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DESERTS ON THE MARCH

By PAUL B. SEARS

Norman: University of Oklahoma Press. 1980. Pp. 264.

To a shocking extent, deserts are man-made; world-wide, their area increases by one South Carolina per year. Professor Sears explained the desertification process better than anyone else in the first edition of this book in 1935. Conservation measures followed, and in the 1947 edition the author said that, in the United States at least, the deserts were in retreat.

Alas! The succeeding thirty years have brought a reversal of sound husbandry practices and new expansion of desert or near-desert. The high price of grains in the seventies led the government to encourage farmers to cut down the windbreak tree belts planted in the thirties. Intensive crop farming brings short-term gains at the price of long-term soil losses. Grasslands, which Sears identifies as the bonds of a conservative agricultural investment program, are plowed up to make way for cereal grains (the speculative stocks). Weather varies. Disaster follows unwise speculation in cereals. The overstressed agriculture ratchets down to ruin. To expand farming operations based on the availability of fossil water is to base the future on sand (which is more than a figure of speech).

Deserts on the March, a fine science popularization, is now a classic. After forty-five years its essential points are as valid as ever; the up-dating required for the new edition was in secondary matters only. The new examples emphasize both the timeliness and the timelessness of the message.

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