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Review: Nature Noir: A Park Ranger's Patrol in the Sierra

By Jordan Fisher Smith

Reviewed by [Ryder W. Miller](#)
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Jordan Fisher Smith. *Nature Noir: A Park Ranger's Patrol in the Sierra*. New York: Mariner Books, 2005. 216 pp. ISBN:0-618-71195-3 \$US13.95.

Jordan Fisher Smith, a former California State Law Enforcement Ranger who served for fourteen years, tells of his experiences at the Auburn State Recreation Area, a landscape in the Sierras designated to be dammed and later saved and restored. The author's job was a tough one as a law enforcement ranger at the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation site in Sierra river country. Trails were sometimes difficult, and he had to work in hot and dusty weather, as Smith recounts in this surprisingly uplifting story.

Smith seeks to explore the question of "how do people behave in a condemned landscape?" For more than a generation the river that ran through the Auburn State Recreation Area was slated to become the Auburn Dam, but those actions were halted by politics in Washington, D.C. Unlike Edward Abbey, who was also a park ranger, Smith does not suggest that projects like the proposed dam should be torn down, but he does recount living in the shadow of the Reclamation Departments plans. *Nature Noir* captures the bigger picture. Though there are vignettes about law enforcement, and some shady characters, they do not take up the whole book: there is also Gold Rush history, experiences in nature, observations, philosophy, and reflections. The author does object to the notion that because pure or pristine nature does not exist anymore, there is no need to defend wild places, writing:

"While it may be true that human effects are everywhere, it is a matter of degree, and we are now at a critical juncture in history when we must take great pains to ensure the survival of those landscapes and species that have not already been massively manipulated.... For me, the bedrock of reality is my affection for wild nature, and I take exception to the idea that nature is nothing more than a cultural construction. " (p. 188)

This is not a police drama, and unlike much noir fare is not edge-of-the-seat reading, but Smith does make known the difficult and dark job facing Park Service law enforcement agents who are paid too little and get hurt more than is widely known. Smith's experiences, concerning criminals he encountered over the years, unsolved crimes, environmental politics, mountain lion attacks, dangerous rivers, and Lyme disease, do not dampen

his appreciation for nature and those who protect wilderness. There are no theories or accounting of man's dark or wild dangerous nature here, or darkness in nature. Instead Fisher is grateful for his nature experiences and to his colleagues, and offers his "thanks to every ranger I ever worked with, the many more I did not, and those who follow me. You continue to stand in defense of the sweetest and most hopeful places I know: the world's national, provincial, and state parks and wildernesses." (p. 216)

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Ryder W. Miller, Freelance environmental and science reporter who has been published in Sierra Magazine, California Coast & Ocean, California Wild, and Hydrosphere.