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Review: Intelligent Courage: Natural Resource Careers That Make a Difference

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Abstract

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By Michael E. Fraidenburg

Reviewed by Victoria Carchidi

Washington, DC, USA

Comments

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Fraidenburg, Michael E. *Intelligent Courage: Natural Resource Careers that Make a Difference*. Malabar, FL: Krieger, 2007. 203 pp. ISBN 9781575242873. US\$35.25, hardbound. Alkaline paper.

The seven men and women whose voices make up the chapters of this book embody the intelligent courage of the title. They risked promotions, pay raises, their careers—even their safety and that of their families—to protect fragments of our natural world. Their careers or avocations in natural resources span the second half of the twentieth century, from post-World War II ramping up of resource “production” to accommodate returning GIs, through the introduction of environmental protection legislation in the 1970s, to the uncertain future of climate change since the 1990s.

Michael Fraidenburg, a career officer with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife for several decades, watched the change from “natural resource abundance” to “natural resource scarcity” (p.1). He selected the book’s subjects for their successful in difficult work, and restricts himself to the margins. They speak powerfully about their struggles.

The decline in resources, and shifts dictated by new science, attitudes, and policies, disrupted comfortable relationships between public resource officers and ranchers, industries, and other users of public lands. Altering the premises and implementing new practices for managing public land required conviction and bravery. Gloria Flora, a supervisor in the Forest Service, recounts the difficulty she faced in rural Nevada when even the courts would not support her effort to stop private interests from bulldozing a road across the Jarbidge River.

Roger Contor, a 30-year veteran of the Park Service, notes that success also requires luck. When he first implemented the then-novel decision to let wildfires burn themselves out, seasonal weather patterns quickly extinguished the flames. Similarly, luck helped Phil Pister find and save the desert pupfish, thought to be extinct. Yet, Pister points out, “Conservation requires that you win repeated battles. Development only requires that you win once” (p. 143). New “development” or even just climate change could defeat conservation successes.

In addition to fighting fierce battles, these and the rest of the book’s speakers—Olympic skier turned activist Andrea Mead Lawrence, Bern Shanks, Tom Peterson, Mike Dombek—reveal other commonalities. Many refer to the importance of a broad education rather than blinkered specialization (making this a useful book for students!).

Another strength many emphasize is psychological acuity: knowing oneself and one’s limits, and accepting the motives of others. The eighth speaker, Max Bazerman, comes not from natural resources but from the Harvard Business School, where he studies how and why we make the decisions we do.

One point that recurs offers hope for the future. Several speakers attribute change to states of crisis. At critical moments, opposition broke down and new arrangements evolved to meet revised expectations. This observation suggests that if we show intelligent courage and consider new ways forward, the Great Crash of 2009 could offer the opportunity to find a better way to live within the world.

This book is easy to read, and offers much to ponder about how we manage ourselves. It is not the career resource its subtitle might lead one to expect, but it provides useful case studies and first-person accounts of decisions that are important to environmental management.

As a textbook, *Intelligent Courage* cannot stand on its own. Fraidenburg assumes considerable basic knowledge on the part of the reader. Even his introductions to the speakers provide scant information about their careers. Yet, the stories the subjects recount matter. This book could supplement other class reading (which a search of the web shows it already does). It should certainly be in high school, college, and public libraries, accessible to anyone interested in environmental activism or planning to enter a public resource management field.

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