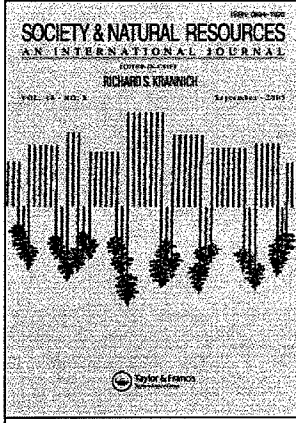


This article was downloaded by:[University of California Berkeley]
On: 26 June 2008
Access Details: [subscription number 792224787]
Publisher: Taylor & Francis
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954
Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Society & Natural Resources An International Journal

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713667234>

A Review of: "Kosek, Jake. **Understories: The Political Life of Forests in Northern New Mexico.**"

Carl Wilmsen^a

^a College of Natural Resources University of California, Berkeley, California, USA

Online Publication Date: 01 May 2008

To cite this Article: Wilmsen, Carl (2008) 'A Review of: "Kosek, Jake. **Understories: The Political Life of Forests in Northern New Mexico.**"', Society & Natural Resources, 21:5, 451 — 453

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/08941920801967260

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08941920801967260>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article maybe used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Kosek, Jake. *Understories: The Political Life of Forests in Northern New Mexico*. Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2006. 408 pp. \$23.95 (paper). ISBN 978-8223-3847-5.

Reviewed by **Carl Wilmsen**
 College of Natural Resources
 University of California
 Berkeley, California, USA

Jake Kosek is interested in roots. In his book he probes the roots of forest management in the United States as well as the roots of the politics of race and difference in environmental conflicts in contemporary northern New Mexico. In so doing he presents many important insights and artful performances. However, at times he overstates his case, and incorrectly states and omits some important details. This leaves the reader with the uncomfortable feeling that although the analysis is cogent and supported with rich material, there is more going on than his story allows.

Kosek demonstrates how race, nature, and nation are intimately interconnected using the following basic argument. White professionals and Hispano community activists in northern New Mexico use natural metaphors, especially metaphors of roots and trees, to render their racial identity and connection to nature intelligible. The beliefs and understandings they create about their relationship with nature and who belongs to place and nation also form the basis of assumptions about who has the legitimacy and expertise to care for the forest. It is in this process that the beliefs and understandings do the work of excluding particular groups of people and legitimizing the privilege and authority of others.

Kosek examines the stories and explanations that Hispano activists, Forest Service officials, environmentalists, Los Alamos National Laboratory officials, and others tell about the land, and weaves them together to show their impact on forests and people. His analysis shows that Hispano people living in small rural communities in the mountains of the region have created an identity for themselves based on a particular relationship with the forest that is more longing for a mythic past than an accurate reflection of their current interaction with the forest. Carrying this point further, he observes that the memory of the loss of land grants and self-perception of rootedness in the land not only help Hispanos bond as a community, but they also help establish boundaries between racial groups in the region.

The official story the Forest Service tells about the land is also crucial to maintaining such boundaries. Kosek demonstrates that this is so in a skillful analysis of the discourse of Gifford Pinchot. He shows how this discourse defined what constitutes a forest as well as how it established the Forest Service as the arbiter of good governance of the forest and the people who use it. He then analyzes the history of the development of Smokey the Bear as a cherished national symbol to show how notions about who has the expertise and ability to care for the forest are rooted in the taken-for-granted assumption that White males are the quintessential Americans.

This assumption was crucial to the American colonization of New Mexico, and continues to exclude people of color from full involvement as equals in many aspects of American life (not just management of the forest). Kosek brilliantly depicts the impact of such exclusion on Hispano people in his penultimate chapter, which includes a gripping illustration of how attachment to place may entail excruciating pain. For the people of Truchas (the village in which Kosek did his field research),

attachment to place is colored not only by memories of loss as well as longing for a bygone era, but also by the agonizing pain of personal loss in the form of the death of loved ones from heroin overdoses.

Yet Kosek's tight linking of different story lines and underlying issues and themes in his analysis leaves some nagging questions. His treatment of eugenics and his omission of details in his portrayal of relations between environmentalists and Hispano activists leave one wondering whether his explication is too neat.

In his discussion of the roots of the modern environmental movement, Kosek argues that concerns about the purity of nature are indelibly intertwined with concerns about the purity of the White race. Historians have established that many early advocates of conservation, including Gifford Pinchot and Theodore Roosevelt, strongly supported eugenics. Yet implying that Aldo Leopold's ideas derive ultimately from eugenicist thought, as Kosek does, is hard to square with the fact that Leopold's wife was a direct descendent through her mother of the prominent Hispano Luna family of Los Lunas, New Mexico. To be sure, in his discussion of "Wildlife in American Culture" Leopold evokes images solely of White males forging civilization out of wilderness. But when he wrote of a boy "Daniel Booneing," he was perhaps imagining his own mixed-ethnicity sons at play in the forests and fields. Leopold may have considered his wife White, and she may have self-identified as White as well. The eugenicism Kosek describes, however, was based on assumptions about the superiority of Germanic Whites in contrast with (among other people) "the dark-skinned Spaniards" (147). Leopold may have been guilty of excluding the contributions of people of color and women to the creation of the American landscape and character from his writings, but stronger evidence than Kosek presents is needed to support the claim that Leopold "drew directly from German and eugenic scientists who trafficked in metaphors of nature's purity to make intelligible and improve bodies and landscapes" (163).

Kosek's linking of eugenicist thought to contemporary debates and issues in the environmental movement is similarly unconvincing. The problem is that he misstates the facts. Contrary to his statement on page 161 that the Sierra Club had proposed an initiative to support California's anti-immigration Proposition 187 in 1998, the club had in fact opposed it when it was on the state ballot in 1994 (Sierra Club 1994). The issue in 1998 was over a resolution adopted by the Sierra Club board in 1996 stating that the club would take no position on U.S. immigration levels or policy. A group of club members had gathered enough signatures to put a question on the club's election ballot asking the membership to vote to reverse the board's resolution. If passed, the ballot measure would have directed the club to adopt a policy of ending U.S. population growth through reductions in both natural increase and immigration. Complicating matters was the organization of a slate of candidates, some of whom took an anti-immigrant stance, for the Sierra Club's board in the same election. Race and racism did feature large in the ensuing debate over the ballot question and the candidates. As Kosek suggests, support for anti-immigration candidates and policy may very well have derived from deep, historically rooted racist fears and anxieties. Nevertheless, the fact that the ballot question and anti-immigration candidates were hotly contested and ultimately defeated suggests that the contemporary, ongoing development of the environmental movement is more tormented than Kosek's analysis admits.

Kosek's omission of a detail about the assistance a local environmentalist, Sam Hitt, provided Hispano communities is relevant here as well. Kosek writes that in

1996 Hitt's organization, Forest Guardians, sought to distance itself from protests over the prohibition of firewood harvesting on national forests resulting from a lawsuit it had filed. Forest Guardians brought firewood to people in Truchas and helped "obtain funds to purchase a wood splitter for La Compañía Ocho, an organization based in Vallecitos" (134). In fact, Hitt had helped La Madera Forest Products Association (an earlier organization out of which the La Compañía Ocho logging company was formed) obtain funds to purchase a wood splitter in 1991 during a brief period when Forest Guardians, other environmental groups, and Hispano activists attempted to work together toward sustainable forestry (Wilmsen 1997). The implication this detail and the details of the Sierra Club's national-scale debate over immigration have for Kosek's analysis is that the history of development of environmental thought and activism is more nuanced, contradictory, and filled with cross-currents than his argument suggests.

These shortcomings in Kosek's argument cast a veil of ambivalence over the book. On the one hand, Kosek makes a strong argument about how people imbue their lives with meaning using metaphors of nature, and how these meanings establish boundaries between groups of people and form the basis of exclusionary discourse and practices. On the other hand, the inaccuracies and overstatements in the argument leave one feeling that the connections Kosek makes are perhaps too tidy. Nevertheless, Kosek makes an important contribution in putting the mutual constitution of race, nation, and nature front and center in the dialogue on forging a more just and sustainable society. In making this contribution, his book opens the dialogue to new possibilities and new directions.

References

- Sierra Club. 1994. Environmental leaders denounce proposition 187—It won't save our state. News release, October 6. <http://www.sierraclub.org/planet/199411/pr-cal187.asp> (accessed May 15, 2007).
- Wilmsen, C. 1997. *Fighting for the forest: Sustainability and social justice in Vallecitos, New Mexico*. Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms.