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## Book Review: *The Natural West: Environmental History in the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains* by Dan Flores

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*The Natural West: Environmental History in the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains.* By Dan Flores. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001. Photographs, maps, illustrations, acknowledgments, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. x + 285 pp. \$29.95.

Prolific environmental historian Dan Flores has gathered together and revised many of his previously-published short works in *The Natural West*. Two ideas link the essays together: genetic evolution that has produced ingrained, even instinctive, environmental behaviors in humans; and the West's distinctiveness, deriving not from aridity but from the ecological (and historical) interrelationships of the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains.

Drawing from the fields of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, Flores argues that humans are revolutionarily adapted to transform the environment in order to perpetuate the species. But, he admits, "I can't imagine that many historians are going to be willing any time soon to apply evolutionary interpre-

tations to the history of events and the actions of individuals. I would not be comfortable doing so myself. Evolutionary insights are too blunt an instrument for such work." Although Flores does use evolutionary psychology throughout the book, he never loses sight of culture. For example, he uses cultural difference to explain the varying relationships the people of New Mexico, Utah (particularly Mormons), and Montana have forged with Rocky Mountain ecosystems. Flores is a provocative thinker, and his assertions about human animalness certainly rattle conventional wisdom about environmental history. In the end, though, he succeeds best when he works in the safer terrain of empirical history and ecology.

Flores reenergizes the debate about Western exceptionalism by challenging historians' long-standing focus on aridity. Mountain ecology, he notes, has provided water, fertile valleys, minerals, and large animals that are as critical as aridity to understanding human experience in the American West. Flores refers to mountains and Plains as the West's "yin and yang," each an essential part of Western ecology and history.

Although *The Natural West* has some unifying themes, the chapters vary in their approach and target audience. Some are idea-oriented while others are empirical history. Some deal with the Plains, some with mountains, and some with both. Some of the chapters require an understanding of scholarly debates while others don't. Despite these variations, Flores has done a service to the scholarly community by making his previously scattered works available in one volume. The book includes his 1991 essay "Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy," which scholars in Native American history, Western history, and environmental history must read. But the essays aren't all pitched at scholarly audiences. The book's final chapter grapples with the problems of environmental restoration in terms that anyone can understand. What West is it that we seek to restore? How do we go about doing it? Flores opens up these ques-

tions in a way that can bring environmentalists, scholars, and residents of the West into the same conversation. And anyone who cares about the Great Plains should read “A Long Love Affair with an Uncommon Country,” which uses *longue durée* (deep-time) history to consider the region’s future.

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