



Engineering Eden: The True Story of a Violent Death, a Trial, and the Fight over Controlling Nature

Jordan Fisher Smith

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The fascinating story of a trial that opened a window onto the century-long battle to control nature in the national parks.

When twenty-five-year-old Harry Walker was killed by a bear in Yellowstone Park in 1972, the civil trial prompted by his death became a proxy for bigger questions about American wilderness management that had been boiling for a century. At immediate issue was whether the Park Service should have done more to keep bears away from humans, but what was revealed as the trial unfolded was just how fruitless our efforts to regulate nature in the parks had always been. The proceedings drew to the witness stand some of the most important figures in twentieth century wilderness management, including the eminent zoologist A. Starker Leopold, who had produced a landmark conservationist document in the 1950s, and all-American twin researchers John and Frank Craighead, who ran groundbreaking bear studies at Yellowstone. Their testimony would help decide whether the government owed the Walker family restitution for Harry's death, but it would also illuminate decades of patchwork efforts to preserve an idea of nature that had never existed in the first place.

In this remarkable excavation of American environmental history, nature writer and former park ranger Jordan Fisher Smith uses Harry Walker's story to tell the larger narrative of the futile, sometimes fatal, attempts to remake wilderness in the name of preserving it. Tracing a course from the founding of the national parks through the tangled twentieth-century growth of the conservationist movement, Smith gives the lie to the portrayal of national parks as Edenic wonderlands unspoiled until the arrival of Europeans, and shows how virtually every attempt to manage nature in the parks has only created cascading effects that require even more management. Moving across time and between Yellowstone, Yosemite, and Glacier national parks, *Engineering Eden* shows how efforts at wilderness management have always been undone by one fundamental problem--that the idea of what is "wild" dissolves as soon as we begin to examine it, leaving us with little framework to say what wilderness should look like and which human interventions are acceptable in trying to preserve it.

In the tradition of John McPhee's *The Control of Nature* and Alan Burdick's *Out of Eden*, Jordan Fisher Smith has produced a powerful work of popular science and environmental history, grappling with critical issues that we have even now yet to resolve.

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