

[Hester on Sutter, 'Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies: Providence Canyon and the Soils of the South'](#)

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Paul Sutter. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies: Providence Canyon and the Soils of the South.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015. 288 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-3401-1.

Reviewed by Al Hester (South Carolina State Park Service) **Published on** H-Environment (March, 2016) **Commissioned by** David T. Benac

One of the central riddles of southern environmental history is the question about the causes and meaning of the region's severe land degradation, which by the early twentieth century had resulted in dramatic and iconic gullies. Historian Paul S. Sutter examines this riddle in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies*, looking at the question from a local as well as a regional perspective. Using Georgia's Providence Canyon as a case study, he finds that the New Deal land reformers were only partially correct when they argued that southern soil erosion had roots in poor farming practices, exploitation, and slavery. He finds that social explanations are not enough, and that the nature of the southern environment itself, specifically its soils, topography, and weather, had a great deal to do with the problems that began when settlers cleared the land for cultivation. In the process of investigating the larger historical questions surrounding the formation of Providence Canyon, Sutter wrestles with how it was a product of human failures and natural phenomena.

The book carefully and effortlessly moves between this specific, historic place and its broader context, weaving together local history and summaries of the extensive scholarship on southern agriculture. Sutter develops his argument over three main sections. In the first part, he examines the early twentieth-century discovery of Providence Canyon by geologists and then soil scientists, and the origins of the debate about the canyon's meaning. Next, he shows how local tourism boosters and land reformers came to dramatically different views about the place, the first group seeing Providence as a nationally important scenic attraction and the second as an equally important, cautionary tale about lack of land stewardship. In the third section, Sutter concludes with his own interpretation of the canyon's significance and its place in regional environmental history. Initially inclined to see it as did the 1930s land reformers, that is, as a human mistake, he comes to see the canyon "as more of a natural place than my initial sense of irony would allow" (p. 7).

Over the course of these three sections, he takes us on an entertaining exploration of the rise of soil science in the United States, and the influence of key figures in that field such as Hugh Hammond Bennett and Milton Whitney. He examines local views on Providence Canyon, most typically voiced by business boosters and journalists, but also expressed through the fascinating poetry of Thomas Jefferson Flanagan, an African American from Stewart County, Georgia. Other chapters focus on how specific regional farming practices, such as shifting cultivation of cotton and early attempts at terracing, were sincere attempts to deal responsibly with uniquely erodible southern soils. Bringing in evidence from other disciplines, Sutter also discusses how the environment itself was an actor in this drama, though he is careful to avoid deterministic arguments. He notes how piedmont soil composition, extreme rainfall intensities, topography, and loss of forest cover all played important

roles in the creation of Providence Canyon and its sister gullies across the South. Even so, he also reminds us that it was only in conjunction with human land use choices that these environmental factors eventually led to crisis.

Sutter also grapples with the debate on the relationship between slavery and soil abuse. Historians have long contended that there was a strong link between the two, and Sutter details the evidence over several pages. He then cites a few tentative examples suggesting that slavery may not have been a determining variable in the equation of southern land degradation. These include historical geographer Carville Earle's argument that in some times and places slavery may have been soil-conserving; that slave-based rice cultivation was not soil-destroying; and that the lands of yeomen farmers were just as damaged even though they owned few or no enslaved workers. But as he notes, more research on the topic is needed. It does seem that it would take more evidence to revise the Depression-era critiques of southern farming that associated human and natural resource exploitation so strongly. In this sense, Sutter's conclusion is correct that "Providence Canyon's interpretation might just raise as many questions as it can answer" when it comes to the topic of slavery (p. 147).

Public historians will be particularly pleased to read Sutter's arguments for interpreting this story to visitors at Providence Canyon State Park. Many visitors may come away focusing on the irony that the scene of an environmental disaster could be celebrated and memorialized as a public park, since we ordinarily associate parks with natural resource protection. But Sutter believes that we should not just look at it as a place of iconic importance. Instead, interpreters of the site should avoid over-moralizing "by simultaneously descending to a local level of detail and critically assessing the assumptions and narratives we bring to the place" (p. 184). A park like this one should help us come to grips with contradictory histories: nature versus culture; conservation measures that sometimes exacerbated environmental problems; slavery as a soil-destroying system or as a soil-conserving one; and so on. He extends his argument by suggesting that this approach should not be limited to Providence Canyon, but could also be applied at other sites of environmental degradation, ranging from the Sumter National Forest in South Carolina, or the Alcovy Conservation Center in Georgia, all the way to Malakoff Diggins State Historic Park, a hydraulic gold-mining site in California. His vision for bringing the complexities of environmental history to our public parks and forests is certainly a welcome one, and an approach full of exciting possibilities.

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