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Book Review: Conservation on the Northern Plains: New Perspectives. Edited by Anthony J. Amato. Sioux Falls: The Center for Western Studies, 2017.

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Book Reviews

Conservation on the Northern Plains: New Perspectives.

Edited by Anthony J. Amato. Sioux Falls: The Center for Western Studies, 2017. xxiv + 215 pp. Illustrations, maps, table, notes, index. Paper \$12.00.

The Northern Plains are not a landscape that immediately leaps to mind when most Americans think of “conservation.” This of course hinges on a number of preconceptions, particularly definitions of conservation (is it preservation or wise use?) and conceptions and perceptions of the Northern Plains landscape (a lovely landscape or flyover land?). Is there “nothing to conserve or preserve in the open space”? (p. xvii). Anthony Amato and the authors collected in *Conservation on the Northern Plains* showcase the range of landscapes, land uses, definition of conservation, and voices to reveal the great diversity of views on this concept and this region, highlighting the ways this landscape has been and is being conserved.

The collection begins with a foreword by journalist Dennis Anderson, meditating on notions of resources and conservation. Anthony Amato’s introduction emphasizes the importance of defining both conservation and the Plains, setting the stage for the chapters that follow. The essays are written in a variety of styles, from creative nonfiction to academic research. They encompass the variety of land use seen on the Northern Plains: agriculture, ranching, parks, and hunting and consider the ways in which these landscapes have been utilized in the past and how they continue to be utilized. Linda Hasselstrom and Peter Carrels each present views of farmers’/ranchers’ sustainable practices, contrary to popular misconceptions of farmers/ranchers in the region, that “The ranchers we know might not call themselves conservationists, and certainly would not call themselves environmentalists, but they know taking care of their land is good business” (p. 48). Barry Stiefel highlights the role of the Plains in the creation of the national parks movements in the United

States and Canada and the creation of parks on the Plains. Stephen Eliason presents two different chapters exploring Montana hunters' attitudes, one focused on hunters' views of wolves and one on why hunters stop hunting, both drawing from a perspective of wildlife as a collective resource that needs to be managed "for the benefit of all citizens" (p. 171). Lisa Payne Ossian, Miles Lewis, and Anthony Amato each examine different aspects of agriculture on the Plains (in Iowa, Montana, and southern Minnesota, respectively), focusing particularly on how government practices have transformed the practice of agriculture on the Plains, impacting not only the ecology but also the human ecology. Finally, Joseph Amato presents a lovely overview of conservation on the North Plains, grappling with the evolving definitions of conservation as employed by the federal government as well as its evolution in the American consciousness, and how they have impacted the Plains.

For a book entitled "Conservation on the Northern Plains," a clear definition of conservation was sorely missed in Anthony Amato's introduction where he sets the stage for the essays that follow. Amato states, "Conservation is a matter of words" (p. xviii) but then never provides the words, never provides a definition of conservation or lays out its messy usages. Readers may then begin reading the essays wondering how the editors and authors define it and finding from essay to essay a range of definitions and applications. As Joseph Amato abundantly makes clear at the end of the book, the term has evolved in meaning and even today is confusing, at times suggesting preservation and at times efficient or wise use of resources. Perhaps Joseph Amato's essay should have led, setting the stage with a discussion of the evolution of its definition and making clear there are multiple ways to view conservation. Given its title, readers may come to the text with expectations that the volume will address the preservation of the Plains ecosystem: they will be disappointed. The majority of the essays here address "wise use" of the current, human-modified Plains ecosystem.

Despite this misstep, there are some real gems here: Hasselstrom's "Cattle Ranching in South Dakota," Stiefel's "A Tale of Two Plains," and Amato's "Conservation on the Northern Plains" are all well-crafted and interesting pieces that would make for great discussions in environmental conservation, environmental history, American West, or Great Plains classes.

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