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Review of *Deserts on the March* By Paul B. Sears

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Deserts on the March. By Paul B. Sears. 4th ed.
Norman: University of Oklahoma Press,
1980. Index. x + 264 pp. \$15.00.

In 1935, the worst Dust Bowl year, Paul B. Sears, then professor of botany at the University of Oklahoma, published *Deserts on the March*, a succinctly written book that directed public attention toward the growing menace of soil erosion in the United States. By 1980, *Deserts on the March* had become a classic ecological study; it is currently in the tenth printing and fourth edition. Sears, now retired from his position of chairman of the conservation program at Yale University, has rewritten much of the original text, but his message is the same today as it was nearly fifty years ago: man must learn to live in harmony with nature before it is too late. In this age of oil spills,

chemical dumps, and polluted rivers, Sears reminds us that the prevention of an ecological disaster is far wiser than a struggle for redemption that may require centuries before the environment is restored.

Sears, however, is chiefly concerned with soil conservation. During the great westward migration across the continent, he notes, pioneer farmers felt little obligation to conserve the soil, and the inevitable result was a "kind of predatory farming" (p. 48). Predatory farming meant that once the soil of a farmstead became exhausted, one could always move farther west to where it was rich once again. The forests were cut down and the grasslands plowed under; and when the rains and winds came, the soil washed and blew away. Predatory farming still exists, and the need for the vigilant practice of proper soil conservation techniques is as great now as at any time in the past. A variety of conservation measures are particularly needed in the Great Plains where only a delicate root system anchors the soil against the nearly constant wind. Once the grasslands have been destroyed by overgrazing or by plowing, drought and wind will play havoc with the soil. Still, the task is not to grow

two blades of grass where only one grew before, but rather to develop a land utilization policy that will preserve the soil when only half a blade can be grown. If such a land utilization program is not instituted, Sears warns, the result will be future Dust Bowls and the irreplaceable loss of topsoil—all to the detriment of the world's food supply.

Droughts still occur today, dust continues to blow, and man persists in his abuse of the land. But this abuse is not always readily apparent. In the Great Plains, for example, farmers now raise corn where it could not possibly survive without irrigation. Vital water is recklessly mined without any possibility of being replenished. Some day the underground water supply will be exhausted and major agricultural readjustments will be needed quickly to protect the fields where corn once held the soil. It is significant that today as in 1935 the chief danger to the soil is man himself. Sears writes that "responsible husbandry is possible only in a society that disciplines itself."

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