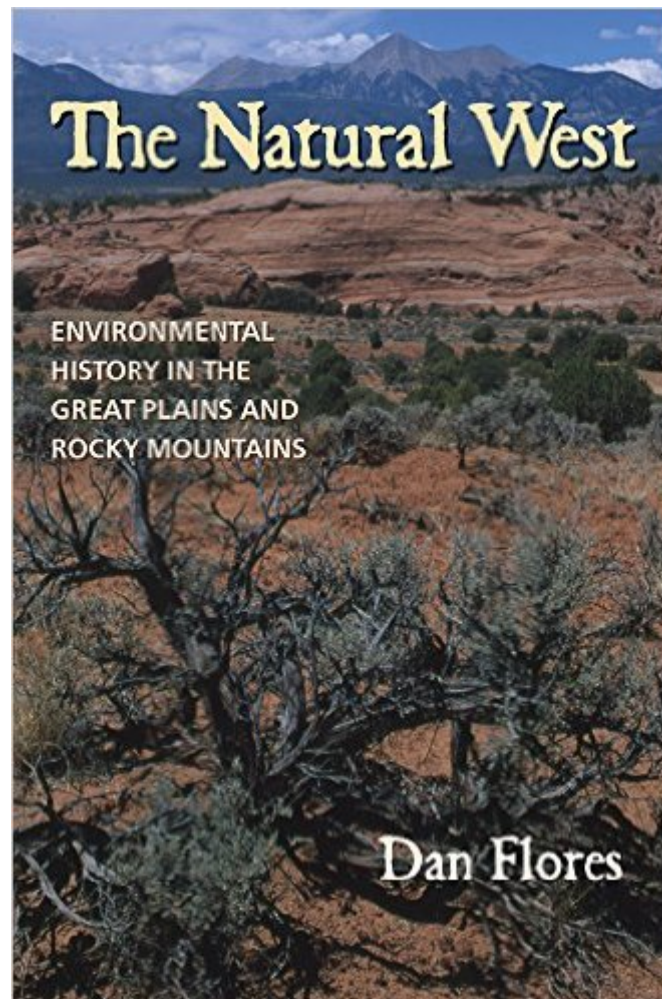


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# The Natural West: Environmental History In The Great Plains And Rocky Mountains



## Synopsis

The Natural West offers essays reflecting the natural history of the American West as written by one of its most respected environmental historians. Developing a provocative theme, Dan Flores asserts that Western environmental history cannot be explained by examining place, culture, or policy alone, but should be understood within the context of a universal human nature. The Natural West entertains the notion that we all have a biological nature that helps explain some of our attitudes towards the environment. Flores also explains the ways in which various cultures-including the Comanches, New Mexico Hispanos, Mormons, Texans, and Montanans-interact with the environment of the West. Gracefully moving between the personal and the objective, Flores intersperses his writings with literature, scientific theory, and personal reflection. The topics cover a wide range-from historical human nature regarding animals and exploration, to the environmental histories of particular Western bioregions, and finally, to Western restoration as the great environmental theme of the twenty-first century.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Everyone always loves the West -- people hike the mountains for adventure, they hide out in the small towns when they're broke, and they buy ranchettes when they have money. The West is like a big old classic car that symbolizes something dependable and that people love to get in and hit the road -- the loooong road. "The Natural West" is for those brave enough to get under the hood and see how that car operates. "Environmental History" is a fairly recent discipline, coming out of conventional history meeting ecology and the changing understanding of what a human being really

is. Dan Flores is a hip guy with a smart take on the whole field. He's out there hiking, taking photos (they're in the book), running his wolf-dog, building his adobe house, and fighting the exotic weeds on his acreage -- and all the time he's thinking, "How does this work? How does all this fit together?" Not that he will hand you a lot of predigested answers. This book, broken into chapters by region, is a tool kit, a beginner's manual, a map to the territory. It's a place to start getting under the hood and finding out how the motor really works. He's handed you all the clues. This is a book to keep on hand and return to. Every revisitation will reveal the beginning of a new trail.

Dan Flores picks up where he left off in Caprock Canyonlands and Horizontal Yellow to give an overview of the state of bioregional history in the American West, followed by some chapters applying those latest findings and approaches to some specific times and places. There's a lot to learn here. Flores puts "paid" to the Roussellian "eco-noble savage" idea of Paul Shepard. In Exhibit A, he notes how the Comanche, after becoming (allowing themselves to be?) co-opted by the global market, were exerting their own downward pressure on bison numbers. He shows how sociocultural history and ecohistory meet in forming bioregionalism by documenting Utah Mormons' high hostility to environmentalism. In doing so, he nuances Powell's high praise for the environmental standards of Mormon communal development in the 19th century. He talks about the southern Plains, Texas' Caprock, in a way that you too will lament there being no National Park there. All of this done in an easy to read style. One complaint: The title "The Natural West" is a bit misleading. After discussing how "the West" is actually composed of several dozen bioregions, Flores basically ignores anything west of the Rockies -- the Great Basin, Sonoran, Mohave and Upper Basin/Northwest deserts, the Sierras, Southern and Northern Cascades, and the various sections of Pacific Coast. With that allowance, it's a great book.

I would add to the previous review that the first chapter provides a critique of Paul Shepard's thesis that our society is broken, and will never become whole again until we return to our hunter-gatherer roots. I was interested in this because I am a big Paul Shepard fan and have not before seen a critique of his ideas from a source I can respect. I don't know that Flores even gets Shepard's ideas completely straight, and I wish he had devoted more space to his critique, but at least it's something to get you thinking about. I hope I haven't turned off those looking for a more straight-forward natural history of the West and southern plains, because except for that first chapter, that's what this book is- and it's excellent in its digestible chapters on components of this region.

Dan Flores is an environmental historian. His book, *The Natural West*, focuses on the region of the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains. This ecosystem has been radically changed in the last 300 years, and a number of these changes have resulted in irreversible degradation. Flores has a misty vision of restoring the West, and his work explores issues that contributed to ecological imbalances. We can't address challenges that we don't understand. At the time Flores was writing, many green thinkers were indulging in a fantasy that imagined an environmental Golden Age, when the continent had no scars from human activities. Native Americans lived so lightly that they left almost no footprints. Flores was among the scholars who questioned the fantasy. What happened to the mammoths, mastodons, and camels? Where are the woolly rhinos and saber-toothed cats? He noted that many ecosystems were altered by the Indian practice of periodic burns to control the growth of brush, and to maintain grassland habitat that was ideal for bison. In *The Ecological Indian*, Shepard Krech wrote that some of these fires grew too large and killed entire herds of animals. Flores didn't mention the "buffalo jumps," where herds of bison were driven off the edge of cliffs. Of course, far more impact was caused by the technologically advanced settlers. Never before, in North America, have a group of humans wrecked so much, so quickly. Obviously, we would not be where we are today if hunter-gatherers possessed a level of ecological knowledge that a small herd of ecology experts now have (and the vast herd of consumers really need). If our wild ancestors had possessed wizardly understanding, then pockets of humans would not have reduced carrying capacity via overhunting, leading to the catastrophe of agriculture, and the resulting population explosion. Some Western Indians were bison hunters for more than 8,000 years. Bison can zip along at 35 miles per hour (56 km/h). On the wide-open prairie, sneaking up on a herd unseen, unheard, and unsmelled, required remarkable stalking skills. Then, Spaniards brought domesticated horses to the New World. Over the next 200 years (1680-1880), more than thirty Indian groups adapted horse-propelled bison hunting, which made it much easier to get lots of meat. This very unusual era was recorded by white painters, and it has become a common perception of traditional Native American life. Plains Indians imagined that there were infinite bison, it was impossible to deplete their numbers. Herds had been boosted by the cooler wetter climate of the Little Ice Age (1550-1850). Then, the shift to a warmer dryer trend reduced vegetation growth, which reduced carrying capacity for bison. Meanwhile, the horse population exploded, and horses competed with bison for the same vegetation. Among the many unwelcome gifts brought by settlers were bovine diseases like anthrax. The Gold Rush migration of 1849 brought cholera, which triggered a diarrhea rush, killing many natives. By 1850, there were many reports of starving Indians. Comanches were eating their

horses. Competition for bison and horses spurred tribal warfare between 1825 and 1850. Tribes raided tribes to snatch horses. (See Paul Shepard's book, *The Others*, for an excellent discussion of the many problems resulting from animal domestication.) So, it turns out that bison herds were not infinite, and that horse-propelled hunting very likely did not have a rosy future, even if whites had stayed out of the West. The experiment was cut short by industrial bison hunting, which accelerated after the Civil War ended in 1865. It rapidly brought the species close to extinction. I learned a lot from the chapter on the settlement of Utah, which got little notice in my history textbooks. In the early years, Mormon society was strikingly un-American. Rights to water and forests could not be privately owned by individuals. They belonged to the entire community. Joseph Smith believed that animals had souls, as did the Earth. Farms were limited to 20 acres (8 ha) to discourage the emergence of wealth inequality. Unfortunately, their impact on the ecosystem was similar to American communities everywhere. Population quickly grew. Most of the forests around Salt Lake City were gone in just ten years, and not reseeded. Grassland was overgrazed. War was declared on "wasters and destroyers" (wild predators). When the transcontinental railroad was completed, many non-Mormons moved into Utah, accelerating the turbulence by increasing cultural diversity and economic competition. In 1896, when Utah was admitted as a state, they were required to Americanize. Polygamy was banned. Firewalls were erected to separate church and state. Utah leaped onto the free market bandwagon, and grew like crazy. Explosive growth was not kind to the ecosystem. Everyone agreed that overgrazing was dumb, but everyone disagreed on which animals were the problem (not mine!). Americans brought many exotic weeds to the West, causing immense irreversible damage. Cheatgrass displaced native vegetation across large areas. It created biological wastelands, since cattle and wild grazers would not touch it. Cheatgrass was highly flammable. After a fire, exposed soil was vulnerable to erosion and gullying. When it rained, the runoff of water was rapid, leading to sudden floods. By 1930, the risk of repeated floods forced the abandonment of thirteen Utah communities. In the 1930s, four Utah valleys that were once lush grasslands became barren dust bowls. Flores was raised in a Mormon household. He laments that this culture (like most Americans) perceives humankind to be the crown of creation. The Earth is merely a funky waiting room on the journey to paradise, and if we trash it, it doesn't matter. Many in Utah, and other Western states, want federal lands returned to the states, so that resources can be profitably extracted, as quickly as possible, without the annoying restrictions of regulations (sorry kids). The culture is conservative, and environmentalists are not warmly welcomed. Growth is the god-word. Flores circles the word "animalness," and suggests that it might aid the healing process. Behaving like the

masters of the world has been very harmful to the planet. What might happen if we came to perceive humans as one animal among many, in a circle of equals? Many of the vital lessons in life are learned from mistakes. Flores serves readers a lavish banquet of eco-boobos. The West has been dying for 200 years. What should we do? What does *Restoration* mean? Is it possible? Are we willing to bury industrial civilization and get a life?

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