


[Meyer on Leshy, 'Our Common Ground: A History of America's Public Lands'](#)

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John D. Leshy. *Our Common Ground: A History of America's Public Lands.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022. 736 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), [ISBN 978-0-300-23578-4](#). 

Reviewed by Carrie Meyer (University of Nebraska) **Published on** H-Environment (September, 2022) **Commissioned by** Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

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Our Common Ground is an ambitious undertaking, not only in John D. Leshy's task of writing it but also in the reader's completion of it. At six-hundred-plus pages, it appears daunting, but readers will be pleasantly surprised with Leshy's engaging style and ability to guide them with complex political negotiations and agencies without losing his point.

In his very first sentence, Leshy describes his work as a political history, and that stays true throughout. *Our Common Ground* presents a chronological progression from British colonial relationships with land from immediately prior to the American Revolution all the way to the present, ending with the Trump administration. Discussions about land and expansion of settlement and control began when there were still thirteen colonies under British control. But the densest period of public land development occurred between 1890 and World War II. As Leshy states, "except for the special case of Alaska, the overall amount and location of the public lands, and the government agencies charged with managing them, have not fundamentally changed since 1945" (p. xv).

Dividing his work into eight parts, with six to eight sections in each, Leshy breaks down the narrative into digestible parts for the reader to show the evolution of thought around public lands through national history. Yet this is not an irrelevant or concluded discussion. The debate continues, most recently in the wake of the Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. In June 2022, Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) suggested that the federal government establish abortion clinics on public lands to guarantee access to services.[1] When placed in the context of Leshy's book, such suggestions and the subsequent media onslaught of pros and cons for such action are not at all surprising.

Given its scope and organization, *Our Common Ground* would be an excellent text for classes on public policy, presidential history, or even Supreme Court history. It could easily be integrated into instruction by era or administration. Another intriguing feature is that rather than focusing on how decisions and divisions have differed over time, Leshy's narrative illustrates how "public lands have played a consensus-building, unifying role in American life. Indeed, political decisions about public lands offer some of the best examples of long-term thinking the American political system has ever produced. Public land grants early on helped establish a tradition of public education and build an infrastructure that knit the nation together" (p. xvii). Decisions about land and its uses are subject to

the will of the people. The number of voices in that discussion are ever increasing and provide opportunities for redressing past wrongs and exclusions.

Leshy transparently admits that he does not “give much attention to the actions and decisions by which the U.S. government first acquired these and other lands from foreign governments and from Native Americans. Nor does [the book] deal in detail with Congress’s decisions to transfer ownership of many lands to states and private interests” (p. xiv). This is understandable because to do so would be an undeniably daunting task that would add at least another six hundred pages to the book. Leshy also acknowledges that past discussions excluded women, Native Americans, and people of color from the public policy discourse. Still, many of the policy and relationship clashes with these groups are discussed to provide context of events as they transpired and to show later shifts of the federal government acknowledging land rights in the modern era. However, in-depth ethical and historical analysis of these events is left for others to undertake.

At the close of the book, Leshy calls for acknowledgment of the climate challenges facing public lands. He notes that “a destabilizing climate poses countless tests for public lands. It alters natural qualities that were a primary reason why the United States decided to retain or acquire them” (p. 596). He also brings to the fore how increased recreational use endangers wildlife and cultural resources in these preserved places. How to balance these forces with the use, though declining, of lands for oil, coal, and natural gas harvesting and livestock grazing poses important questions for future policymakers. At its heart, “questions of public land policy are ultimately political questions,” and it will be up to “we the people” to impart our will for the future use, preservation, and longevity through our elected officials (p. 600).

Leshy’s closing thoughts sum things up well, “our public lands have shown how our governing process, for all its imperfections, can work to produce a result that most Americans support” (p. 601). That such agreement can be achieved for the benefit of all is a very edifying thought.

Note

[1]. Katherine Tangalakis-Lippert, “Standing among Protestors after the Fall of Roe vs. Wade, AOC Calls on Biden to Create Abortion Clinics on Federal Land,” *Business Insider*, June 24, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/aoc-calls-on-biden-create-abortion-clinics-on-federal-land...>

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