



Engineering Eden: The True Story of a Violent Death, a Trial, and the Fight over Controlling Nature

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The fascinating story of a trial that opened a window onto the century-long battle to control nature in the national parks.

When twenty-five-year-old Harry Walker was killed by a bear in Yellowstone Park in 1972, the civil trial prompted by his death became a proxy for bigger questions about American wilderness management that had been boiling for a century. At immediate issue was whether the Park Service should have done more to keep bears away from humans, but what was revealed as the trial unfolded was just how fruitless our efforts to regulate nature in the parks had always been. The proceedings drew to the witness stand some of the most important figures in twentieth century wilderness management, including the eminent zoologist A. Starker Leopold, who had produced a landmark conservationist document in the 1950s, and all-American twin researchers John and Frank Craighead, who ran groundbreaking bear studies at Yellowstone. Their testimony would help decide whether the government owed the Walker family restitution for Harry's death, but it would also illuminate decades of patchwork efforts to preserve an idea of nature that had never existed in the first place.

In this remarkable excavation of American environmental history, nature writer and former park ranger Jordan Fisher Smith uses Harry Walker's story to tell the larger narrative of the futile, sometimes fatal, attempts to remake wilderness in the name of preserving it. Tracing a course from the founding of the national parks through the tangled twentieth-century growth of the conservationist movement, Smith gives the lie to the portrayal of national parks as Edenic wonderlands unspoiled until the arrival of Europeans, and shows how virtually every attempt to manage nature in the parks has only created cascading effects that require even more management. Moving across time and between Yellowstone, Yosemite, and Glacier national parks, *Engineering Eden* shows how efforts at wilderness management have always been undone by one fundamental problem--that the idea of what is "wild" dissolves as soon as we begin to examine it, leaving us with little framework to say what wilderness should look like and which human interventions are acceptable in trying to preserve it.

In the tradition of John McPhee's *The Control of Nature* and Alan Burdick's *Out of Eden*, Jordan Fisher Smith has produced a powerful work of popular science and environmental history, grappling with critical issues that we have even now yet to resolve.

Engineering Eden: The True Story of a Violent Death, a Trial, and the Fight over Controlling Nature Details

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From Reader Review Engineering Eden: The True Story of a Violent Death, a Trial, and the Fight over Controlling Nature for online ebook

Carol says

The calendar aspect of this book was at times disconcerting but the essence of the story was quite evocative.. Jordan Fisher Smith gives a good overview of the many players' mindset. It's a good trail of just how little we know about human, animal and plant behavior.

To summarize, I'll quote Smith's thoughts given in his Afterward on page 324:

"How much should we respect nature's autonomy? How much should we manipulate and control it to save it? Do we know enough to risk doing it? And what happens if we get it wrong?"

The story of our lives! Just how smart are we? Yes, I know - of course I AM RIGHT!!

BMR, MSW, LSW says

I won this book in a Goodreads Giveaway last year, but I just got around to reading it.

To quote BOC, "History shows again and again how nature points out the folly of men."

Don't feed the bears, lock up your food in bear proof containers. Also, the US Government will always cover up the truth when it comes to their mismanagement that results in the death of people and animals. The End.

Jeanette says

Interesting and well researched subject, but the organization to the telling was frustrating. The trial case that begins the crux of the issue within Yellowstone and other National Parks with regards to ecosystem and predators which opens the first sections? Well, it's quickest to say that the trial then commences just past page 200. With 1000 characters and 200 years of history and practices in between, just a slight diversion?

So it was nearly impossible to follow the individual cases of historic record, beyond which the continuity was too problematic to enjoy the read for any specific scientific nugget. It was for me. Because it jumps from forest fire to ecosystem to specific people and different locations. It's all over the place.

And although he truly tries to relate the facts without bias or agenda, I think he rather failed in that aspect too. He clearly has a treatise here that animals and people do not belong in the National Parks together as presently the habit for administration and "control". Not under the current set of feeding enforcement/restrictions and placements.

The book is titled in the same pattern of faulty direction as the continuity. Not that it wasn't covered- but that death, trial and fight of the title case named remain just a smaller portion of the overall tome. Not even 25%

related to it, IMHO.

In this exact time of news attention to the alligator in Disney taking the 2 year old- Jordan Fisher Smith is posing a strong argument overall throughout this non-fiction piece.

Some of the biographies of people involved in natural history and animal research, especially with the birds- would make great separate books.

Personally, I have never, ever understood that the national parks in the USA have in the past and still do in some cases, have such loose rules and naive overlooks to the reality of predators, ecosystems and "fun" camping as they do.

And this also lost an entire star for the numbers of descriptive minutia details in the numerous, numerous Grizzly attacks described. After awhile I didn't want to hear about scalp scraps any more.

I always believed that the story I heard endlessly in my youth was BS- concerning hiking, traipsing, camping out in the Midwest, North, and Western USA locations. It was mantra that the bear, wolf, mountain lion only attacked into bedrolls and tents without provocation when there were menstruating women present. Just not true at all! This book details why it is proximity to people feeding animals as a habit and in a certain place- repeated consequence of habituation. And that all that former rationalization and scientific "fact" was nothing of the sort.

If you are at all a National Park user, I would stronger recommend you read this book. It is a trudge to get to the evidence. You'll need to slog along through tracking, outcomes, replacements to location -if they (predators and bear especially) remain alive during the drugging and lifting processes for removal? They return to the "trouble" area quickly- far quicker than ever formerly presumed. All these decades of "controlling" habits by humans are reviewed by the dozens.

I'm fairly sure that within a decade or two people will be "out" of the biggest parks by Federal law. They are not truly playgrounds. But far beyond that is the fact that putting ourselves into the "know better/ preserve" function is inherently faulty and worsens far more often than it helps.

Nature always is changing itself- endlessly. Humans perceive at this point that they are the main and controlling/ destroying factors in ecosystems. As if they were the sun in our solar system and pivotal to all outcomes. They aren't.

Amerynth says

I received a copy of Jordan Fisher Smith's "Engineering Eden: The true story of a violent death, a trial and the fight over controlling nature" through LT's Early Reviewer's program.

If you're interested in the history of ecology and management of natural resources (or non-management as the case may be,) this is definitely the book for you. Smith has packed this book with a ton of interesting information about how management of national parks like Yellowstone has changed over the years.

At the heart of the story are grizzly bears and the early practice of feeding bears and the later ramifications when that was stopped. Poor options for food storage, as well as removal of the foods bears came to depend on had fatal consequences for several, including Harry Walker, who was killed by a grizzly bear in Yellowstone. His parents sued the government and much of the Smith's book is structured around that lawsuit.

I thought the book had a few structural problems -- the lawsuit story was broken up into such small segments, it felt really choppy. Sometimes the book felt like a dissertation that was turned into a commercial work, so the different threads came together in odd ways. However, all of those different stories and histories were pretty interesting overall, making this a worthwhile read.

Joan says

Beautifully written. Well researched. Chalk full of fascinating stories and interesting events. I especially enjoyed it as I've camped and hiked in locations that are important National Park scenes in this book. The history of ecosystem management, with a special focus on bears, was very interesting.

Ev says

Engineering Eden by Jordon Fisher Smith

Not an easy read, but an important one.

This book is not for everyone. It is far from a casual read, yet is not exactly a text book either. Mr. Fisher Smith tells a lot of the history of our National Park Service (NPS) from its beginnings with Yellowstone. As a veteran park and wildlife ranger, he knows his subject matter from experience. The original plan was to have places where the entire public could go to see our wildlife in their natural habitats. There was no working model for such a thing and the NPS had to devise as they went. As society has changed and grown with different expectations, so have the plans for these areas. This is an area that will always have divisions as there will always be interests groups deeply imbedded on both sides of the issue of protection of the resources vs. allowing building and recreational fees for financial gain. This is even more deeply divisive because of low funding provided by the federal government for their support. The reader needs to keep in mind, that there was no way of knowing what these costs would be when the service was initiated.

My memory of our family trip to Yellowstone when I was in elementary school, is still clear to my mind. It was more years ago than I care to say, but suffice it to say, far fewer tourists were present and very few buildings were available. Even at that early age, I knew I was expected to follow the rules and keep the camp site clear of food or anything that would attract animals from invading our area. Notices were posted everywhere warning not to feed the bears and if they were spotted to stay clear of them. Mostly everything was a common sense issue. Yet there were still those who pushed the rules. As we waited in the car to get to a geyser site, a bear was meandering through the line of stopped vehicles and although most people stayed in their cars, there was one woman who advanced towards the bear, totally ignoring park rules. Fortunately someone guided her away before there was a confrontation. The part of the book that was difficult for me

was reading about the attacks, especially the one on Harry Walker, the man killed. The telling is very descriptive, as it should be.

Mr. Smith writes about other issues in the parks and how man tries to control nature and manages to create even more difficulties. Approximately the last third of the book is dedicated to the actual trial with the Walker family. All the major players are visited and it is obvious the writer did his homework and researched the subject. This killing by a bear is the example he uses to show fully how the opinions of natural management vs. tourists collide.

The issues aren't going to be going away anytime soon. Sadly there are too many differences of opinion on how these lands should be managed. Just how much man can control nature and if he should even try to do so. Is there a way for the different groups to come together in agreement? With rapidly vanishing resources, though, the bigger question should be how we protect what we have for future generations to enjoy as have past ones.

At the beginning of this review I mentioned this book is not for everyone, and it isn't. However, students of management programs and those deeply interested in issues of the environment and preserving our natural resources, along with those very interest in our parks, I think will enjoy it. Visiting these parks is a far cry from visiting an amusement park and tourists must learn this ahead of time and honor the rules for their own safety and the safety of all park visitors, so education is vital. If a reader has only a casual interest in these subjects, they may want to pass, as it may contain way too much information, and the descriptive/graphic attacks.

I received this book as a contest winner at The Reading Room. This review is solely my own and not a requirement.

John Yunker says

The National Park Service is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year. And while a century may seem like a long time, it's safe to say, after reading Engineering Eden, that we're only just beginning to understand how to best manage our lands.

Fundamental to management is the question of how "wild" do we want our parks to be? Author Jordan Fisher Smith writes:

There are two ways in which most people don't wish to die: by being torn apart by a wild animal and by being roasted in flames. These two abject fears from deep in the ape-psyche, became, in the American West, bloated government programs, the two-headed dragon that Starker Leopold fought all his life.

In the early days of the park systems, we waged a war on predators that effectively eradicated them from most of the United States. In 1915, Congress authorized the killing of 11,000 coyotes in California, Oregon, Nevada, Idaho, and Utah. Wolves, bobcats, mountain lions were also killed in massive numbers, primarily to rid the government lands of predators that might attack livestock.

Interestingly, bears were largely given a pass in our national parks because they were a major tourist attraction. Shows were conducted in Yellowstone in which people would sit in bleachers to watch bears congregate at food dumps that the park service maintained. When these food dumps were closed in 1970 in an effort to create a more "balanced" ecosystem, a concept championed by naturalists such as Starker Leopold, chaos ensued. Hungry bears scoured campgrounds for food and came into conflict with humans.

The main narrative of the book centers around the story of one man mauled to death by a grizzly in Yellowstone Park in 1972 and the legal case that followed.

Smith covers a lot of material in this book, from elk hunting in Yosemite to controlled burning in Sequoia National Park, which at times may feel a bit overwhelming. But I appreciated the wealth of detail. And I empathized with the struggles that the park managers faced in trying to create environments that were both *wild* and *safe*. This isn't Disneyland after all.

I also was not aware just how far back in history people were feeding bears from their cars -- as in the 1920s! And bears were tearing their way into cars back then as well. Even then there were those who recommended that secure food storage was essential to living more harmoniously with these 400-pound neighbors. Sadly, it took too many decades until food storage became as well established as it is today.

Engineering Eden documents important and at times deeply tragic missteps in the evolution of our park system. Hopefully the next 100 years will be far more "balanced."

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NOTE: This review was first published on EcoLit Books: <http://www.ecolitbooks.com/>

Shawn says

As others have noted, the structure of this book can be maddening. I am perfectly ok with non-linear historical narratives, but it was problematic here.

Carly says

A riveting history of wildlife management in national parks and the civil trial that put into focus the question are we guardians or gardeners. Smith's passion for the subject really shines through.

I won this book from Goodreads.

EJR says

Very informative and interesting.

J.S. says

Guardians or gardeners?

We tend to look at National Parks like Yellowstone and Yosemite as slices of undisturbed nature in the midst of our ever-expanding civilization. However, this idea couldn't be further from the truth, according to Jordan Fisher Smith, who argues that our National Parks are among the most manipulated of anyplace that might be called wild.

An early goal of the national park system was that the land should be kept looking the way it looked before European explorers arrived. This ideal, however, is difficult to maintain and it brings up a lot of questions. Do you burn the land like the Indians (Native Americans) did? What do you do about predators, especially when those predators don't understand the boundaries and attack rancher's livestock? How many elk are too many? And what do you do when things seem to be out of whack?

Smith looks at the differing philosophies such as "natural regulation" and focuses mainly on fire, bears, and elk in the national parks. Running through his narrative is the story of Harry Walker who was killed by a grizzly bear in 1972 and the subsequent trial, but this is not what the book is about. Smith introduces us to John and Frank Craighead - a pair of twin brothers who studied bears and even gained a measure of celebrity; Starker Leopold, the son of Aldo Leopold and an eminent authority on wilderness thinking; and many others who influenced the way National Parks were run. There are lots of stories of bear attacks, but the overall theme of the book is how difficult our relationship with managing nature has been. Not all of the different threads seem to mesh together as nicely as the reader might hope, but I thought it was a very interesting history of our efforts to keep the land "natural."

Laura Lyons says

Smith certainly did his research for this book, but there were times when the amount of detail bogged down the book. For example, I didn't need to know that two scientists married half sisters from Alaska who never showed up in the story again.

Also, the second part of the title for this book is misleading. So much of the book talks about the history of national parks, various wildlife-management schools of thought, fire-fighting, etc., which all fall into the broad story of engineering "eden," but they didn't remotely fall into the story of the trial, so that took me a while to accept that half of the book wasn't about the trial at all and it was just a tease to get me to read the book. I enjoyed the topics that made up the other half of the book since I was ignorant of much of the information (and it inspired me to read about them more), but at times it was slow with the lack of plot, and confusing trying to remember how the various scattered paragraphs pulled together. I recommend the book for anyone who wants to visit national parks, but if you find a similar novel with less of the scattered story, opt for that other novel.

Erin Cataldi says

Fascinating, disturbing, and enlightening, this raw epic look at the National Parks and regulating nature will leave readers enthralled. Covering a lot of ground, "Engineering Eden," covers a brief history of the creation of Yellowstone National Park, the fight over controlling nature, and a major trial involving the death of a young man mauled and eaten by a grizzly. Although it covers a lot of ground and introduces many key players this book doesn't feel too overwhelming and introduces readers to a complex history without being too overwhelming. Covering many gruesome bear attacks, the fight between being a guardian versus gardening national parks, controlled fires, the role of government, and public safety this book has enough to satisfy anyone: outdoor enthusiasts, wildlife lovers, and history buffs. A wonderful and enlightening read.

I received this book for free from Librarything in return for my honest, unbiased opinion.

Suzanne says

This book was hard for me to read, because it chronicles the history of the National Park Service through years of stupidly wanton destruction of national treasures (in this case, wildlife and wild lands) mostly due to misguided reasons and lack of knowledge, most often by well-intentioned people with vested interests in their own beliefs, and probably too-healthy egos. [Of course, we see the same thing today: too little cooperation, too little open-mindedness, too much politics, ego and greed.] But it's a well written, well researched, and knowledgeable history of the National Park Service into the mid-20th century, told in story form.

The violent death isn't really a big part of the story. The death and trial are somewhat reminiscent of Erik Larsen's works, which are always interesting and instructive. The death and trial are used as a literary convention to make what might otherwise be a drier history come alive. I thought it was an interesting (and effective) way to introduce the myriad of "players" or "characters" in this American Drama. And there are a LOT of them! (The photos section was a good one and very helpful though I did want a few more.) So there's a LOT of apparent scurrying down rabbit holes, as new "witnesses" are called to the stand, and that can be disconcerting or distracting. But overall there is a ton of information, along with excellent Notes at the end.

I have been privileged, thanks to an amazing friend, to stand on a sand bar among a half dozen grizzlies fishing for salmon. I live in black bear country and have had them on my deck and in my garage. I respect them. I admire them. I want them -- and all wildlife and lands -- to prosper. I know Man, humankind, is capable of dominion (as opposed to domination), to caring for the earth and its species, to the benefit of all of us and the planet, if we worked together toward that common mission. Given human nature with its ego and self-centeredness, I also know it will never happen. This book examines one partly-successful attempt. The attempt was flawed. But if we love this Earth and its inhabitants, and want it to continue, we should read and meditate upon the tensions of varying visions (to interfere or not) toward an ultimately common goal. How can we improve our working together toward common goals? (Personally, since mankind has "interfered" by invading wildlands with wild abandon and little concern or knowledge, I tend to come down on managing environments to some degree, but I'm willing to be convinced otherwise. I think the evidence indicates we should recreate the last most "natural" habitat -- in other words, stop trying to eradicate any aspect of a whole ecosystem and reintroduce as necessary to that ecosystem -- and then leave Nature to it as much as sensible. Or perhaps we need to look at "interfering" where our prior interferences have been decimating, destructive, death-dealing.)

I am eternally grateful for public lands and those who try to care for them properly. It will always be "a work in progress." Smith is a good writer. This is a complete story. It is, to me, mostly a sad story. But it is a valuable book which everyone should read.

Jules says

When I received this book, I originally thought that it was going to be about the trial regarding the bear attacks in Yellowstone. I thought to myself, "Anyone who enters Yellowstone should realize that they are entering a wilderness with bears; therefore, a bear attack is a real possibility and a risk. How can someone place blame on the National Park Service?" It never occurred to me that the mismanagement of the bears could have played a role in the attacks. But what does that mean? Isn't a national park an area dedicated to protecting the land and the animals from human influence? How do we control a bear's behavior? Should we control a bear's behavior? So many questions! This book takes you through the history of Yellowstone and the events, persons, and decisions preceding the fatal bear attacks.

To my surprise, the book is not limited to the bears in Yellowstone. It also refers to other debatable issues such as what to do about the effects of the loss of wolves. We even step outside of the Yellowstone boundaries to visit the problems in Yosemite, the Tetons, and the Everglades. The underlying question always being, now that humans have influenced the environment of the national parks, how do we fix it? Do we try to manipulate the environment to get it "back on track", or do we cross our fingers and hope that nature will fix itself?

It's been 2 weeks since I've finished reading this book, but it is still on my mind. I never realized how much work was involved in running the national parks, and how one decision can change the course of...well, everything. Any book that has completely changed my point of view deserves 5 stars!

I received this book for free through a Goodreads Giveaway.
