

Review: *Lost Landscapes and Failed Economies: the search for a value of place.*

By Thomas Michael Power

Reviewed by [R. James Tobin](#)
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

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Power, Thomas Michael. *Lost Landscapes and Failed Economies: the search for a value of place.* Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1996. 304pp. cloth US \$29.95 ISBN: 1-55963-368-9. Acid-free paper.

"Folk economics" would have us believe those extractive industries such as logging, mining or agriculture are the basis of economic well being for the localities in which they are practiced. All other occupations are dependent on the continuance and prosperity of these basic industries. On the basis of such assumptions, political objections to restricting or regulating the practice of extractive industries have had considerable persuasive power. Thomas Michael Power, Professor and Chair of the Department of Economics at the University of Montana in Missoula, shows that these claims or assumptions are greatly exaggerated and based more on traditional myth than on careful and objective economic analysis.

Power presents evidence showing that local economic well being does not necessarily diminish when basic extractive industries decline, fail or depart, because other industries may have created prosperity on their own. Agriculture has been shrinking as a segment of the total American economy for nearly two centuries. At the same time, the American economy has grown enormously. Many industries have failed, but there are few ghost towns in America. Similarly, the economic, and general, well being of some locales has actually improved with the shutdown of mining operations. "Mining contributes too little to local economic development to justify its scarring local environments while disrupting local communities" (129).

In addition to logging, mining and agriculture, Power also examines the tourism industry. He does not recommend big tourism, as it can disrupt a traditional way of life and result in as much overdevelopment as other industries. However, when kept under control, tourism's economic benefits should not be discounted. "Backpacking and wildlife may well

hold more economic value than a gold mine" (120).

With respect to logging, Power notes that although woodworking jobs are relatively high paying, a benefit "touted in justifying health, safety, and environmental problems associated with the industry...the more important the wood products industry is as a source of income in a county [in Oregon or Montana], the lower the average income is..." (142). In other words, there is no spillover effect benefiting other workers in timber industry locales.

Another economic myth addressed in *Lost Landscapes and Failed Economies: the search for a value of place* is that service jobs, as compared with jobs in extractive industries, are low, poverty level employment. Power shows that service industry employment is typically quite rewarding economically, except for unskilled labor. Although he recognizes the plight of the unskilled, Power counters recommendations for more low-skilled work with the observation that it is jobs requiring skill that produce prosperity.

People move to certain locales because of scenic and other amenities, and people are willing to work for lower wages than they would accept in undesirable locations with few amenities. In fact, highly paid workers frequently commute in and out of such locations (such as mining sites), spending most of their income elsewhere, and thus failing to contribute to the economic well being of these locales while destroying scenic amenities. Some communities bring this sort of thing on themselves without thinking the matter through. Choice of locale for living and working is a major theme of Power's book.

Power is not sentimental about traditional, though vanishing, ways of making a living, such as logging, or even agriculture. He feels that we need to look forward and not back, because economic realities change whether we want them to or not, and because attachment to old ways may be detrimental both to economic prosperity and the well being of the natural environment. He has some well-deserved negative things to say about the Forest Service, in both environmental and economic terms. Misguided agricultural policies have resulted in water-scarcity and overdevelopment of dams. Shortsighted poisoning of predators of sheep not only put poison into the environment but keep down the price of overabundant sheep, a practice contrary to the economic interests of the sheep raisers.

Power's book displays a great deal of sheer good sense and rationality in service of the environment. He offers economics on behalf of

environmental concerns, not in opposition to them. Although Power writes as a professional economist, using charts, graphs and tables to illustrate his empirical findings, he writes with a minimum of technical jargon, and in a style accessible to the lay reader, and he does so convincingly. It would be difficult to overestimate the value and importance of this book. It deserves the widest possible readership.

R. James Tobin <RJT@GML.LIB.UWM.EDU> is Collection Management Librarian at the Golda Meir Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, USA.