

Smith, Jordan F. 2005. *Nature Noir: A Park Ranger's Patrol in the Sierra*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company. Pages: 216 Price: \$24.00 ISBN: 0-618-22416-5

Reviewed by

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How many of us who chose a profession related to outdoor recreation, natural resources management or interpretation were drawn in our youth by the intrigue of wildness; the challenges of climbing, backpacking, or canoeing through natural areas; the peaceful contemplation offered by natural landscapes; an honorable and idealistic personal passion to “save the earth;” the adrenaline rush of working search-and-rescue or fighting fires; or the other envisioned excitements of living a ranger’s life, symbolized by that infamous flat-brimmed “ranger hat”? How many of us actually donned that quite uncomfortable (but still symbolic) hat, still passionate and committed, only to discover a world much more complex and sometimes hostile – a world filled with conflicting opinions about how to use natural resources; a world littered with not-so-nice and otherwise troubled people; a world complicated by those distasteful concepts of economics, politics and greed? How many of us finally acknowledged, reluctantly, that managing our natural world is really much more about managing people than natural environments? Such is the case of Jordan Fisher Smith, who began his starry-eyed journey as a seasonal park ranger, then settled into a multi-year stint as a state park ranger in the Auburn State Recreation Area, geographically defined by the north and middle forks of the American River in California’s Sierra Nevada Mountains.

Fundamentally, *Nature Noir* is a book about a ranger’s work life, in which the author shares both his peaceful encounters with the natural world and the underbelly of the human condition. Each chapter can stand alone as a separate adventure story, with several exhibiting elements of a good mystery. The chapter stories are good. They are exciting, gripping, and intriguing. They take the reader on a roller coaster of emotions—eliciting smiles, wonder, empathy and calm; evoking suspense, disgust, frustration and sometimes anger. As any sensational newscast or well crafted novel, they present tales of murder, rape, disease, disappearance, drunken brawls, secret missions, and dangerous animal encounters—and all of them are true.

Taken together, however, the chapters are so much more than a compilation of park ranger adventure stories. Fisher presents a compelling and convoluted history of the proposed Auburn Dam that would have flooded many miles of canyon, carved by

the American River. Woven throughout the story are political battles; pressures and dreams of economic development (e.g., the subdivisions perched above the river canyons, adjacent to the proposed lake, built on unfulfilled speculation); the persistent tension between developers and environmentalists; the conflict between recreational and other (e.g., mining) uses of the resource; changing cultural values; the paradox of recreational settings being used for illegal, dangerous and destructive pursuits; the irony and futility of enforcing “no river bank alteration” regulations while simultaneously facilitating permitted mining and anticipating pending inundation of the canyons with millions of foot-acres of water for flood control, irrigation, and power generation. Even the history of the national park idea and rangers as park managers is woven into the tapestry of his tale. In the style of John McPhee’s *In Control of Nature* and Sebastian Junger’s *The Perfect Storm*, Fisher presents the scientific analyses—including conflicting interpretations, often spun by political or economic motives—of the area with regard to geology, biology, ecology, hydrology and climatology. Just as easily, he presents the basic engineering and structural design elements of various dam construction proposals.

In the style of Nevada Barr, Fisher paints vivid word pictures of the canyon and river environment, of ranger “culture,” and the residual placer and dredge gold mining community. The characters of his stories, under pseudonyms, are appropriately developed. Fisher portrays the manifestations of, and reasons for, ranger culture. Some reflect the influence of previous management and tradition; some address coping strategies developed by police officers, medical staff, park rangers and others who regularly deal with death, injury, rescue, and aberrant behavior. Fisher openly presents the paradoxes of trying to protect, for decades, a place slated for inundation and ruin. He admits the occasional sense of futility of the job, but one that is counterbalanced with notions of a “naturalist’s Hippocratic oath” to do no harm, and to protect and heal when possible. Through it all he refuses to pass judgment—on the destitute, the odd, the political, the greedy, and the just plain mean. Nor does he overtly pass judgment on decisions about the dam. However, he does express his feelings and opinions, and describes the stresses of working under conditions of political turmoil, perpetual uncertainty, and withholding of information from rangers that has unintended, but serious, consequences. (This is a secret you can discover if you read the book).

It is these qualities, combined with the diversity of perspectives and issues presented, that make the book an excellent resource for case studies or issues-oriented discussions in park, recreation, and tourism courses. This book is a must-read for *Scholar* readers—as a reflection on the complexities of the world and field within which we work, as a bit of catharsis and validation for those whose life and professional journeys have shared common elements, and as a classroom resource. The book is well researched and well written, with the flair of an adventure or mystery story based on solid research and painted against a vividly described landscape and context. A faculty member can find an array of issues to challenge romantic percep-

tions and discuss realities of managing natural resources, parks and other outdoor recreation settings and users. A map provides the reader a constant spatial reference while exploring the canyons with Ranger Fisher. I found myself wanting additional maps and some schematic diagrams (structural diagrams of various dam types and operations, gold mining dredges, and other technical illustrations), despite the well crafted verbal descriptions. For the scholar wanting to do additional research on the history and issues presented in the book, a list of references would have been useful. But perhaps additional illustrations and references would disrupt imagination and cognitive painting. Despite these minor limitations, I highly recommend this journey into history, politics, adventure and . . . the canyons.