

Steven Davis. *In Defense of Public Lands: The Case against Privatization and Transfer*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press. 2018. 273 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-1-4399-1537-0. USD 29.95.

In Defense of Public Lands

Although there have been cyclical movements to privatise U.S. public lands since their inception, the Trump administration's rise to power could arguably serve as a catalyst to make it a reality. In *In Defense of Public Lands* (p. xi), Steven Davis writes "To those interested in keeping public land public, our nation has entered an extremely perilous age." Davis describes the legislative attacks on public lands, which became more spirited and determined since the rise of the Tea Party wing of the Republican Party. He provides a forceful and unapologetic defense of keeping public lands public in this political climate. He presents this as his political aim in the preface, and explains that the book is therefore "aimed as much at the policy maker and citizen as the scholar" (p. xii). The book is an accessible read and makes convincing and clear arguments against privatisation from ecological, economic, political, and ethical standpoints.

The book begins with the history of the establishment in the U.S. of public lands, including county, state, and federal public lands, and details the periodic movements to privatise these lands or to transfer federal public lands to state ownership. Davis argues that transferring federal public lands to various states would make them far more vulnerable to privatisation or quasi-privatisation through land trusts, which are not public in terms of access or decision-making and which also have a fiduciary responsibility to generate revenue and can be sold at any time. As most federal public lands are found in the western states and in Alaska, Davis describes the mounting tensions between privatisers in the west and federal authorities in the east, with proponents of privatisation arguing that federal control of western state lands undermines their sovereignty.

In Chapter 2, Davis skillfully lays out the arguments made by prominent proponents of privatisation and the underlying assumptions of these arguments rooted in classical economic theory. These arguments will be familiar to scholars working on market-based conservation, where proponents argue that the environment and the free market are linked in a positive way and thus the best economic decisions will also naturally be best for the environment. This "win-win" rhetoric sees the market and private property as the best bulwark against the 'tragedy of the commons' (Hardin 1968). Davis provides a comprehensive exploration of a number of accompanying arguments for privatisation, such as the failure of public management, the idea that protecting intact ecosystems is just a subjective value preference that adulterates the objectivity of the market, that privatisation increases resource productivity,

and that bureaucrats are inherently corrupt. These arguments are not new, but the book does a brilliant job of assembling and presenting all of these arguments collectively and then systematically refuting them in Chapters 3 through 6.

Chapter 3 makes the case for public lands on ecological grounds, comparing biodiversity levels, the presence of imperilled species, ecosystem fragmentation, and long-term resilience between public and private lands. I found this to be the most convincing chapter. Chapter 4 makes the case for public lands on economic grounds, demonstrating the boon that public lands provide to surrounding economies, employment levels, and property values, and their impressive return on investment (ROI). This chapter also makes the case that there is in fact more economic value—in terms of the ecosystem services that these ecosystems provide for "free"—in leaving biodiverse ecosystems intact than privatisers might assume. Chapters 5 and 6 make the case for public lands on political grounds, arguing that conflict and dissensus between interest groups is in fact an integral part of healthy democracies and not an annoyance that should be done away with by letting the "unbiased" market decide. These chapters also make the arguments that collective values are embedded in public lands, that they are (more or less) equally accessible to all, that bureaucrats are motivated by more than self-interest, and that central bureaucratic land management is not entirely top-down. Although several points throughout these two chapters are well made, I found these later arguments less convincing. Chapter 7 concludes with future projections for public lands, including trends and challenges – such as how to appeal to changing demographics in America and how to deal with the threat of climate change – as well as suggestions for building popular movements around protecting public lands from privatisation.

Some of the arguments Davis presents fit rather uneasily together, such as arguments that nature should be valued for intrinsic or ecological reasons, and that protecting nature through public lands is the most worthwhile investment. Some of the economic arguments will likely be uncomfortable for critical scholars, such as the argument that there is value in pricing ecosystem services to convince those who think that public conservation spaces are a waste of untapped economic potential. Davis himself admits this and argues that regardless of contradictions between individual arguments, it is useful to demonstrate that no matter which position you argue from, there is no strong case for favouring private land management over public land management. He convincingly makes the case for public lands over private lands; however, the book, while critical of classical economic theory in environmental

management, is written from a largely managerial perspective, and does not engage much with the critical political ecology literature. The book would benefit from engaging with this literature as its current presentation does not address some significant questions.

The first major question concerns the legitimacy of public lands on Indigenous territories. Regrettably, Indigenous nations are mentioned only in passing in this book. On pages 5–6, Davis notes in a single paragraph that public lands were created at the expense of Indigenous peoples. He then moves on without returning to this important point while making his arguments for public lands. Indeed, public lands were tools of colonial territorialisation. Parks around the world, and certainly in the North American context, continue to alienate Indigenous peoples from their land bases as these lands become enmeshed in colonial-capitalist land management regimes (Coulthard 2014; Youdelis 2016). The notion that settlers have legitimate claim to this land is contested, but Davis goes on to uncritically argue for a celebration of public lands as “American inheritance” or “national treasures,” and argues that these can be rallying cries to inspire building movements around protecting public lands. He quotes Cronon on page 145, but does not engage with Cronon’s important critiques of the ‘wilderness’ ideology and the colonial (and capitalist) conservation regimes built from it. On page 194, he writes that discussions of transferring federal lands to state ownership are problematic because “you cannot, of course, have returned to you what was never yours in the first place... Native American tribes are the one and only group who can legitimately make that argument.” Again, however, this important point is left largely unaddressed. What would it mean to take this statement seriously on American public lands? Are the limitations of public land management that Davis admits to at the end of Chapter 3 artefacts of this colonial-capitalist approach to land management and the consequent marginalisation of alternative worldviews and practices? What are the implications of invoking nationalism as a defense of public lands?

Additionally, this colonial and capitalist paradigm becomes more vulnerable during times of austerity. This has been clear in my home country of Canada, where austerity politics led to a swath of proposals to privatise the development and management of park services. Davis notes that this kind of marketisation is already happening in American parks, which he argues is a slippery slope towards full privatisation, particularly in this age of austerity. Climate change, which is driven by our current political economy, will also threaten the long-term viability of this colonial and capitalist approach to land management. While the answer is certainly not privatisation, how can we move towards a decolonised and post-capitalist land regime that will adequately avert these threats while working towards reconciliation with the Indigenous nations whose land we inhabit? The Tribal Parks movement in Canada is one example of a move in this direction

(ICE 2018), but more thought and energy needs to go into answering these questions.

Davis’ aim, however, was not so much to provide a materialist critique of how the broader political economy produces these threats, but rather to arm citizens, scholars, and policy makers with relevant information to fight the impending privatisation of public lands in Trump’s America. With this in mind, the book is an incredibly useful and fruitful read. I have already used it in one of my lectures about the tragedy of the commons and the implications of property regimes in natural resource management. I would recommend it for course readings in geography or environmental studies at the introductory to senior undergraduate level, as it is very accessible and lays out complex arguments and theories clearly. This book will be useful and of interest to scholars and teachers, conservation practitioners, policy makers, and environmental activists alike. It will also be of interest to citizens who are able to visit and enjoy U.S. public lands and who are not keen on losing these spaces to private interests and developers.

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