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Review of *Struggle Over Utah's San Rafael Swell* by Jeffrey Durrant

Michael Coughlan

Department of Anthropology at the University of Georgia

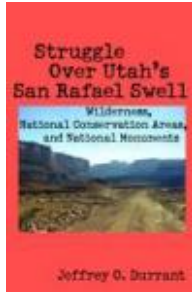
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Coughlan, Michael, "Review of *Struggle Over Utah's San Rafael Swell* by Jeffrey Durrant" (2008). *Ecological and Environmental Anthropology (University of Georgia)*. 20.
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Reviews
Struggle Over Utah's San Rafael Swell


Jeffery O. Durrant

ISBN: 078-0-8165-2669-7

University of Arizona Press 2007

Jeffrey O. Durrant's *Struggle Over Utah's San Rafael Swell: Wilderness, National Conservation Areas, and National Monuments* presents a history of the political conflict over public lands use and management of the canyon riddled landscape of central Utah. It examines the conflict using the content of the public record: journalistic media, governmental correspondence, mission statements and public statements of the stakeholder organizations, agencies and local governments involved. *Struggle* is at its core a journalistic narrative that unfortunately does not live up to the standards of an academic presentation of a recurrent political ecological theme in the American West. Indeed, Durrant reviews none of the relevant academic literature other than a standard recital of iconic works which serve to color his narrative rather than illuminate the reader (e.g. Aldo Leopold, John Muir, Carl Sauer).

The lack of an explicit theoretical or methodological approach accompanies an unsophisticated handling of the very cultural and political constructs the author purports to address. For example, his use of a reified conception of wilderness is devastatingly simplistic in light of recent environmental paradigm shifts apparent even in the discourse of the Federal agencies he addresses. Despite an attempt to incorporate local history *Struggle* glosses over at least 10,000 years of human habitation of the landscape in one paragraph, relegating the potentially meaningful character of that history to mere curiosities (i.e. "rock art sites") sparking romantic visions of what amounts to an imagined, intangible past. Even a main thread of Durrant's argument, an analysis of shifts in the Bureau of Land Management policy, misplaces Multiple Use policy as a tenet of National Park Service policy and ethos, rather than that of the US Forest Service. A cursory review of conservation history would have built a stronger argument concerning this shift. Instead, the writings of selected wilderness celebrities appear fleetingly throughout and in the conclusion of *Struggle* where they support Durrant's call for the "conservation of amazing western landscapes . . . above other considerations." (p.219, emphasis added).

Durrant's apparent affinity for the literary musings of the wilderness crowd is tempered only by a romantic but fatalistic sensitivity to the land-based culture that recreational wilderness designation will displace. In the end, however, Durrant celebrates the passing of an "Old West" characterize by, as he points out, federally subsidized extensive and intensive land use.

Of course, *Struggle* does have some redeeming qualities. For one, it presents a contextual history (albeit a shallow one) of the cultural and political conflict involving the designation of a recreational wilderness in the intermountain west. Indeed, to his credit, Durrant even includes five personal experience statements from participants in the struggle, although these remain unanalyzed and are apparently only presented for their novelty.

Given the limits of such an approach to understanding the relationships between humans and their social and physical environments, I would not recommend this book to scholars with interests beyond a superficial description of the local particulars of the San Rafael Swell in Utah. *Struggle* has little to contribute to our understanding of political ecological conflict, recreational wilderness areas, or any other of the multitude of cultural intricacies affecting the future of the "New West."

 Review by Michael R. Coughlan, Department of Anthropology at the University of Georgia.