

*Book Review***Book Review: Bourgon, L. *Tree Thieves: Crime and Survival in North America's Woods*; Little Brown Spark: New York, NY, USA, 2022; ISBN: 978-0316497442****Jerry A. Griffith**

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When considering individuals who illegally harvest trees from public lands, author Lyndsie Bourgon “wonder(s) how someone who lives surrounded by the crushing beauty of a redwood forest can simultaneously love it and kill it.” In her insightful examination of the often-hidden world of environmental crime and poaching (of trees, mainly), *Tree Thieves*, Lyndsie Bourgon guides readers deep inside North America’s forests. The book engrossed this reader as she explores the intricate web of illegal logging and poaching and the struggle for survival in the midst of changing land use policies and a changing environment. Bourgon’s prose reads like a crime novel, but the characters are not law enforcement or hardened criminals, but rather ordinary people driven by desperation or a desire for monetary gain from the surrounding land resources. The author skillfully stitches their stories together and describes the complicated relationship between individuals, society and nature. It is a nuanced story, depicting the main characters as neither heroes nor pure villains. The book provides an example of the human–environment tradition of geography, and both scholars in this field and laypersons interested in conservation and the environment can gain much by reading it.

The book focuses on tree poaching from national and provincial parks in the Pacific Northwest of the U.S. and Canada, and there are three dendritically named sections: (1) Roots, (2) Trunk, and (3) Canopy. As most people associate poaching with animals, Bourgon provides supporting statistics in the first “Roots” section, showing that illegal harvesting of trees is a major problem worldwide and in most of the U.S. National Forests. Getting to the “roots” of the crimes is where Bourgon and this book excel. She notes that “this is explained by the impacts of economics, land use policy and the sociology of rural communities”. She further details the “trickle-down effects of environmental and economic policies that disregard and marginalize the working-class people who not only live among the trees but rely on them to survive”. It is in this section that Bourgon provides an overview of environmental history and land use policy, especially in the forests of the Pacific Northwest, and how it created the divide between the competing philosophies of preservationists and utilitarians.

Among the most detailed stories discussed in the book are the stories about the economically (and socially) depressed town of the far northern California town of Orick, located near Redwood National and State Parks. She discusses the impact of the creation of the National Park and how that would change not only the geography of the area but the lives and livelihoods of the local residents. What happened here set the stage for the so-called timber wars of the 1980s and 1990s in the Pacific Northwest in the US and Canada. She discusses how this was the precedent for the federal government annexing private land while not adequately accounting for the fallout on the local communities. All of this sowed the seeds of chronic unemployment, housing decline and anti-establishment sentiment in the town, for which any gains from tourism were not able to counter.

Part II (“Trunk”) of the book mixes some ecology (such as describing the valuable burls on the tree) with the stories of the people, and the cat and mouse games played by



Citation: Griffith, J.A. Book Review: Bourgon, L. *Tree Thieves: Crime and Survival in North America's Woods*; Little Brown Spark: New York, NY, USA, 2022; ISBN: 978-0316497442. *Land* **2024**, *13*, 590. <https://doi.org/10.3390/land13050590>

Academic Editor: Hossein Azadi

Received: 10 April 2024

Accepted: 25 April 2024

Published: 29 April 2024



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the local poachers and the park service rangers. The book makes the connections between unemployment and drugs personal, which plays into the locals and the park rangers developing an adversarial relationship.

Part III (Canopy) delves into the science of determining where illegally harvested wood products come from. This section features the work of US Forest Service (USFS) Research Geneticist Richard Cronn and how techniques developed by his lab can match, in some cases, wood of illegally harvested products with actual stumps in the woods. This will create an array of DNA samples that can show where a tree has grown, determined by the DNA of trees around it. They can achieve precision to within a location of 1–10 km. They use this spatially informative genetic variation to design DNA fingerprinting tests that enable land managers and law enforcement to evaluate the legality of domestic and international wood products.

However, this is not an overly technical book, and she succinctly summarizes how the process works. Cronn and his team study the DNA profiles of certain tree species throughout their ecological range and map out how a species' DNA evolves across geography and climate. The collected DNA reference library will also be used for ecological management, such as for adapting to climate change, and guide breeding methods and plant selections that result in broadly adapted trees that contribute to resilient forest communities at present and in the future. To obtain these samples, the USFS partners with citizen scientist volunteers, organized by the non-profit group Adventure Scientists, who then collect hundreds of samples covering a broad geography.

The final chapters seem a bit like a coda to the main portions of the book, briefly describing poaching around the world and in the Amazon, and how poaching can impact the ecology of these regions. This is not the strength of the book, which is the character-driven study of the people involved in poaching, as she embedded herself in the community over a length of time. The trust that she created by embedding herself into the lives of the poachers and sharing the ethical dilemmas that they and the law enforcement figures faced is admirable. This is what made *Tree Thieves* a pleasure to read. It should be of great interest to those interested in the themes of land use policy impacts, human–nature relationships, identity and belonging, community and conflict, resilience and adaptation, and power and politics. She concludes her story with an apt statement, “separating nature from human use has never kept it safe”.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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