

Living In an Increasingly Unnatural State

California overwhelmed by human numbers

Book Review by Tom Andres

In his foreword to Steven Gilbar's excellent anthology, David Brower writes, "the 2 million Californians here when I arrived have already become 32 million. California wildness deserves a chance to recover, and *Natural State* lets us know why." Well said, but with California's population increasing by over 423,000 annually, much of it fueled by mass immigration and resultant birthrates, the larger question is obviously *how*.

While by no means a sad book, packed with 40 eclectic selections — among them John Steinbeck's "Flight" into the unforgiving chaparral, Robert Louis Stevenson's mesmerizing "The Sea Fogs," Jack London's liberating "On Sonoma Mountain" (latter two excerpted from differently titled larger works) — it would be difficult to read *Natural State* without feeling frequent twinges of loss.

Sometimes it is explicit, such as Wallace Stegner's melancholy "Remnants," or David Darlington's "In Condor Country." Other times the reader knows what is to come.

In the 1860s' "Into the [Salinas] Valley," William Brewer writes about the now extinct California grizzly: "A man stands a slight chance if he wounds a bear, but not mortally, and a shot must be well directed to kill. The universal advice by everybody is to let them alone if we see them, unless we are well prepared for battle and

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have experienced hunters along."

In "Ramblings in Yosemite," approaching the High Sierra in the 1870s, Joseph LeConte is struck by "the great massiveness and grandeur of the clouds and the extreme blueness of the sky." Mark Twain's "Lake Tahoe" is "not *merely* transparent, but dazzlingly, brilliantly so."

Recurrent is the desire to get away from the multitudes. In "Climbing Matterhorn Peak," Jack Kerouac's character, Japhy Ryder, "modeled on the poet Gary Snyder," is determined to camp far enough along so that he and his buddies won't "wake up tomorrow morning and find three dozen school teachers on horseback frying bacon in our backyard."

Also on Yosemite, Ann Zwinger, "Trumpets of Light," writes: "More than 706,000 acres, over 94 percent of the park, is managed as wilderness and can never be developed. A permit system applies to hikers and groups on horseback who plan to remain overnight, thus guaranteeing that hikers are not falling over one another or

overusing one area."

Three cheers for good management, but how rarely it is mentioned in such encouragingly enlightened accounts that ever-growing future populations will mean ever-shrinking nature rations available to any given potential wilderness permittee, or any general park visitor for that matter. Outside tourist numbers aside, California is projecting a tripling of the Sierra Nevada population between 1990 and 2040.

There do seem to exist a few natural California features beyond the ability of human numbers to overwhelm, such as the tule fog in California's Great Central Valley. David Mas Masumoto, "Winter's Fog," writes, "The fog continues to roll in. Where it's heading I do not know. It passes in front of the porch like a shifting

**Natural State,
A Literary
Anthology of
California Nature
Writing**

*Selected and edited
by Stephen Gilbar*
Berkeley, CA: University of
California Press, 1998
377 pages, \$15.95



cloud. If I stare at it long enough, it seems that I start to move instead. I imagine our farmhouse cutting through the gray mist like a lost ship, my porch transformed into the bridge.”

Unfortunately, while the fog is still rolling in, so are the subdivisions. California farmland is now sinking beneath them at such a rate that the Central Valley has earned the American Farmland Trust's designation as the nation's number one most threatened agricultural area.”

On Southern California, Joan Didion, “The Santa Ana,” corrects the misconception of an endlessly bland climate, the reality being “infrequent but violent extremes.” Of course, we experience ever more destructive extremes as ever greater numbers of us continue our lemming-like advance onto shorelines, wildfire zones, flood plains and cliff edges.

Nor does Los Angeles smog go unrepresented. Hildegarde Flanner, “A Vanishing Land,” writes, “From the foothills above Pasadena I can see for sixty miles or more ... All this delights the eye, the mind, the heart, with romantic geometries and the pride of home. But not for long. Gradually all those remarkable harmonies and differences of texture fade and flatten, while a horizon of spectral murk advances ... a mobile, drifting wall.”

That was LA smog in the 1950s, to be improved by later clean air laws, improvements now being canceled out by — you guessed it — population growth.

Natural State has an eloquent afterword by Gary Snyder, advocating “a non-nationalistic idea of community, in which commitment to pure place is paramount [and] cannot be ethnic or racist. Here is perhaps the most delicious turn that comes out of thinking about politics from the standpoint of place: anyone of any race, language, religion, or origin is welcome, as long as they live well on the land.”

Yes, a greater sense of community, of place, is one reason I subscribe to *The Social Contract*, but isn't it a little late in the day for us to be betting the farm on reinventing humankind?

Could one warning sign be that among all the peoples of Earth it is probably only those of European heritage who would consider making ethnicity irrelevant to place “delicious?” Or even think it remotely possible? And how would it work? Would a family that champions feminism live serenely next door to one devoutly believing in female circumcision, since both would have an overriding commitment to the Sacramento River

watershed?

Setting aside Mr. Snyder — who has written some sensible things on immigration, but then notes that they do not apply to Mexico, which we must first help “transform!” — it became evident in the recent Sierra Club immigration vote debate that one popular way to avoid taking a position on a controversial problem is to talk about a future “we must” thought-revolution that conveniently erases the to-be-avoided problem.

Although not necessarily a conscious calculation, prognosticating something as huge as a thought-revolution excuses prognosticators from ever having to provide the details of just how it could possibly come about, providing a way to appear courageously visionary while hiding.

Among its other strengths, Steven Gilbar's fascinating

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book should serve as a reminder to many of just what it is we are losing, and how fast. Not only for the now 33 million Californians, but also for every citizen of what might be called our Natural Nation.

The fact remains that population growth is America's number one nature-flattening machine, a machine that is mostly fueled by relentless mass immigration.

Which gets back to David Brower's “chance to recover” and the question of *how*?

Obviously, at a minimum, an immigration moratorium — and soon.

NOTES

Source for the state's current annual population increase: Californians for Population Stabilization (CAPS), 926 “J” Street, Suite 915, Sacramento, CA 95814, caps@calweb.com.

For Gary Snyder on “Migration/Immigration,” see *Wild Duck Review*, Winter 1998.