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## Review of *Ogallala: Water for a Dry Land* by John Opie

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**Ogallala: Water for a Dry Land.** John Opie. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993. 412 pp. Maps, photos, appendix, and notes. \$35.00 (ISBN 0-8032-3557-7).

*Ogallala* is as much about the need for achieving sustainable agriculture in America as it is about the issues surrounding the depletion of groundwater in the High Plains. In some ways, the Ogallala region simply serves as the setting for describing the problems of the energy intensive, high-tech oriented agriculture pervasive throughout much of the U.S. today. Only a portion of the Ogallala, that most impacted during the dust bowl era and extending from about Lubbock, Texas through southwestern Kansas, is treated systematically.

Opie's work is a comprehensive attempt to 1) examine the historical context for agricultural development within the region, 2) assess the current situation concerning the problems associated with groundwater decline including the human response and recent management efforts, and 3) peer into the future prospects for sustainable agriculture in a region that will become, arguably, drier due to the climatological changes brought by global warming. To Opie, "The issue for the Ogallala region is to what extent human intervention (agriculture) upsets the self-regenerating capacities of the natural ecosystem enough to bring on environmental collapse of a region and subsequently deny human survival there" (p. xviii).

The first four chapters provide us with an historical context from which to better understand the current ecological dilemma. Topics include physical characteristics of the Ogallala region, early settlement, the ecology of water use, a description of the dust bowl era, and the impact of advancing irrigation technologies. Opie makes many references to the dust bowl throughout the book—perhaps as a blunt reminder that another such disaster is, potentially, just around the corner.

Chapters five and six provide contemporary insights of human adjustments. Three groundwater conservation districts are examined to provide a perspective about local efforts to manage groundwater depletion. While acknowledging that many benefits have accrued from local management, Opie concludes that "none of the agencies faces up to the fact that pumping water for irrigation is a mining operation as much as coal, gold or oil" (p. 196). Chapter six examines the irrigator response to groundwater use and the role of government as both a hinderance to and supporter of the family farm.

The last three chapters look to the future. Chapter seven questions the feasibility of continued irrigated agriculture, and explores the roles of water saving practices, water importation schemes, and alternative crops as potential solutions. In chapter eight, the dim prospects of irrigated agriculture in the face of global warming are highlighted and the possibility of another dust bowl is emphasized. A broad assessment of the sustainability of irrigated agriculture is provided in the last chapter and Opie concludes that "the decline of the Ogallala may be only the last stage of a long series of events that will once again test survivability in this submarginal agricultural environment" (p. 311).

One of the book's more interesting parts appears as an appendix titled "Puzzling Out the Plains." Here some very revealing conclusions and insights about the High Plains are drawn from the works of Walter Prescott

Webb, Paul Sears, Frederic Clements, James C. Malin, Carl Sauer, Martyn J. Bowden and Donald Worster. For those less knowledgeable about the High Plains, I would recommend that they read the appendix first as an excellent context from which to better evaluate Opie's ideas.

*Ogallala* takes a very holistic view of the problems associated with achieving a balance between natural resource use and environmental degradation. Certainly, this is an important book about an important subject and should be read widely by natural resource specialists, those broadly interested in the High Plains, groundwater managers, and by policy makers who must confront the serious issues associated with groundwater depletion. But most of all, it will capture the attention of those who wish to pave a path to sustainable agriculture. **Stephen E. White**, *Department of Geography, Kansas State University, Manhattan*.