

Review: Vacationland: Tourism and Environment in the Colorado High Country
By William Philpott

Reviewed by Kathy Butler
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Philpott, William. *Vacationland: Tourism and Environment in the Colorado High Country*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013. 497 pp. ISBN 9780295992730. US\$ 39.95, cloth. Acid-free paper.

The goal of this new contribution to the discipline of environmental history is to examine the influence of marketing and tourism on the cultural, political and environmental development of a region, and reciprocally, how evolving local values influence marketing and tourism. The author, who teaches history at the University of Denver, focuses on the “high country” of Colorado in the postwar years and the development of recreational tourism. The first few chapters present character sketches of local promoters who influenced state officials toward a concerted effort to market Colorado as the ideal recreational paradise. Commercial motivation by local promoters and chambers of commerce encourage the public to act as consumers of “vacationland,” although enjoying nature is not the same as preserving nature. Increased tourism requires increased infrastructure, and the chapter describing highway proliferation mirrors national developments of the time. The differing influences of John Denver and Hunter S. Thompson on Colorado’s image as a recreational wilderness add color and contradiction to the history.

The chapter “Blueprints for Action” may be of interest to the environmental scientist as it traces the development of the popular environmental movement in Colorado, and by extension the nation. The author describes local political and cultural forces, as well as the many contradictions between consumerism and environmental protection. Profiles of the early involvement of the Sierra Club and the Izaak Walter League of America in encouraging conservation via recreation as a means to gain popular support provide insight into the “founding episode of the American environmental movement”(p. 200): the effort to stop dam construction at Echo Park. Eventually, the popular support fragmented into special interests because “Skiers, bird-watchers, hunters, and horticulturalists had very different ways of consuming the high country.” (p. 225) Considerable space is devoted to Arthur Carhart, recreational conservationist, who popularized Colorado recreation, leading to recreational zoning and government involvement as a building block in the new environmental movement.

The black and white illustrations in the book depict advertisements of the time, as well as brochures and maps; perhaps one breathtaking color picture of the high country would have contributed to the appreciation of Colorado as a vacation paradise. Although a scholarly work of interest to environmental scientists and historians, with 100 pages covering notes, bibliography and index, the extraordinarily multidisciplinary nature of the content— illustrating economic, marketing, political, and sociological aspects of our American history—gives it broad appeal. The entertaining narrative style makes the content accessible to an audience beyond experts, suitable for students, and general readers.

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