

New Ways to View Complex Landscapes: A Book Review of the Atlas of Yellowstone

Amanda Obery¹

Michael Brody¹

¹Montana State University
Department of Education
222 Reid Hall P.O. Box 172880
Bozeman, MT 59717-2880

“The only thing the national parks and other wildlands offer humans is education, inspiration, and wonder” (John D. Varley as cited in Marcus (2012), pp.xx-xxi).

Most of us have heard of Yellowstone National Park, maybe most of have visited it at sometime in our lives. However, few of us have taken that experience and interest to the level of the Yellowstone Ecosystem. Now all world travelers, mountain ecosystem enthusiasts and scientist have a collection of the natural, social and cultural aspects of the Yellowstone ecosystem that combine into one of the quintessential ecosystems on Earth. The Atlas of Yellowstone provides the depth and scope to more fully understand this unique northern Rocky Mountain ecosystem.

In accordance with the increase of available technologies and data sources, the collaborators and editors of the atlas sought to synthesize the information available on the oldest National Park, Yellowstone, for the public as well as the scientific community. To continue in the path of the editors, this review is meant to increase awareness of the wealth of knowledge with connections to environmental education (EE) presented and to continue to bridge the gap between scientific research and public understanding. As the world’s first National Park, Yellowstone represents a worldwide shift to put importance and value on a region, its natural beauty and complexity, arguably this goal is still a major focus of EE.

Over the past ten years, collaborators of the Atlas have sought to undertake the task of creating a comprehensive view of the Yellowstone region, including both Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Park areas. Yet, as with any atlas, interpretation of the data remains a deciding factor in the overall message to the readers. Though the Atlas does go to great lengths to include a variety of experts in a diverse array of fields, often the stories untold or the connections unmade ultimately set a tone for the text. The collaborators do highlight the need for an additional volume to include information that due to varied circumstances did not make the publication deadline such as “Environmental Quality,” and “Vegetation Change.” However, despite these issues, the Atlas of Yellowstone does provide a wealth of information to the public and leaves many critical conclusions concerning human impact and environmental change to the reader.

The Atlas is setup as page pairs in five sections: 1) “Geographic Setting;” 2) “Human Geography;” 3) “Physical Geography;” 4) “Wildlife;” and 5) “Reference Maps.” The editors sought to share four overarching geographic themes in the sections: 1) “Yellowstone is connected;” 2) “Yellowstone is dynamic;” 3) “Interaction of humans and nature;” and 4) “Importance of Yellowstone” (pg. 252).

The first and last sections of the book, Geographic Setting and Reference Maps, are similar as they underscore the importance of the location of Yellowstone National Park. From road maps to detailed political and historic boundaries, these pages begin to tell the story of Yellowstone through its location between several mountain ranges. Included in the introduction is a history of National Parks, which focuses in on the impact that Yellowstone as a National Park had on the entire world, setting off a global wave of National Park creation.

Presenting the Human Geography, historical and infrastructure of the Park, prior to the geologic history may indicate a belief of the editors to show the impacts humans have had on the area as being more critical than the geologic setting. Maps detailing the Native American culture and the art created in Yellowstone quickly give way to images and charts displaying the road creation and acreage developed in the later 1800's into the 20th century. Though no conclusions are drawn by the authors, the readers leave the Human Geography section not with images of the beautiful historic and cultural connections Yellowstone has but with charts about the religious and political majorities in the surrounding areas.

The Atlas of Yellowstone provides a unique approach to the understanding of a geographic location. Given the history and sheer importance of the Yellowstone region, it seems fitting to utilize this region when pioneering in the comprehensive mapping of the geologic, human and physical characteristics, as well as the keystone species indicative of the region. While some connections between and within these factors are made, such as the inverse relationship between wolf and coyote populations, in providing the wealth of resources the authors enable readers to draw their own connections and conclusion about the past, present and future of the area. For example, while the authors make no statement to the effect, one could conclude given the mapping of the increase in the populations of counties surrounding the Yellowstone National Park and the decline in distribution of the sagebrush-steppe habitat, that they are inextricably linked.

Many of the maps have required decades, if not centuries, of data collection by leading scientists. Yet, the presentation of these maps enable the general public to have a better understanding of the area through well labeled, easy to read legends and clear, but not simplified, overviews and explanations. Overall, given the highly detailed, range, and in-depth nature of the maps, The Atlas of Yellowstone has provided a new standard for how useful atlas's can be when understanding a diverse location. Finally, in highlighting the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem in such a prominent manner, it's hard not to be intrigued to learn more or visit the park to experience the region.

References

Marcus, A. M., Meacham, J. E., Rodman, A. W., & Steingisser, A. Y. (2012). *Atlas of yellowstone* (S. Allan & R. West Eds.). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.