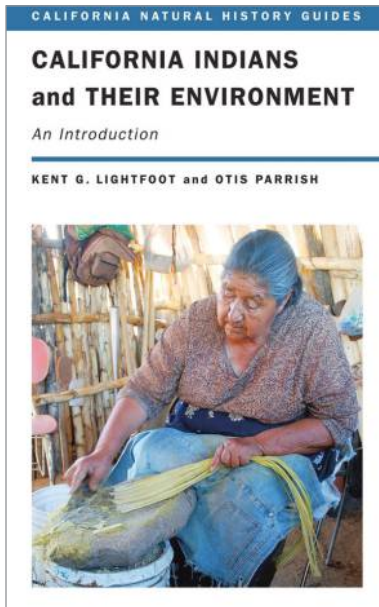


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The Wilderness Paradox



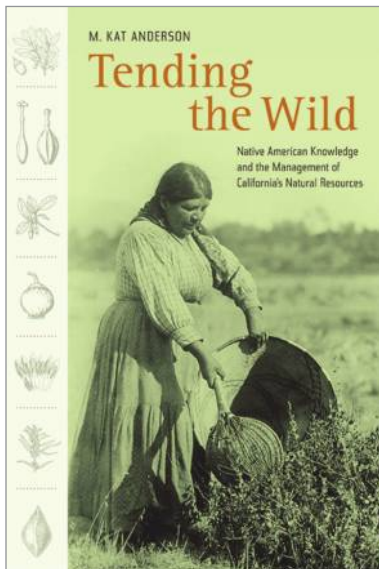
M. Kat Anderson, *Tending the Wild: Native American Knowledge and the Management of California's Natural Resources* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006)

Ira Jacknis, *Food in California Indian Culture* (Berkeley: Phoebe Hearst Museum Press, 2004)

Kent G. Lightfoot and Otis Parrish, *California Indians and Their Environment: An Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009)

The road from Sacramento to Yosemite takes you up into the mountains and back into the history of human subsistence in California. South of the capital city, Highway 99 roars with semis carrying agricultural equipment and produce—the inputs and outputs of laser-leveled fields and industrial food factories. The junction with 120 East is in Manteca, whose name (“lard”) recalls Spanish California’s tallow-and-hide operations as well as the modern region’s association with feedlots and dairies. In the eastern part of the valley lie fruit and nut orchards that have been part of the landscape since Yankee and Japanese settlement. As the road begins to rise into the foothills, ranchettes give way to large private cattle ranches. Closer to the park, scraggly state and national forests bear the scars of timber and mineral extraction. To the north is Hetch Hetchy, a reservoir and hydropower station for the city of San Francisco. When you finally cross the boundary between Stanislaus National Forest and Yosemite National Park at Crane Flat, however, most outward signs of the economic exploitation of California’s material abundance cease and the recreational and spiritual aspects of the backcountry come to the fore.

This break from the *trammeled* landscape is a major part of the appeal of national parks and other wildlands, of course. The problem is that our dependence on produce, meat, lumber, ore, water, and energy does not really disappear at the park gate: the need for food and shelter in fact remains as strong as ever, even as we distance ourselves from the messy circumstances of their procurement. The fruits of our domination of the natural world outside the wilderness boundaries must be trucked into the Yosemite Valley and the high meadows, where their presence often registers as



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an affront to the principles of “leave no trace.” A Snickers wrapper dropped by an eager backpacker in the parking lot near Tenaya Lake or the cappuccino served at the Lodge cafeteria in the valley can seem like both a sacrilege and an acknowledgment of our fundamental distance from the natural world we are attempting to enjoy.

For just these reasons, environmental ethicists have long recognized wilderness preservation as a problematic approach to the relationship between modern civilization and the nonhuman world. Taking large swaths of land out of economic use and designating them for limited recreation, they remind us, is a complex cultural and political act, and one filled with questionable presumptions. In making certain landscapes sacred, for example, don't we implicitly make all the rest into an environmental sacrifice zone, as in those photographs of intact forests on protected lands that abruptly give way at their edges to vast clearcuts and tree farms? In basing our decisions about what to protect on aesthetic grounds, don't we miss biologically more significant lands, such as the lowland marshes that have all but disappeared from the state? And in removing wilderness from human history, don't we both exacerbate the alienation of the modern citizen from the natural world and disrespect the long and deep aboriginal connection to particular environments? For several decades now, the consensus among those who contemplate such problems is that yes, we do.

And yet, for all the problems with wilderness, few are willing to follow through on the logic of this argument and repudiate the system of wilderness preservation we have in this country, sensing that backing away from wilderness absolutism, however intellectually shaky its foundations, will open the door to aggressive elements of the mining, grazing, and timber industries already pushing up to the borders of protected parklands. When I introduce the wilderness paradox to my undergraduate students, asking them to consider the pros and cons of doing away with the wilderness designation for all public lands, the invariable result (after several productive hours of debate) is a stalemate: we come to recognize both the deep problems of the wilderness model and the pronounced lack of any satisfactory alternative to it. Is there any way out of Californians' warring conception of our land as either untouchable wilderness or ecological free-fire zone, where the most profound kinds of violence to natural systems are the norm?

This question was on my mind recently as I visited the Yosemite Museum in the heart of the Yosemite Valley, one of the few places that showcases the connection of the park to specific human histories. There I gravitated towards an empty room filled with local native art carefully preserved inside Plexiglas cubes. I stood alone for a full five minutes contemplating the skill and labor that went into the centerpiece of the collection—an enormous woven basket, 60 gallons or more in volume—and quietly bemoaning the loss of a world that was capable of making so much out of so little. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a slight movement from the corner of the room. Seated on a very small stool, leaning slightly against the wall, was a tiny, deeply wrinkled old woman patiently winding a length of deer-grass around the ribs of a newly begun basket. Startled by her unexpected presence and a bit baffled by her obsolete project, I stood for a moment pretending to read a curatorial label and trying to think of an appropriate thing to say. It is one thing to recognize Yosemite as a place of historical human settlement, represented by black-and-white photographs and archaeological specimens, and quite another to find that the original occupants are still in some form of possession. I was soon rescued from my fluster by a large class of fourth graders herding into the room to listen to the woman talk. Her name, it turned out, was Julia Parker. She is a Kashia Pomo and Coast Miwok who has taken up the basketweaving tradition of the Mono Lake Paiute, the people of her husband, and a former apprentice of Lucy Telles, the legendary basketmaker responsible for the immense and beautiful basket I had just been admiring. Now in her early eighties, Julia is herself a living legend of sorts, having spent nearly her entire life in the Yosemite Valley preserving native traditions and interpreting them for the park's millions of yearly visitors. I listened as she began patiently to explain the techniques of basketweaving to the children, delving into the materials she collected from the wild lands in the park at specific seasons with her daughter and granddaughter, now weavers in their own right.

As the children began to ask more and more questions, the relevance of Julia Parker's answers to the problem of wilderness began slowly to sink in. The baskets on display, which I had thought of as anthropological relics, art objects, or “crafts” in the contemporary American sense of the word, are in fact evidence of a long and continuing reciprocity between human beings and the montane ecosystems

around them. The baskets were and are made of willow shoots, deergrass stalks, redbud twigs, and other materials carefully collected from areas that Indian women manage—through careful weeding, transplanting, and burning—in order to encourage the right kind of growth of the right kind of plants. The native makers of these baskets constructed them as tools to support their own subsistence, in particular for the processing of acorns. The acorn, a nutritious major staple of native California, owes its ubiquity in part to the natives’ deliberately timed fires, which suppressed both insect pests and the natural succession of oak woodlands by shrubs and conifer forests. There were baskets for collecting acorns, baskets for storing them, baskets for holding the crushed meal, baskets for leeching out the bitter tannins, and baskets for cooking the final product, acorn mush. A well-equipped native household might have thirty or more different woven vessels for a variety of domestic tasks. As I walked out of the museum with Julia Parker’s words ringing in my ears, the baskets, the people responsible for them, and the landscape itself seemed changed in fundamental ways. No longer trapped within an archaic wilderness ethic—take no specimens, leave no trace—that is continuously belied by the alien material culture (popcorn, chocolate bars, Gore-Tex) trucked in and out daily for the benefit of tourists, it could be again what it still was for a few members of the native tribes, an active garden that both reflected and sustained their claims on the land.

Reinroducing such native Californian knowledge and practices into the management of public lands on a broader scale is the express goal of M. Kat Anderson, an ethno-ecologist who argues in *Tending the Wild* that the wild landscapes for which California is famed come primarily from the labor and accumulated experience of native occupants who took charge of their home ecosystems to produce the materials they needed to survive. If heeded, Anderson’s claim would have major significance for both the philosophy and the practice of environmental preservation and restoration, not to mention the status of native peoples in directing public environmental projects. No longer simple hunter-gatherers passively dependent on the bounty of wild nature, historical native Californians would have to be seen as manipulators of their environment no less ecologically significant than the large, centralized agrarian societies found elsewhere in native North America (though quite

different in the specific techniques they applied and the effects they produced).

By the same token, *wilderness* would no longer be understood as a place defined by its indifference to the hand of man and instead would have to be viewed as a tended agroecological zone that historically has required the intervention of humankind to help it retain its pre-contact biodiversity and fertility. More concretely, the state of California’s environmental laws, policies, programs, and practices would need to be shaped by the memories and experiences of native peoples as much as by the farming, industrial, and scientific research communities that now dominate such discussions. To back up her claims, Anderson draws upon a huge repository of texts, oral interviews, and field research, demonstrating how nearly every component of a given ecosystem played a key role in the material economy of the local tribes, providing ample documentation of native practices—like irrigating, pruning, coppicing, tilling, sowing, transplanting, and especially burning—that contributed to sustaining the resource and creating places like Yosemite that we now try to preserve, ironically, through questionably low-impact policies.

Anderson’s book represents one of the high points in a marked scholarly reappraisal of native Californians and the worlds they lived in prior to and after colonization. Kent Lightfoot and Otis Parrish’s new collaboration, *California Indians and Their Environment*, appears as a commissioned volume in the California Natural History Guides series, but it has an ambition grander than the typical guidebook: to synthesize new research on native California tribes that takes seriously their capacity to help resolve some of the state’s seemingly intractable environmental problems. The scope of this task is daunting in part because of the notorious diversity and complexity of native California. Yet despite the challenges posed by the eighty or ninety different linguistic groups in the state at contact and by the decimation of native communities thereafter, a lot of information about native environmental practices has survived into the present. Perhaps the greater stumbling block has been a conceptual one: the models developed by American anthropologists in the study of other regions of North America are often quite misleading when applied to the aboriginal societies of the West Coast. In particular, the standard division between “primitive” hunter-gatherer societies and larger,

more “advanced” agricultural societies (like the Cherokee or Hopi nations) does not fit California facts. Although primarily made up of very small “tribelets” (as Alfred Kroeber called them), native Californians displayed highly advanced forms of material and social culture as well as sophisticated trading networks. Of particular interest is native California’s oblique relationship to traditional agriculture. The “three sisters” so commonplace elsewhere in North America—corn, squash, and beans—were not cultivated outside of a small sliver of what is now the southeasternmost part of the state, nor were any similar agricultural staples. Calling native Californians hunter-gatherers, however, obscures the wide range of deliberate interventions they made in their environments. Lightfoot and Parrish make clear the need for a new category of subsistence in the extensive introductory portions of the book, which are highly recommended for Californians who want to begin their study of native peoples with the most up-to-date synthesis available. The remainder of the guide is given over to six sections—one for each of California’s major geomorphic provinces—detailing the specific animal, plant, and mineral materials used by various tribes in the region. The Central Valley/Sierra Nevada section, for example, describes the use of Mariposa Lily bulbs for food, of jimson weed as an analgesic poultice, and of soapstone for dishes. Walking through an uncultivated portion of my home turf in the Sacramento Valley, I began to see the land anew as a granary, medicine chest, and outfitter.

Bringing this kind of change in perspective out of academia and into the broader popular culture of California will likely require something more than either Anderson or Lightfoot and Parrish can supply, for after they had inspired me to a new awareness of the useful materials around me, I still lacked detailed knowledge about how to actually go about using them. What we need, in order to act on the lessons Anderson and others are teaching us, are instructions that will help connect their insights into native food cultures developed in California over millennia with the widespread interest in local, ecologically appropriate food, medicine, and clothing.

The work of Ira Jacknis, an anthropologist at the Phoebe Hearst Museum, may become the founding text of any such future movement. Bringing together for the first time dozens of obscure anthropological and Indian texts

on native foodways, Jacknis’s book offers a systematic culinary and gastronomic consideration of early food practices after generations of studies that focused primarily on either the nutritional or the social dimensions of subsistence and exchange. Not a cookbook in any traditional sense, Jacknis’s work nevertheless provides an extraordinarily fine degree of detail about various native California food practices. Modern Californians searching for an engaged, sustainable, and historically aware relationship with the California landscape through their own kitchen-table practices should start here.

To move toward a new vision of public land, one in which human intervention (guided by the experience of native Californians) is not regarded as a defeat of preservationist principles but as an affirmation of our necessary bond with our environment, requires a careful transition away from the ideological legacy of wilderness. The demise of that outdated vision, however, need entail no diminishment in our attachments to our state’s famous natural landscapes. According to Jacknis, the sugar pine we now appreciate for its beauty can also yield a resinous native candy that would perhaps be an even more durable connection between the coming generation and the natural world they are partly responsible for. And perhaps someday the injunction to eat what is fresh and local will extend beyond introduced cultivars grown in the stripped fields of the Salinas Valley even to roasted armyworms, a favorite Pomo dish consumed in celebration every few years when the population of these caterpillars spikes in the ash groves of the northern Bay Area. The continuing process of reinhabiting California in a sustainable and responsible way will have to proceed through our foraging grounds, gardens, palates, and stomachs. Thanks to the natives and scholars working to reveal the agriculture and foodways of the first peoples of California, such a goal no longer looks like sheer fantasy.

No doubt modern Californians will long continue to car-camp in Yosemite Valley, making s’mores over the fire pit. But I wonder whether one of our California mallows (perhaps the appropriately named *Malva neglecta*) might take the place of the gelatinous corn-syrup puffs we are used to, whether we could make a graham cracker out of carefully leached, pressed, and baked acorn meal, and how much coaxing it would take to get our children or grandchildren to replace a square of chocolate with the roasted pith of a green pine cone. **B**