

Understanding human development in the western US

William R. Travis, *New Geographies of the American West: Land Use and the Changing Patterns of Place*, Island Press, Washington, DC, USA, 312 pp, Tables, Pictures, Maps, Index; 6 × 9 in., Hardcover, US\$30, ISBN-13: 978-1-59726-071-1

Robert E. Keane

Received: 22 January 2008 / Accepted: 10 February 2008 / Published online: 22 February 2008
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2008

“Isn’t that development new?” is perhaps the phrase most frequently uttered by people who live in the western US. The West, it seems, is sucking Americans into its precious places at a rate that is unparalleled in recent US history. As humans continue to diffuse into the western landscape, they bring their corresponding demands for energy, transportation, water, amenities, and recreation. In the end, they end up transforming, and even destroying, the intense beauty of the land that once attracted them. While his previous book “Atlas of the New West” (Reibsame et al. 1997, WW Norton and Company, New York) documented, at a coarse scale, the western transformation by humankind, Travis’s new book cuts right to the heart of the problem and presents a comprehensive summary of current conditions. This is followed by a pin-point diagnosis of the problems involved in western human development. Travis then goes one step further and presents possible solutions to minimize the human stain on western landscapes. Travis recognizes the importance of pattern and scale in development and he uses these concepts to propose a possible solution to the West’s pressing problems.

The intent of the book is clearly stated in the introduction—taking stock of changing land use, finding the problem, and proposing possible solutions. The

collection of chapters in Part One of the book describes the concepts needed to understand the changing geographies of the West. In Chapter 1, Travis repudiates the notion that the history of the West is a series of “boom and bust” cycles. Instead, he states that Western development is “one long boom” since the retreat of the last ice age, with minor downturns, in an increasing trajectory of habitation. And the “long boom” shows no sign of busting. Moreover, traditional, widely held views of resource economies driving the West are misrepresented because the West is currently driven by high-tech, service-driven “post-cowboy” economics. In Chapter 2, Travis presents his four geographies for understanding development in the West: (1) metro-zones (most westerners are suburbanites), (2) the exurbs (low density residential “ranchettes” within commuting distance), (3) resort zones (“second home developments”), and (4) gentrified range (rural landscapes with “hobby ranches”). These geographies arise from three types of forces: driving (the “why” of development), enabling (the “how” of development), and shaping (the “where” of development). This is a fascinating synopsis of development dynamics. In Chapter 3s “Footprints of Development”, Travis insightfully describes land-use patterns and their interaction with the landscape to create the human “footprint.” He weaves together a multi-scaled view of development geography and links it with the factors that drive population pattern dynamics and the impact that these factors have on patterns of place.

Chapter 4 starts Part Two of the book where the concepts presented in previous chapters are detailed

R. E. Keane (✉)
Missoula Fire Sciences Laboratory, Rocky Mountain
Research Station, USDA Forest Service, Missoula,
MT 59808, USA
e-mail: rkeane@fs.fed.us

and discussed. First are the metro-zones—their origins, growth, geography, and future. The “exurbs” are presented in Chapter 5 as perhaps the most pressing problem facing today’s county planners because they gobble up all high quality land within commuting distance to the metro-zones with a “thudding sound”. Chapter 6 discusses resort geographies as “paradise paved” with second home developments condemning glorious natural landscapes to human playgrounds. It’s obvious that Travis feels strongly about this issue and his discussions are quite constructive. The “Gentrified Range” of Chapter 7 is the proposed transition of the rural West where working ranches are replaced by hobby farms of wealthy romantics obsessed with notions of the old West with both good and bad consequences.

The last section of the book (Part 3) deals with the future of Western landscapes, and Chapter 8 describes the challenges of land-use planning including problems of consent, rapid growth, undesirable location, and government regulation. Travis mentions at the end of the chapter that our inability to hold “decision makers accountable to plans” may undermine any proactive efforts to control development. Chapter 9 represents the unique contribution of this book. Here Travis describes an integrated plan for the new West which merges burgeoning technologies with multi-scaled landscape planning, landscape ecology, and an attention to place. Many examples are used to advocate a new era in Western development. Travis proposes that spatial analyses be linked with landscape-level planning using new guidelines for development that include heightened social engagement and ecologically based land-use advocacy.

William Shutkin said it best in the book’s forward—this book is “an academically veiled wake-up call” for

all those who live in and love the West. Travis’s writing style is quite enjoyable as he punctuates important concepts with supporting data and relevant facts. He aptly mixes anecdotal evidence with scientific data in a direct approach that synthesizes complex issues into understandable summaries with perceptive terminology. Being a fire ecologist, I especially enjoyed his detailed description of wildfire interactions with his new geographies. This book is a wonderful reference, an interesting guidebook, and a recipe for the future of the new West.

I have some minor reservations about the book. Travis failed to mention the vast difference between western and eastern US development in the context of landscape ecology. Arid western landscapes are mostly missing the dense forests that can hide human scars on the land, and therefore, the results of any activity, whether recreational trail walking or strip mining, are visible for all to see. Next, Travis did not describe the importance of Native American land use in the history of the West. Aboriginal burning and the nomadic lifestyle of native peoples created and maintained the magnificent, open landscapes that dominated the West. The very character of these park-like landscapes is what draws people to the West now, and it is this character that is being degraded by development. Last, I thought that Travis needed to detail the technology that enabled western development, such as trains, interstate highways, and air-conditioning. Despite these shortcomings, this book would be a valuable addition to the library of landscape ecologists, planners, and scientists because it presents the causes, consequences, and possible solutions of perhaps the most pressing issue in landscape ecology—human “land use and its patterns of place.”