

Manifest Destiny and its Legacy in the American West

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As climate change continues to alter the natural world, humanity has begun to see the effects of the attitudes and beliefs people have traditionally held towards the environment. Despite conservation and sustainability becoming increasingly prominent concerns throughout society, the natural environment has continued to be abused and ripped off its inherent beauty by humans.

Although National and State Parks across the United States have preserved many of the natural wonders, people have started to explore the landscape outside of marked locations. Through these explorations, humans have begun to recognize the destruction of the natural environment caused by the human hand. While humans continue to ravage the earth for selfish gain, the impacts of past transgressions have come to create irreversible changes to the landscape. In the nineteenth century, Manifest Destiny was a driving factor in the belief that nature is meant for human's personal exploitation and expansion. Today, the legacy of the ideals promoted by Manifest Destiny has continued to inspire American's mistreatment of the natural environment. Over the course of history, and even in today's modern age, people in the United States have consistently viewed the world and its natural resources as humanity's inherent birthright and not as something to coexist alongside. Photographers across generations in the United States have documented the impact of human development on the natural landscapes and provide a unique perspective on the damages being done. In the face of an impending global environmental crisis it is essential that Americans learn from their past mistakes and take responsibility for the harm that has been caused due to the belief that the natural world is there to be exploited.

Images of the United States landscape have traditionally presented the natural world in a way that suggests that the landscape is there to benefit humans. Inspired by Manifest Destiny, these images utilize techniques such as high viewpoints to convey human dominance over the land. This style was mainly utilized during the nineteenth century, but it has continued to influence artists throughout the past century. Ansel Adams is one such artist; his photography style was heavily influenced by that of early landscape photography. As an environmentalist, his images were also influenced by his desire to preserve the natural landscape. His images helped establish the creation of national parks in the United States. Deborah Bright claims that "the active participation of government and private enterprise, wilderness scenery became good business." Images that suggest the landscape is there for humans to take over effectively commoditize the natural environment. These images are more insidious in their reference to Manifest Destiny. By comparing them to other landscape images, it becomes clear that they promote the ideals of Manifest Destiny and have helped rationalize the destruction and exploitation of the natural landscape.

Human innovation has always been the driving force for increasing the standard of living for all people, however, it has also been the cause of much of the destruction plaguing the natural world. A combination of poor farming techniques that were guided by the ideals of Manifest Destiny and a prolonged period of dryness resulted in the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. Stretching "over 50 million acres," the Dust Bowl "afflicted about 75 percent of the country" and forced many farmers out west in the hopes of finding viable land (Richardson, 60) During this era, also known as the Great Depression, people across the world struggled to survive. To spark job

growth and economic revival, the United States government undertook many massive work projects. Hired by the Farm Security Administration (FSA) to document the effects of the Great Depression on rural communities, Russell Lee captured the effects of these work projects on the natural environment. Lee's documentary photography style served to depict the changes caused by humanity's development and his images have played a large part in how people perceive the time period. (Swensen) Lee's photography reveals a vivid depiction of how infrastructure began to overtake nature and how the legacy of Manifest Destiny inspired people to believe that the natural landscape was theirs to alter.

More recently, photographers have begun to push back against the traditional style of landscape photography by avoiding taking images of aesthetic, untouched landscapes. These images present the viewer with the fact that the landscape has in fact been irrevocably altered and affected by humans. In his *Desert Cantos* series, Richard Misrach captures the destruction of the landscape caused by military testing sites, which are views typically hidden from the public eye. His photographs vividly reveal the true impact of human innovation on the natural world through a captivating, but chaotic, beauty. Similar to Adams, Misrach is both a photographer and political activist who created his own style of "cultural landscape photography." (Sanders) Instead of creating his style of landscape photography, Mark Klett utilizes traditional styles of landscape photography that were inspired by Manifest Destiny, to call attention to the destruction of the natural world. The photos in his series, *Revealing Territory*, were "made to reference the nineteenth-century survey photographs of Timothy O'Sullivan and William Henry Jackson in a kind of updated survey of the twentieth century." (Mark Klett Photography) Unlike the nineteenth-century survey images that depicted the landscape as void of humans, but ready for their taking, Klett's images include evidence of humans in nature. Images like Klett's and Misrach's call attention to the ways in which humans have occupied and utilized the land, rather than ignore it like their predecessors. These images effectively challenge the viewer to confront Manifest Destiny and suggest that it is time for America to break free from its legacy.

As the past begins to fade from memory, people are left with the photographs and knowledge of a previous era. Americans' previous recklessness in being stewards of nature has created a future overwhelmed by the effects of the mistakes of the past. Climate change has already caused irreversible damage across the globe and will continue to do so if humanity continues to treat nature with the same contempt as did past generations. The inhabitants of the United States have long been driven by Manifest Destiny and that belief that nature is meant for human exploitation. Photographers of the past offer current generations a unique insight into the mistakes and damages done to the environment, which plague North America. For the sake of future generations, Americans must take responsibility for their past mistakes and work towards creating a future that is in harmony with nature.

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