

***The Ghost Forest: Racists, Radicals, and Real Estate in the California Redwoods.*** By Greg King. New York: Public Affairs, 2023. 480 pp. US\$32.00 (cloth); US\$18.00 (e-book).

The conflict over Northern California's redwood forests is sometimes lumped in with the "Timber Wars" that erupted in the Pacific Northwest in the late 1980s and early 1990s. But as Greg King shows in this impressively researched volume, Northern California's redwoods deserve their own story. King's ancestors settled in the redwood belt in the 1870s, making this quite literally King's birthright, and he is the sole person who could have researched and written this definitive history. The story King tells is personal, riveting, and blunt when it comes to the transgression of environmental laws by corporate interests to the detriment of forest ecosystems.

Given King's careful and voluminous investigation, discussing this book in broad strokes feel almost disingenuous. King's work builds upon research on the relationship between Americans and their forests, from Michael Williams's *Americans and Their Forests: A Historical Geography* (1992) to Jared Farmer's *Trees in Paradise* (2013). The background research is extensive, including published and unpublished archival sources, newspaper articles, interviews, public testimony, and more. While hefty, the book avoids slipping into jargon. It is accessible to both academic and academic-adjacent audiences and would be of particular interest to students and scholars of Western American environmental and forest history.

The book is organized into five sections, which weave together personal and historical narratives. The first, *Stumps*, provides an overview of redwood forest ecology and the way in which the unique qualities of redwoods (strength, size, fire-resistance, etc.) increased its value as a timber species. The second section, *Empire*, describes the privatization of North Coast forests, beginning in the 1850s. Notably, corporations abused the intention of the 1878 Timber and Stone Act. With the government offering 160 acres at \$2.50 an acre, corporations paid individuals to apply, after which the land was transferred to the corporation. This set the precedent of timber interests in California, taking advantage of government loopholes to their advantage. The third section, *A League of Their Own*, provides a damning indictment of the Save the Redwoods League for the way that they enabled and abetted the timber industry.

Particularly eye-opening is how the eugenics movement thrived in the Save the Redwoods League, justifying in part the superiority of redwoods over other species. The fourth section, *The Empire Strikes Back*, tells the story of the fight to save the 60,000-acre Headwaters Forest complex at risk of being liquidated to pay off the junk bonds of Texas oilman Charles Hurwitz, who acquired the Pacific Lumber Company in a hostile takeover. Sophisticated legal and organizing strategies created one of the strongest forest activist coalitions in US history. The movement was characterized by female leadership, coalitions with timber workers, and a sense of humor. While the final Headwaters deal did not please most activists, David did, in part, beat Goliath. The fifth section, *Home*, is a letter written to King from his mother and well worth reading.

A clear-cut is the complete removal of the forest overstory, and it is a management approach that redwood activists fought tooth and nail. It is absolute, rapacious, and eliminates forest ecosystems. Ecological justifications are slim. The Headwaters Forest controversy garnered public attention in part because it appeared so clear-cut: the corrupt oil baron versus the scrappy activists. But today, most environmental problems are not the difference between right and wrong. The vast majority of redwood forests are not awe-inducing cathedrals but have varying levels of structural complexity and biodiversity, showing generations of changing management priorities. Most forest managers cannot look to a clear-cut answer but rather must make decisions that balance ecology and value extraction with no guarantee of certain outcomes.

In *The Ghost Forest*, King guides readers through a meticulously researched tour of the decisions and personalities that led to the decimation of some of the most majestic forests on earth. Ghost forests, to King, are ghosts of a wild earth. Wild spaces where the mysteries of nature humble us, pushing back against what we think we know. One might imagine that for King, with his lineage so deeply intertwined with these majestic forests, seeing them ravaged was like losing a limb. The loss of unique ecosystems is assuredly inexcusable. But there are no ghost forests until they are paved over with concrete. As climate change has modified every part of the globe, fundamentally calling wildness into question, it is increasingly obvious that ecosystems will not retain their wild qualities unless stewarded by people. These shattered ghost

forests beg us to step up as pilots of spaceship earth and bring forth our better nature.

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