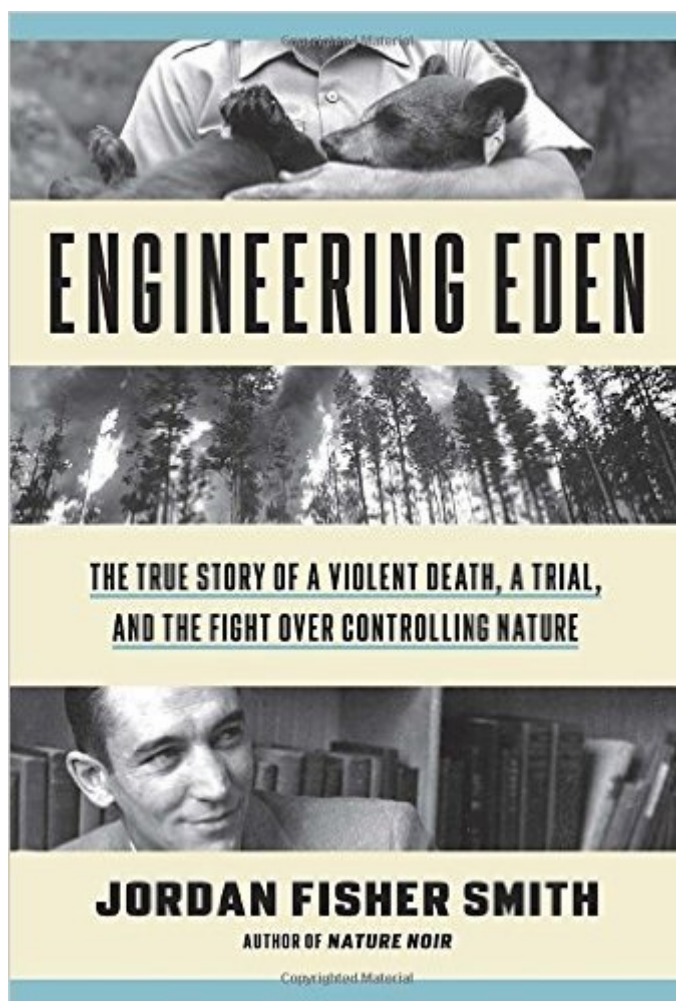


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Engineering Eden: The True Story Of A Violent Death, A Trial, And The Fight Over Controlling Nature



Synopsis

The fascinating story of a trial that opened a window onto the century-long battle to control nature in the national parks. When twenty-five-year-old Harry Walker was killed by a bear in Yellowstone Park in 1972, the civil trial prompted by his death became a proxy for bigger questions about American wilderness management that had been boiling for a century. At immediate issue was whether the Park Service should have done more to keep bears away from humans, but what was revealed as the trial unfolded was just how fruitless our efforts to regulate nature in the parks had always been. The proceedings drew to the witness stand some of the most important figures in twentieth century wilderness management, including the eminent zoologist A. Starker Leopold, who had produced a landmark conservationist document in the 1950s, and all-American twin researchers John and Frank Craighead, who ran groundbreaking bear studies at Yellowstone. Their testimony would help decide whether the government owed the Walker family restitution for Harry's death, but it would also illuminate decades of patchwork efforts to preserve an idea of nature that had never existed in the first place. In this remarkable excavation of American environmental history, nature writer and former park ranger Jordan Fisher Smith uses Harry Walker's story to tell the larger narrative of the futile, sometimes fatal, attempts to remake wilderness in the name of preserving it. Tracing a course from the founding of the national parks through the tangled twentieth-century growth of the conservationist movement, Smith gives the lie to the portrayal of national parks as Edenic wonderlands unspoiled until the arrival of Europeans, and shows how virtually every attempt to manage nature in the parks has only created cascading effects that require even more management. Moving across time and between Yellowstone, Yosemite, and Glacier national parks, *Engineering Eden* shows how efforts at wilderness management have always been undone by one fundamental problem--that the idea of what is "wild" dissolves as soon as we begin to examine it, leaving us with little framework to say what wilderness should look like and which human interventions are acceptable in trying to preserve it. In the tradition of John McPhee's *The Control of Nature* and Alan Burdick's *Out of Eden*, Jordan Fisher Smith has produced a powerful work of popular science and environmental history, grappling with critical issues that we have even now yet to resolve.

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Customer Reviews

For 21 years, Jordan Fisher Smith worked as a park and wilderness ranger in California, Idaho, Wyoming, and Alaska, so he is a good author for this type of book. He knows the subject matter from experience. The author shows the conflict of interest over how to control and manage nature and its resources. Mr. Smith describes the history of the National Parks Service and the changing approaches to dealing with natural resources and tourists. The National Parks Service was designed to preserve natural places and allow people to enjoy watching wildlife. However, whenever there are resources and people who want to use them, there always seems to be different opinions on what is important – “preservation vs. making money off of tourists to keep the park going. It’s a hard choice because there is not much money allocated by the government for these parks. When created, there was no model on how to balance these conflicting goals for a park, and over the years the conflict between these opinions has caused issues. The author examines the opinions held by witnesses about wildlife and conservation in the park. The author uses a trial over a bear killing to provide an example of how those opinions are applied to nature conservation vs tourists. As someone that has taught Environmental Psychology, I find this book to be very interesting. The books that are part of my class are dry textbooks so knowing about a real world example I can use to discuss preservation of natural resources vs. using resources is very helpful. Some reviewers think this book is dry, but I guess it is what you have read in the past to make a comparison that determines how you will feel about it. I think anyone interested in this topic will enjoy it and/or gain benefit from it.

A great deal of thought went into the structuring of Engineering Eden. It could have been a long condemnation of the National Parks Service. It could have been a collection of profiles of ecologists and their accomplishments (and crimes). It could have been a timeline of fatal park

mismanagement. Or it could have been a depressing retelling of extinctions. Instead, Jordan Fisher Smith employs a lawsuit by the family of someone killed by a Yellowstone bear to weave a superstructure â “ a framework â “ to tell all the ancillary stories. The scene of the crimes is Yellowstone. The main crime is the mismanagement of a precious resource. The park and its flora and fauna are unique and should never have been treated the way they have â “ as Coney Island West. The players are Parks Service people, ecologists, victims of bears and the occasional politician. It turns out they, or their work, all had some effect on the trial that connects them. Their paths cross again and again over their lifetimes, and Smith lets them grow and develop before our eyes. The overall effect is intricate and reinforcing, without being overwhelming. Smith has assembled an unforgettable tale, and told it unforgettably. Yellowstone Park began with the best intentions. Roads were built to let materials in, so they wouldnâ™t have to strip the natural resources already there. But immediately thereafter, hotels, restaurants and campgrounds turned the park into a playground. All the refuse everyone produced went into feeding bears. Various administrations wanted the park to be clean, groomed and spiffy; natural was uncouth. All the predator animals clearly had to go. Then they had to deal with massive overpopulations of elk. It is really rather pathetic. Scientists know so little it is frightening.

Everyone understands, at least intuitively, that all things are interconnected - ALL things. Ecology is the study of those interconnections. And managing the entire wild ecology of America's national parks is the impossible task that the National Park Service has been chartered to accomplish - to "...conserve the scenery and the national and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations." (The National Park Service Organic Act of 1916) Also intuitively, no one completely understands what the future ramifications are of the actions of one species on all of the other species and objects, flora, fauna and mineral, within an ecosystem. Yet mankind, just one of the innumerable entities that are part of the ecosystems of the national parks, tries to manage, to control, to conserve and preserve, all without completely understanding what will be the results of its actions. The Service has acted valorously in trying to meet its goals, stumbling at times, picking itself up and trying again - sometimes through trial and error, sometimes on blind faith and unsupported beliefs, sometimes on scientific study and analysis, sometimes just in unquestioning compliance with policies set by commercial interests or political interests or public pressure for individual enjoyment - all ranging from fancy lady's hats festooned with feathers and sometimes entire stuffed birds to heedless orgies of killing of millions of animals - elk, bison, bears,

antelope, beaver, ducks, quail, grouse, passenger pigeons, salmon, etc., etc., and the loss or endangerment of sequoia, whitebark pine and so forth.

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