

**Shaping the Sierra:
Nature, Culture and Conflict in
the Changing West**

Timothy P. Duane. 1999. Berkeley and
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For many Californians, the Sierra Nevada range is a giant playground, a convenient short-term get-away from the pressures of urban living. Most urban Californians know little of the region beyond the ski slopes of the Tahoe basin, the Mammoth Lakes and the granite cliffs of Yosemite Valley. And yet the Sierra Nevada has been the setting for some of the most pivotal developments in California's history. It is also the source of what is arguably the state's most valuable resource, water. To a large extent, the fate of the Sierra is the fate of California.

While the title of Duane's book is *Shaping the Sierra*, its introductory chapter illustrates how the Sierra Nevada has shaped California's culture, climate, and economy. Simultaneously, the Sierra region itself has been shaped and altered by human intervention, first through resource extraction (mining, logging, diversion of water) and increasingly through residential development and tourism. *Shaping the Sierra* explores the phenomena driving recent population growth in the Sierra and the consequences of this growth. This book is a powerful demonstration of planning's interdisciplinary reach. Drawing upon economics, demographics, ecology, history, constitutional law, political science, popular culture, planning theory, and personal experience, Duane crafts a multi-faceted picture of the Sierra region and the dynamic relationship between nature and culture.

Duane begins by exploring the changing demographics of the region and the establishment of "exurbia" in the Sierra. He identifies two waves of recent ex-urban migration to the Sierra. The first occurred during the seventies and was comprised of people influenced by the "Back to the Land" movement. This group moved to the Sierra because of a desire to interact with nature on a daily basis and included many environmentalists. Many in this group made substantial financial sacrifices to live their dream. The second and probably larger wave began in the eighties. This group moved not so much "to" the Sierra as

“from” the perceived problems of urban living: crime, pollution, traffic congestion, high land prices, and, arguably, large minority populations. This group is generally higher income than the previous wave of immigrants, and certainly wealthier on average than the pre-existing residents of the region. But it shares a similar racial background, making the Sierra region one of the most racially homogeneous in the state—more than 90% white. This is remarkable in a state as ethnically and racially diverse as California.

These changes have brought with them cultural conflict between newcomers and old-timers over land-use and management. Newcomers and the urban constituencies from which they emerged often believe in strong environmental legislation to protect the aesthetic qualities and land values of their new homes. These values are commonly perceived as interfering with the ability of old-timers to earn a living in traditional extractive industries. The influx of newcomers may bring with it its own negative environmental consequences. Increased population may result in traffic congestion, crime, pollution, and destruction of the social fabric of community in rural areas. Rising housing costs may push out pre-existing lower income residents. Newcomers may move to rural areas only to find that they have destroyed those very values they sought by migrating to exurbia.

The changing demographics of the area have resulted in revolutionary economic changes as well. Duane traces how traditional economic analyses overstate the importance of extractive industries in the region by focusing only on job creation. Such analyses do not capture the complex dynamics of the emerging exurban use patterns in which much of the income spurring economic activity comes from outside the region in the form of commuter paychecks and transfer payments to retirees. Add to this the income from tourism, and it becomes readily apparent that the most important engine driving economic growth in the Sierra is based upon amenities (environmental quality) rather than commodities (natural resources).

This is an important point in Duane’s overall analysis leading him to conclude that economic development in the Sierra is not in conflict with environmental quality, but rather nearly wholly dependent upon it. As Duane notes, it is not environmental regulation that has destroyed jobs in the traditional extractive industries, it is the automation of the extraction processes and the acquisition of small local companies by larger national and international conglomerates that have cost the most jobs. Without moving to a new economic base—the wave of new migrants may present interesting opportunities to do so—the economic future of the Sierra is indeed bleak. The Sierra region is thus rapidly

transitioning from a “landscape of production” to a “landscape of consumption.”

In the final chapter, “Reinhabiting the West,” Duane’s solutions to the conflicts of the Sierra, both cultural and environmental, have to do with a fusion of community politics and environmental values. He examines bioregionalism, a movement that seeks to rethink institutional and cultural boundaries to fit ecological boundaries. Appropriate boundaries might be a watershed or a particular ecosystem. Acknowledgment of place is important for a reconfiguration of human interaction that allows for communities to effectively plan and manage their relationship to their natural setting. Duane draws on Elinor Ostrom’s work on the management of common pool resources in his proposals for sustainable development in the Sierra. Successfully managed common pool resources are dependent upon a high degree of cooperation between individuals using these resources. This sort of cooperation necessitates communities of relatively small size and stability so that individuals come to know and depend upon one another. Another necessary precondition for successful management of a common pool resource is clearly defined boundaries. This specifically place and community-based philosophy may be necessary if human beings are to live harmoniously within their respective communities and maintain the viability of the land on which they depend. As Duane notes in closing, “We can no longer presume to conquer the western landscape, extracting Nature’s riches before moving on to another place; instead we must choose to reinhabit the landscape as if we and our descendants will stay.”

This final chapter of the book is both vital and problematic. Duane is searching for a solution that will preserve both the character and composition of rural communities and the qualities of relation and reciprocity that reside there, and the environmental integrity of the Sierra. However, it is hard to conceptualize how the values of bioregionalism can be promulgated beyond the confines of the “Back to the Land” movement. What will make the exurban commuters who choose to live in a gated community want to connect with the very neighbors from whom they were escaping? How can this kind of ethic take hold in places such as Quincy, where the timber industry still rules the landscape and extractive industry jobs provide a traditional sense of pride and identity? How can politicians and communities be persuaded to accept new boundaries not delineated by tradition and politics? Duane himself acknowledges the difficulty in making this transition. He notes in a much earlier chapter that calls for local control in the Sierras are more likely to come from the “Wise Use” movement than

the environmentalist community. Local politics are generally still dominated by extractive industries. The distribution of power, as he notes, is of major importance in all efforts to institute a local process of consensus building that will reduce conflict over land use and management. Part of the answer Duane envisions can be found in the area of communicative rationality. Duane, however, provides no blueprint. The problem is, as always, how to get to there from here.

Shaping the Sierra is a remarkably comprehensive exploration of a region. Duane's status as a long-term resident of the Sierra foothills adds depth to his analysis. This personal perspective on the land and its politics makes the book a pleasure to read. At the same time, *Shaping the Sierra* is packed full of information and analyses. It is particularly valuable in that it applies a planner's perspective to an area more closely associated with the work of poets and environmentalist philosophers. While Duane's call for bioregionalism is visionary and therefore perhaps necessarily vague, he provides a number of practical approaches to specific exurban planning problems throughout the book. While the book focuses on the Sierra Nevada range in California, its insights are relevant to other areas undergoing similar changes. This is the sort of book that one hangs onto and turns to again and again for ideas and vital information.