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Review of *Ecology & Economics of the Great Plains* by Daniel S. Licht

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Ecology & Economics of the Great Plains. Daniel S. Licht. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997. v+225 pp. Maps, figures, tables, references, index. \$45.00 cloth (ISBN 0-8032-2922-4).

This book provides an excellent review of its several subjects. I admire the breadth of its vision. It argues for restoration of grasslands on a meaningful scale. It is an important book and in many ways it is a good book, but the subject deserves a *great* book.

Considering its range, actual errors are few. The problems lie in focus, organization, and integration. The fundamental ecological inadequacy is the deliberate (p. 2) neglect of the extraordinary diversity of grassland ecosys-

tems. Tallgrass prairie differs in kind from shortgrass steppe: in predominant flora, fauna, primary and secondary productivity, in dollar-value per acre and the likelihood of making a crop. Grassland ecoregions (six are shown in Map 1) differ in their feel. The sky really does get bigger between Russell and Hays, or out toward Kadoka and Wall. Economics, ecology, and esthetics all insist on distinctions (however subtle), particularly when the aim is to effect change. If we get the baseline analysis wrong we'll get the questions wrong; if we get the questions wrong we'll get the answers wrong.

The first chapter, "The Land," sets a passionate and lyrical tone (a tone not always sustained beyond), but it does not set a stage. A real introduction—a map of the argument to come—is needed. The final chapter, "Ideology, Reality, Morality, and the Future of the Great Plains," does serve as a summary of sorts. Ten other un-numbered chapters range across the law, cultural history, grassland ecology, and agricultural economics. Criticism of federal farm programs is detailed and well-reasoned. They are a major part of the problem rather than an important part of a solution. "Selected Grassland Species" provides detailed vignettes of a spectrum of grassland organisms. This would have been more useful alongside a biogeographic and ecological synthesis of the biota whole. Overall, there is a good review of the extensive literature, dating into 1996. Some authorities are conspicuously absent, however; I think immediately of the likes of Robert G. Bailey, A. W. Küchler, Wes Jackson, E. D. Fleharty, J. R. Choate, Holmes Ralston, and Paul A. Johnsgard.

Licht wisely urges (p. 83) the importance of knowing pre-Columbian natural history. History—deep and natural—is the only perspective that allows us to visualize the unprecedented impact of industrialization and then to manage the fundamental novelty of our times. History matters. We can begin as recently as the Cretaceous-Tertiary boundary and the Laramide Revolution and the evolution of the "Great American Desert." Glaciers set the course of the Missouri. Late Pleistocene humans arrived via Beringia and most of the Ice Age megafauna then disappeared. The horse was restored a mere 450 years ago. Two centuries later Euro-American market-exploitation of the heartland began. In mid-19th Century, industrialization arrived, first as mechanized transportation and then as mechanized agriculture. Licht urges us to undo in select areas only the last century of change, the last one percent of human history on the grasslands.

The penultimate chapter, "Hypothetical Reserves" provides a site-specific proposal for a network of restoration areas. The most valuable contributions of the book may be Map 7 (p. 162), "Hypothetical Reserves,"

and its numerical companion, Table 7 (p. 163). This laudably bold proposal needs to be packaged so that “s/he who runs may read” and then promoted with state and federal policy-makers and local stakeholders. The book calls for public lands solutions. This gets the scale right, but federal lands are often used and controlled by local communities. Major parts of the grasslands deserve to be restored for compelling economic, ecological, esthetic, and ethical reasons, but restoration must arise as a local need within local communities (because that is where they are being too readily dismissed).

In the front matter, Richard Manning, author of *Grassland* (Viking Penguin, 1995), is quoted as having said of this book, “America ought to read it, and America ought to do it.” I agree, but I fear that neither ecologists nor economists nor Americans generally—unless predisposed to the conclusions as I am—will find the argument compelling. This book preaches best to the converted. The ideas deserve serious consideration and action, but I wonder whether this book has the charisma to inspire the reading and hence the reader. Until the very last page I never felt quite enough west wind. I didn’t see enough infinite red sunsets or horned larks rising in waves at dawn off wheat stubble. I didn’t hear enough coyotes calling to black and starry skies. **David M. Armstrong**, *Department of Environmental, Population, and Organismic Biology, University of Colorado-Boulder*.