



Society & Natural Resources

An International Journal

ISSN: 0894-1920 (Print) 1521-0723 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/usnr20>

The Battle for Yellowstone: Morality and the Sacred Roots of Environmental Conflict, by Justin Farrell

John Schelhas

To cite this article: John Schelhas (2017): The Battle for Yellowstone: Morality and the Sacred Roots of Environmental Conflict, by Justin Farrell, Society & Natural Resources, DOI: 10.1080/08941920.2017.1331488

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2017.1331488>



Published online: 28 Jun 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 2



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
<http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=usnr20>

BOOK REVIEW

The Battle for Yellowstone: Morality and the Sacred Roots of Environmental Conflict, by Justin Farrell, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015, 320 pp., \$39.50 (cloth). ISBN: 9780691164342.

A growing number of intractable environmental conflicts involving interest groups with deeply held beliefs are resisting resolution in spite of extensive scientific analysis and legal and bureaucratic attention. Justin Farrell addresses three such conflicts in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE) as moral and spiritual conflicts, each uniquely animated by history, context, and social relationships. Drawing on a wide range of methods, ranging from ethnography to computational content analysis, and carefully rooted in place-based experiences and historical processes, this book illustrates the central role of moral orders and commitments in driving conflict, describes how moral environmental beliefs and narratives interact with scientific and technical information, and shows how different actors and contextual factors can drive both polarization and collaboration even at the same place and time. Farrell helps us understand conflict in the GYE and, more significantly, presents a deep and innovative sociological analysis that can inform and expand the theoretical approaches and methodological tool kits that we use to analyze a wide range of environmental issues and conflicts.

The stage was set for conflict in the GYE when the focus of environmental conservation around Yellowstone National Park was expanded to address a large regional patchwork of privately and publicly held lands concurrent with the region receiving an influx of amenity-minded immigrants with values markedly different from those of long-time residents whose lifestyles were rooted in extractive natural resource use. Farrell's analysis is firmly grounded at the local level through his ethnographic research, although he also addresses broader, national-level interests through his discussion of historical changes in conservation perspectives and analysis of public comments. The analysis is framed around a distinction between the "old-West" and the "new-West." Old-West moral commitments are rooted in rugged individualism, private property, and hard work involving utilitarian uses of the land, while new-West moral commitments are rooted in nature appreciation, amenity tourism and migration, and employment outside of natural resource extraction. Although one might expect that the new-West would supplant the old because of a changing economy, Farrell argues that conflict is intensified because the new-West environmental regime devalues old-West moral commitments, thereby causing old-Westerners to redouble their commitment to their traditional values.

Three conflicts are described in detail in the book, with each receiving a chapter. The first is the management of the Yellowstone National Park bison herd and its need for winter range outside of the park. This chapter draws on ethnographic work with the Buffalo Field Campaign (BFC), a grass-roots environmental advocacy group, and computational analysis of BFC media material to understand the underlying moral logic that motivates the movement. The principal findings are that deep commitment and on-the-ground presence have enabled the BFC to make bison management a moral and spiritual issue, even while participants have difficulty articulating their personal moral and spiritual stance due to the influence of larger cultural narratives in society fostering

relativism and individualism. The second issue, the reintroduction of wolves into Yellowstone, focuses on the competing moral orders of anti- and pro-wolf advocates using discourse analysis from public letters and in-person interviews. Farrell argues that, rather than being about science or economics, the conflict pits the values of individualism, human dominionism, and grazing and hunting heritage against the spiritual importance of the wild, with the wolf symbolizing a present-day spiritual and ecological renewal. In spite of this, the analysis showed that spiritual arguments do not replace scientific arguments, but rather that the two become intertwined. The third issue describes a successful effort to stop gas drilling (fracking) in the Hoback Basin area of the Wyoming Range, an area of considerable recreational and emotional importance to the region's old-Westerners. This issue adds a new wrinkle to the usual lines of conflict, when old-Westerners, who typically support gas drilling and mining in Wyoming, organize to stop drilling and protect the area. Farrell uses this case to show how when old-Westerners promote conservation, they draw clear moral boundaries to differentiate themselves from new-West environmentalists by emphasizing respect for private property rights rather than unruly and emotional protest.

Farrell has chosen to analyze each conflict, and in fact each side of each conflict, with different methods while examining similar underlying moral commitments. This is sensible, given the differences in political and environmental action by the unique actors found on each side of each conflict, and enables an insightful analysis even as it at times feels somewhat asymmetrical. Yet Farrell's sensitive and careful analysis, grounded in interviews and large volumes of public comments, has the benefit of illustrating the many nuances, values, and actions that unfold in each of the three conflicts. This approach enables Farrell to show the many unique aspects of each conflict while calling attention to factors that, in different cases, exacerbated conflict or led to unexpected solutions. This analysis has practical implications for management and policy, but also provides a foundation for a broader social science approach to environmental research that adds a moral dimension to more traditional concerns of science, technology, class, and power. In the end, though, more research and theory are required for us to learn how to put many of Farrell's findings into practice. For example, in Farrell's analysis a management strategy like economic compensation appears to cut one way in the wolf case and a different way in the drilling case, leaving the reader to wonder to what extent the nature of conflicts can be predicted in advance.

Farrell stops well short of developing a new theoretical approach, although he does briefly discuss how his morally focused approach provides insights not available through other sociological approaches. Instead, he pays careful attention to the ways that moral and scientific or rational commitments are mixed together rather than being mutually exclusive, suggesting a need for broadening rather than replacing other approaches. The need for more theoretical work is clear, however, in the relatively loose usage of a variety of terms that are central to the underlying argument of the book. These include terms such as culture, symbolic, moral, spiritual, religious, emotional, and place attachment, which, while seeming to be used in the book somewhat intuitively to shade different dimensions of environmental narratives, are never clearly defined nor delineated and appear in frustratingly imprecise ways throughout the text. Nevertheless, the book makes a strong case for future empirical work that would further delineate the cultural and moral dimensions of environmental issues through an integrative approach that relates these to other

theoretical lenses to capture the full range of human experience in social science research on environmental issues.

Reviewed by John Schelhas
Southern Research Station, USDA Forest Service, Athens, Georgia, USA
 jschelhas@fs.fed.us

© 2017 Taylor & Francis
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2017.1331488>

