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# Journal of American Ethnic History

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## Reviews

*Understories: The Political Life of Forests in Northern New Mexico.* By Jake Kosek. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006. xx + 380 pp. Maps, photos, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$23.95 (paper).

The deserts and high peaks of northern New Mexico's Sangre de Cristo Mountains contain some of 1 the most extraordinary topographical diversity in the American Southwest. An impressive mix of flora and fauna thrive among free-flowing rivers and 14,000-foot summits thick with stands of Douglas fir and ponderosa pine. Thanks to this natural inheritance, especially the heavy forest, the region is also home to now-very-familiar battles over resource use and natural preservation. But here, on the northern fringe of Spain's once expansive North American frontier, debates about land use are part of a deep and complex history of interactions between humans and nature. Despite the pre-modern feel of this landscape, *Understories* is a chronicle of very modern political fights over the future of this environment.

But this book proves to be much more. The stage is set not by an endangered species rally or a 2 public protest about the declining economic fortunes of timber workers, but a federal drug bust, indeed the largest heroin seizure in American history. The 1999 raid, an effort to curtail the highest per capita drug mortality rates in the United States, is only one sign that the social dynamic of this largely Hispanic region does not match the expected. *Understories* does not include traditional environmental declension narratives or celebrated ecological saints battling corporate polluters. Instead, anthropologist Jake Kosek uses the drug raid as the entry into an examination of the intimate connection between environmental debates and conflicts over race, class, and national identity.

Linking environmental disputes to the cultural politics of race is a significant challenge. Yet in 3 this well-written narrative, Kosek illustrates how deliberations about the future of mountain forests are tied to Hispanic racial politics in surprising and significant ways. When representatives of the federal government arrived in the southwestern environment, usually in the form of the Forest Service, they considered a healthy forest proof of a healthy society. By contrast, "polluted soils" were equated with "degraded souls." One consequence was a growing federal desire to protect the landscape from foreign (read Hispanic) intrusion. As a result, even seemingly benign "board-foot quotas become the site of intense class politics" (p. x). Throughout this work, Kosek demonstrates how the effort to manage New Mexico's forested ecosystem was central to the related effort to manage Hispanic communities. In the Southwest, the techniques of modern scientific forestry reflect a larger social desire to separate the wild from the civilized—an imperative with as much application in the natural world as the human.

In six related chapters that examine an investigation of Spanish land grants, the racial overtones 4 of the wildly successful Smokey the Bear campaign, and the decline of the traditional Hispanic economy, *Understories* demonstrates how cultural constructions of racial difference are reflected in the national consumption and mediation of the physical world. Such debates, Kosek reminds us, are ongoing. Drive north from Santa Fe today and the once-green forest canopy now looks a mottled brown, the result of a recent beetle infestation. Here, too, competing theories about the arrival of the tree-killing pest reflect a broader discussion about the role of natural processes within a decidedly human influenced and racially stratified environment.

That environmental science is influenced by social practice should not surprise anyone, and 5 Kosek is less interested in the moments of intersection between scientific land management and traditional forest use. These are small issues of concern here. *Understories* remains a compelling narrative connecting the politicization of the natural environment to the racialization of an entire

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