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February 1992

Review of "At Odds with Progress" by Bret Wallach

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Riebsame, William E., "Review of "At Odds with Progress" by Bret Wallach" (1992). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 68.

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At Odds with Progress. Bret Wallach. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1991. xiv + 255 pp. Maps, sources, and index. \$24.95 cloth (ISBN 0-81650917-4).

Geographer Bret Wallach's stated goal in this book is to show that environmentalism is rooted in a fundamental human love for the land. He argues that we are "at odds with progress" and that this aversion is illustrated through efforts to protect the land from exploitation. But, Wallach argues, our loyalty to the land is cloaked in "disguises" of efficiency, social welfare, and scientific ecology.

This argument is pursued through a series of personal reflections on places: northern Maine, southern Appalachia, Wyoming desert, San Joaquin oil fields, the national grasslands, and Texas High Plains. Wallach obviously loves these lands, and feels them threatened by the free market's insatiable yearning for profits and an industrial imperative which he says override other human values. Though Wallach paints stereotypical pictures of corporate profiteers arrayed against "conservationist farmers," the argument rings true as he describes how American conservationists like Pinchot clothed a deep

loyalty to the land in a pragmatic gospel of efficiency, social welfare, or, more recently, ecological balance. This sort of dissonance among beliefs and values probably affects most resource managers, who gravitate to professions in touch with the natural world only to find that they must cloak their environmental ethics in practical terms to make bureaucratic headway.

One problem with Wallach's argument is that it casts efficiency, social welfare, and ecology as mere disguises for environmental conservation. Why can't such values (sometimes antithetical, but occasionally complementary) simply stand along with environmental conservation? Moreover, while his regional sketches are superb expositions on how land use goals and conflicts are imprinted on the landscape, support for the main thesis is uneven. The Columbia River Project essay shows that President Roosevelt was, indeed, pursuing social welfare. Certainly he was not trying to conserve the land with dams and irrigation ditches, at least not in the deeply moral, "protect the earth" manner that Wallach senses. This essay fits the argument only inasmuch as Roosevelt's agrarianism was an antidote to the "juggernaut of progress," which, according to Wallach, provokes environmental conservation. The values expressed in the Columbia Basin project are social, not environmental.

Two of the landscape essays will be of particular interest to *Great Plains Research* readers. One, on the Little Missouri National Grasslands in western North Dakota, details the Land Utilization Program that created national grasslands from failed farms and ranches. Wallach maintains that as government officials brought land back into federal ownership, they were expressing a moral dictate against the "headlong rush of industrial progress" and a sympathy for the land disguised as care for the well-being of drought-stressed farmers.

Next, he examines the problem of groundwater depletion on the Texas High Plains, arguing that protests against groundwater depletion and surface importation on ecological grounds are also a disguise for a deeper land ethic. In both cases he also hits a taut cord in Great Plains studies: whether the region's agricultural society is sustainable in the face of hazards like drought and the rural restructuring accompanying agricultural economic decline. Citing the Great Plains Conservation Program, Wallach believes that wide-

spread land degradation and Dust Bowls are now unlikely, though he argues for more land retirement and a new generation of grasslands." He says little about social welfare in the two cases, except to imply that loyalty to the land aids community viability.

The book is aimed at a lay audience, eschewing statistics or analysis for reflection and first-person narrative. Scholars of environmental conservation will appreciate Wallach's explication of the tensions among economic efficiency, social welfare, scientific ecology, and environmental conservation, and will benefit from the rich historical context woven around the land use case studies. Environmentalists will cherish Wallach's heartfelt effort to uncloak the land ethic underlying environmental conservation. **William E. Riebsame**, *Department of Geography, University of Colorado at Boulder*.