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A Great Aridness: Climate Change and the Future of American Southwest

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A Great Aridness: Climate Change and the Future of the American Southwest by William deBuys (Oxford University Press; 353 pages; 2011)

Hotter. Drier. Faster. These themes permeate William deBuys' vision of the potential damaging effects of climate change on the Southwest in *A Great Aridness: Climate Change and the Future of the American Southwest*. According to Jonathan Overpeck, a climate scientist, "[c]limate change . . . will produce winners and losers, and 'in the Southwest we're going to be losers. There's no doubt.'" It is around this idea that deBuys arranges his accounts of the region's natural history, focusing on three simple themes: large events have multiple causes; the actions of humans contribute more to the process than the outcome; and the ability of humans to adapt to variability in the environment is vast. Although deBuys paints a grim portrait of the devastating consequences of climate change, his work is an earnest call for a greater understanding of how individual citizens interact with the environment. He argues for a collective acknowledgement of the need to address issues in the Southwest with an attitude of sustainability, assurance, and resiliency.

DeBuys uses history and transcription of the narratives of scientists on the front lines to involve others in conscious conservation. He is a gifted storyteller who demystifies the science of climate change, conveying its harsh reality in a straightforward and palatable way. *A Great Aridness* is the written product of a 2008 Guggenheim fellowship, and many years of living in the Southwest studying conservation efforts.

The opening lines of *A Great Aridness* are ominous, as deBuys describes the murder of Lorenzo Hubbell's uncle at a trading post in Cedar Springs, Arizona. The subsequent capture of the killers was the work of diligent Navajo trackers using an understanding of the intimacies and interactions of the surrounding environment. Though this language of interdependency is lost in the modern era, deBuys uses this narrative to introduce his study of the contemporary "trackers" and leaders of today in the field of climatology. Climatologists study the weather and environment much like the Navajo trackers, piecing together measurements to compile systems of information that inform hypotheses about climate change.

DeBuys opens his exploration in the dusty, abandoned ruins of the Sand Canyon Pueblo in southwestern Colorado, whose archeological map spins a tale of drought, famine, and death. In the gloomy conclusions of his study of the ruins, deBuys again reminds readers that nothing happens for just one reason. Given different circumstances, the story might have turned out differently, and deBuys continues to call for a greater understanding of the interdependency between the natural environment and human society as the key to adapting to climate

variability. The archeological remains of the Sand Canyon Pueblo convey multiple accounts of successful seasons of farming and devastating drought, indicating periods of high climate variability. The Pueblo seemed to be close to established success; however, a failure to adapt farming practices to climate variability, population growth, and extended periods of drought eventually led the people of Sand Canyon Pueblo to seek habitation elsewhere.

DeBuys spends the rest of the book illustrating how the fate of Sand Canyon Pueblo may not be far from our own. Chapter Five, entitled, "Lava Falls: The Blood of Oasis Civilization," is an illustration of deBuys' observation that the actions of humans contribute more to the process of climate change than to the outcome. This is an astute observation, considering the history of the Colorado River and the Colorado River Compact of 1922. DeBuys attributes "the fatal mortgage" of the Compact to the fact that it was drafted during one of the wettest periods in 15 centuries. The language, based on unreliable gauges, was not sustainable, "[e]ven without worrying about evaporation, system waste, or environmental uses of water." The population of the Southwest continues to grow at a rapid rate, rendering the legal requirements of the documents unsustainable. DeBuys carefully reins in the numbers and explains that he is not trying to pin the blame upon any one set of persons. Instead, he is merely seeking to uncover how the Southwest arrived in this predicament in order to find sustainable, efficient solutions to remedy the situation. This view of conservation is both refreshing and encouraging. It stimulates people to shift their perspectives gradually and with a better understanding of the situation, rather than pushing people to rush out and purchase energy-saving light bulbs and solar panels out of sheer guilt for their contributions to climate change.

DeBuys highlights the capacity for human adaptation to the environment through technology, and emphasizes a recommitment to spreading information about climate change through a medium everyone can understand. The Southwest is on the frontlines of climate change, and the pervasive denial is the result of an overwhelming amount of scientific information that is not conducive to widespread understanding. DeBuys notes that if scientists were to make an effort to communicate climate change through manageable mediums, the culture of denial regarding climate change would melt away, allowing individuals to tackle the idea of what they *can* change with optimism and a sense of accomplishment.

As for the actual survival of the Southwest, DeBuys proposes a two-pronged attack of mitigation and adaptation. He calls for mitigation through a carbon tax to incentivize industry to clean up their act, and

adaptation through forest management, enhanced water security, and limiting excessive urban growth. In deBuys' view, the race of human adaptability versus climate change is much closer than previously thought, with solutions presenting themselves to those who ask the right questions and move past the pervasive denial of climate change.

DeBuys ends his work on an optimistic note, stating universal norms which we all know but seem to have forgotten in the face of tackling the vast project of climate change. He argues that kindness, discipline, and a commitment to work together toward a common goal go a long way toward collective problem solving. DeBuys' evaluation of the current state of the Southwest, although bleak, leaves little room for denial and cynicism, thereby fostering space for individuals to inspire change and influence action.

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