodoxies on resource management” (p. 9). Only by allowing for conflict, for the messy social reality of multiple users, perspectives, and voices, can we hope to manage the equally messy world of multiple biological, climatic, and geological forces.

Similar to *Forest Dreams, Forest Nightmares, Where Land and Water Meet* ends with a fascinating historical essay and management methodology statement on how restoration ecologists, wildlife managers, ranchers, sportsman, local residents, and recreational tourists might try to work together to manage and account for the complexity of riparian areas or any other landscape. The last chapter, “Pragmatic Adaptive Management,” is not so much a conclusion, but a complex suggestion on how management should incorporate conflict and complexity. Langston draws on the philosophical foundations of American pragmatism to argue for a “democratic process that creates a structure for useful conflict” (p. 161). In short, Langston makes conflict and multiple perspectives necessary for good management. Only by putting locals, such as ranchers and small farmers, and non-locals, such as government scientists and environmental activists, on an equal footing can management succeed.

As a teaching tool for both undergraduate and graduate students, this book reads wonderfully. Similarly, *Where Land and Water Meet*, will also be easily digestible for those outside of the academy. It is full of enlightening stories as well as careful and accessible analysis. *Where Land and Water Meet* is elegantly concise at 169 pages, and its six chapters are divided into discussions of discrete historical episodes or thematic discussions which run from about two to fifteen pages apiece.

For all the book’s strengths, its coverage could have been broader. Ranchers and federal managers dominate Langston’s history of Malheur because they were the ones that actually determined land-use policies. Homesteaders, small farmers, and sportsman, for instance, play a much more marginal role in her analysis because they never secured control over that process. Yet the reader is left wondering if these more marginal groups were more than just a constituency to be won over. Langston argues that ranchers and refuge managers tailored their rhetoric to appeal to these groups but took little of it from them.

In this story, those in power held the power of cultural production. The narrative could have withstood further discussion of the role played by other users. It would not have altered Langston's larger argument, but it would have provided a more nuanced telling of how different Oregonians contributed to the creation of the rhetoric of nature so crucial to the fights over Malheur.

Where Land and Water Meet is a sophisticated yet accessible analysis of the intersection of nature and culture. More importantly, however, it moves beyond simple criticisms of the problems inherent in wildlife and natural resource management and advances a nuanced program for those invested in land management, outdoor recreation, farming, ranching, and the environment.

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