

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and
Social Sciences

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Fall 2006

Book Review of *Twilight of the Mammoths: Ice Age Extinctions and the Rewilding of America* by Paul S. Martin

Michael Fosha

Archaeological Research Center, South Dakota State Historical Society

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Fosha, Michael, "Book Review of *Twilight of the Mammoths: Ice Age Extinctions and the Rewilding of America* by Paul S. Martin" (2006).
Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences. 837.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/837>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Twilight of the Mammoths: Ice Age Extinctions and the Rewilding of America. By Paul S. Martin. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. xix + 250 pp. Tables, figures plates, references, index. \$29.95 cloth.

Applying ecological studies to the adaptations of prehistoric human hunter-gatherer groups has greatly increased our abilities to interpret effects of an ever-changing environment and our access to critical resources on these populations. The Pleistocene/Holocene transition, its climate and human genesis in the new world, draws intensive interest from a number of scientific communities. In *Twilight of the Mammoths*, Paul Martin adds his views, which are of no surprise, on the megafaunal extirpations during a cultural period referred to in North America as Clovis.

The book contains 11 chapters with a foreword by Harry Green who sets the stage for a visit to a Pleistocene zoo with Paul Martin as curator. The volume focuses on large fauna (> 40 kg) of the Americas that went extinct in what is described as “near time” (<50,000 years). Its first five chapters discuss the major fauna of the Pleistocene/Holocene transition, with an emphasis on Xenarthra, or, more specifically, the ground sloth, and consider the pollen and plant remains extracted from studies on ground sloth dung recovered from Rampart Cave in Arizona, as well as mammoth and Harrington’s mountain goat from nearby caves in the arid southwest. Plant regimes represented by these studies, as well as those from packrat middens from distinctly separate altitudes, round out this survey and are the book’s greatest contribution. A map showing the locations cited would have been helpful.

Chapters 6 through 9 attempt to dispel the various alternative theories to overkill (hyperdisease, climate, etc.) but do not go into enough detail, nor does Martin discuss the plethora of solid research that supports alternative models. Climate and vegetation change, possibly coupled with pressure from more dominant animal species, all of which might have reduced the range and fecundity of the near-time extinct species, are not adequately examined. Nor do his sections on the archaeological record sufficiently support his overkill hypothesis. Martin’s overkill version reads like an army of right-wing extremists clad in glyptodont armor, invading with the efficiency of a German panzer division and proceeding through the Americas intent on killing animals too ignorant to run and whose presence was an unwarranted blight on their new world. His views and insight into the archaeological profession are neither accurate nor needed here. In general, what with cultural resource managers, engineers,

and preservation officers, the field does not require any additional armchair archaeologists.

Twilight of the Mammoths is the culmination of a very distinguished career by an excellent scholar. Despite my many criticisms (for which there is not adequate space here), it deserves to be on the bookshelf of serious investigators of the Pleistocene/Holocene transition. While its value to the Great Plains is no more or less than other climatic models currently in use from this region, it does present excellent data on the Southwest. From this standpoint, it is certainly worth purchasing one or two extra copies to give to promising students inasmuch as it outlines Martin's model in an entertaining fashion and offers scholars of alternative schools of thought many opportunities for vigorous engagement. **Michael Fosha**, *Archaeological Research Center, South Dakota State Historical Society*.