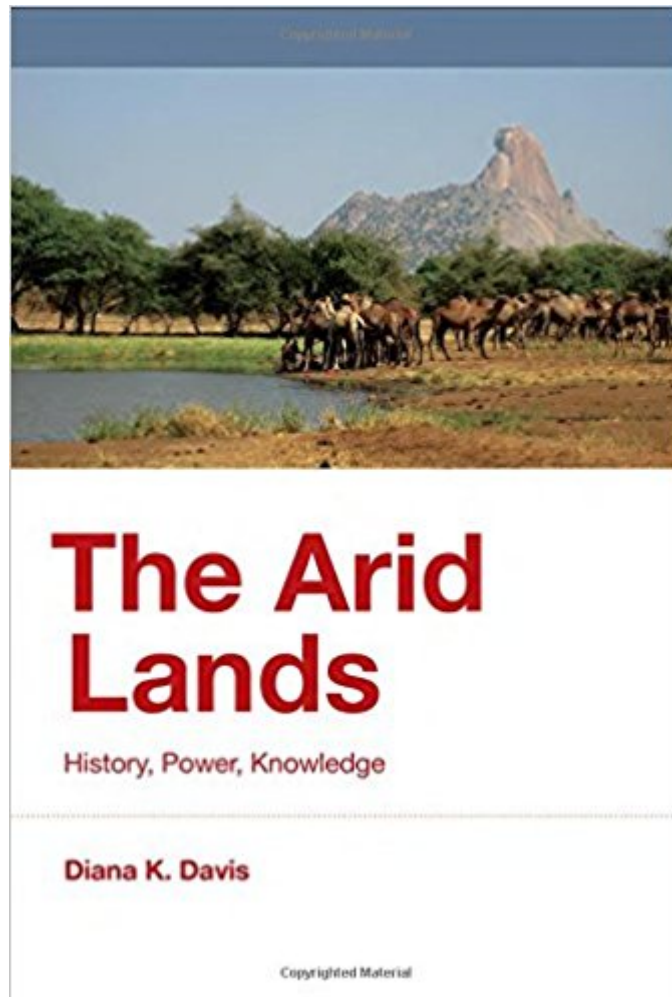


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The Arid Lands: History, Power, Knowledge (History For A Sustainable Future)



Synopsis

Deserts are commonly imagined as barren, defiled, worthless places, wastelands in need of development. This understanding has fueled extensive anti-desertification efforts -- a multimillion-dollar global campaign driven by perceptions of a looming crisis. In this book, Diana Davis argues that estimates of desertification have been significantly exaggerated and that deserts and drylands -- which constitute about 41% of the earth's landmass -- are actually resilient and biodiverse environments in which a great many indigenous people have long lived sustainably. Meanwhile, contemporary arid lands development programs and anti-desertification efforts have met with little success. As Davis explains, these environments are not governed by the equilibrium ecological dynamics that apply in most other regions. Davis shows that our notion of the arid lands as wastelands derives largely from politically motivated Anglo-European colonial assumptions that these regions had been laid waste by "traditional" uses of the land. Unfortunately, such assumptions still frequently inform policy. Drawing on political ecology and environmental history, Davis traces changes in our understanding of deserts, from the benign views of the classical era to Christian associations of the desert with sinful activities to later (neo)colonial assumptions of destruction. She further explains how our thinking about deserts is problematically related to our conceptions of forests and desiccation. Davis concludes that a new understanding of the arid lands as healthy, natural, but variable ecosystems that do not necessarily need improvement or development will facilitate a more sustainable future for the world's magnificent drylands.

Book Information

Series: History for a Sustainable Future

Hardcover: 296 pages

Publisher: The MIT Press (April 1, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0262034522

ISBN-13: 978-0262034524

Product Dimensions: 5.4 x 0.7 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 starsÂ Â See all reviewsÂ (2 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #1,130,771 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #60 inÂ Books > Science & Math > Nature & Ecology > Ecosystems > Deserts #2519 inÂ Books > Engineering & Transportation > Engineering > Civil & Environmental > Environmental #3310 inÂ Books > Science & Math >

Customer Reviews

This is a good book but it may appeal to a small readership. It's a sort of academic argument aimed at other specialists in arid lands, I think, although the science is accessible. The argument is based in a revisionist approach best described by some examples. Davis claims that the dominant view of arid lands has for centuries been that arid lands represent degraded land, with the indigenous people the usual culprit. That view could be just a view, but it has led to many decades of mistaken policies. These policy issues include massive intervention into local cultures, s***ting down migrants and movement of their livestock, which degraded large numbers of people and is still operative. Another policy is the planting of shelterbelts of trees, which Davis says have not helped much and in some cases caused more problems, such as deep-rooted trees depleting the water table. Another common assumption is that arid lands were once forests and could eventually be reclaimed by developing new forests--a massive error, Davis claims (her claims are based on studies, logic and other analyses, as far as I can tell backing her claims up quite well). Davis connects bits of history in intriguing ways. She says that the areas of European common lands came to be seen as wastes and were taken up by people with the means to develop them, neglecting the role the commons played in the lives of common people--firewood, grazing, sometimes game. She sees a connection with European empire building, justifying itself by visualizing turning wastes into edens. She connects this with the American policies in the Southwest (largely against non-Anglos and again aimed at redeeming "waste" land) and these with some British policies in India. She's convincing. She also notes that some governments of now independent former colonies continue such policies and programs as a means of exercising more complete control. Davis claims that the prevailing view of desertification is too drastic, that there is really not much of it occurring and that the real issue is policies and programs based on old assumptions that are outdated and harmful in social, economic and environmental terms.

An extremely well researched book, informatively and cogently undermining many assumptions I had about the arid lands. For all of the persuasiveness of the writing, it lacks scientific analysis, leading to a narrative which is grounded in a fair degree of dogma - exactly what Davis tries to polemicise in the first place.

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