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Citation

RANDLE, Sayd. Wages for climate stewardship?. (2022).

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Wages for Climate Stewardship?

January 2, 2022 • By [Sayd Randle](#)

Book review of *Climate Stewardship: Taking Collective Action to Protect California* by **ADINA MERENLENDER AND BRENDAN BUHLER**

IN 1996, environmental historian Richard White published an [essay](#) with a title borrowed from a pissed-off bumper sticker: “Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?” White used the frictions between loggers and spotted owl advocates in the Pacific Northwest to show readers exactly how US-based environmentalism had come to be seen as orthogonal to productive labor. “Work,” he asserted, is in fact “where we should begin” when we talk about environmentalism. Set aside idealized images of natural spaces as best suited for leisure, he counseled. It’s only “[i]n taking responsibility for our own lives and work, in unmasking the connections of our labor and nature’s labor, in giving up our hopeless fixation on purity,” that “we may ultimately find a way to break the borders that imprison nature as much as ourselves.”

Though they prefer other words for it — stewarding, volunteering, managing — Adina Merenlender and Brendan Buhler’s [Climate Stewardship: Taking Collective Action to Protect California](#) (University of California Press, 2021) is about environmental work. Over the course of seven compact chapters, each dedicated to a different landscape within the state, they outline how residents are laboring to adapt these environments to climate change and its emerging impacts — by thinning flammable undergrowth, for instance, and conducting controlled burns in mountain forests, or by restoring degraded coastal wetlands, removing invasive weeds from deserts, and planting community gardens in the cities of Southern California. Though the actions narrated here are often targeted at sites associated with recreation in the popular imagination (e.g., much of the desert weed-pulling is meant to preserve Joshua Tree National Park’s eponymous species), they are unquestionably forms of work, as are community organizing and local-scale advocacy.

The authors are right to point out that many solutions rely heavily on what White calls “nature’s labor,” more commonly known as ecosystem services — in other words, the “work” of plants, soils, streams, and wetlands in purifying air and water and sequestering carbon. Both agricultural and sylvan landscapes can absorb and store atmospheric carbon in soils and plants. Animals also have a cameo role in the adaptation labor force, as the authors note, grazing down agricultural cover crops that have been planted

to help sequester carbon in the soil. Such examples, and there are many more, help clarify the differences between the authors' pragmatic vision for the state's environmental future, which involves the work of coordinating umpteen forms of labor, and more traditional versions of environmental protection à la John Muir, grounded in aesthetics or romanticized notions of wilderness. The prettiness of the traditional version is certainly nice, as is using that prettiness to move people, but it's the nitty-gritty nonglamorous and certainly nonromantic work involved in coordinated management of the land that is key.

A granular account like Merenlender and Buhler's is considerably more evocative than, say, a generic string of record-high temperatures. The book's careful portrait of the harms mostly locked in due to the fossil fuels already burned (thanks, Exxon et al.) is helpful, too, as is the painstaking detail of its descriptions of exactly how an altered climate will affect, say, the Sierra Nevada snowpack and the North Coast's kelp forests. The authors successfully evoke, for example, the threat of marine heatwaves, likely to recur with greater frequency in the decades ahead, when they have a longtime diver describe the impact of the "blob of stagnant warm water" that persisted offshore and devastated the state's bull kelp forests in 2014. "The rocks," he recounts, "which are usually covered with all kinds of life became a moonscape down there. Nowadays in some of the areas I have been diving for years, all you see is a bunch of urchins..."

Such granularity enables the authors to present climate change as a set of localized environmental challenges with equally localized context-specific solutions or interventions. A global-scale crisis may be a daunting hydra-headed problem, but there are, they show, small, actionable measures that individuals can take to address it. Climate change is not just a monolithic existential threat, in other words.

Notably, however, much of the human climate stewardship work narrated here, while skilled and labor-intensive, is explicitly disconnected from livelihoods. For instance, fourth graders replant wetland vegetation as a class activity in the North Bay while Plumas County residents train and volunteer to participate in local prescribed-burn operations. Through the voices of participants, who tend to highlight the emotional and social satisfaction they get from their exertions, readers are introduced to a wide range of community groups and initiatives to which they might offer their own talents and time. Presenting these "stewards" as approachable, and indeed as people readers might want to emulate, is central to the authors' purpose. As they explain in the preface, Merenlender and Buhler see such "collective action" as both the best way to solve the climate crisis and the only meaningful antidote to climate-related despair: "Connecting with others on actions that transcend self is also a path to joy, and without joy

it's hard to have hope.” They're writing against the politics of individual consumption inherent in metrics like the carbon footprint. But to riff on the bumper sticker: why aren't more people able to do *this* work for a living? The answer to that question is obvious (there are few paying jobs in this line of work) and not addressed in much depth. The authors do gesture vaguely toward political economy a few times, perfunctorily rejecting “a societal model that requires endless growth” and championing “regenerative economies,” but they don't advance a structural critique of the economic arrangements that have spawned the climate crisis. Tellingly, the word “capitalism” only enters the text on page 234 of 243, through the voice of a critical artist. And herein lies the unavoidable rub involved in dodging such structures to locate climate hope exclusively at the local scale: doing so obscures just how different things could be.

Others have attempted to sketch the contours of a world where climate stewardship is understood as something other than volunteer service, and the large-scale political economic shifts necessary to do so. An earlier book, *[A Planet to Win: Why We Need a Green New Deal](#)* (Verso, 2019), is an account of climate adaptation far more invested in rethinking economic arrangements in general and the revaluation of environmental labor in particular. Co-written by climate journalist Kate Aronoff and social scientists Alyssa Battistoni, Daniel Aldana Cohen, and Thea Riofrancos, the slim volume opens with a scenario set in 2027 — it chronicles the imagined aftermath of a hurricane that has walloped New Orleans. While the scene is grim, it's also crafted to inspire optimism, recounting how large-scale, federally funded wetland restoration along the Gulf Coast softened the storm's blow. Shortly after the waters recede, “hardy residents and unionized relief workers” are rebuilding roads, buildings, and power lines across the region, with the assistance of “conservation workers from around the country, trained in disaster relief and accustomed to bussing from one extreme weather hotspot to another.”

As this brief dose of speculative fiction suggests, *A Planet to Win* foregrounds the details of climate adaptation work, but, unlike *Climate Stewardship*, it is grounded in a vision that demands this work constitute the livelihoods of millions. To that end, the authors call for a federal jobs guarantee and a renewed, permanent version of the FDR's Civilian Conservation Corps, but with a difference. Unlike the New Deal-era CCC, which conscripted young men to work for limited stints and paltry wages, this version would provide long-term, well-paid employment and focus on ecological restoration and care labor, jobs available to all. Moving beyond popular tropes of former oilfield workers installing solar panels or wind turbines, the authors envision a sprawling workforce tasked with the exact sort of tree-planting and flammable-undergrowth-pruning work that Merenlender and Buhler narrate within the contemporary California

context. But in their vision, this labor provides a sense of hope, social connection, *and* the wages that people need to survive.

Thinking about wages is particularly urgent in the Golden State, where so many residents are struggling to keep up with the stratospheric cost of living. To put it in terms of time and work, a [2018 report](#) by the National Low Income Housing Coalition found that an employee compensated at the state's minimum wage would need to labor 119 hours per week to afford to rent a two-bedroom apartment at fair market rate. Such brutal numbers underline the problem with relying on unpaid volunteer work to power climate stewardship initiatives: many of those who grasp the urgency of the threats simply can't afford to labor for free, at least not at the scale that the unfolding crisis demands. Further, as *Climate Stewardship* details, many of the communities likely to suffer the worst effects of an altered climate are already grappling with the toxic legacies of environmental racism and injustice. In these places in particular, climate adaptation work deserves substantive public investment, ideally structured in a manner that allows residents to build livelihoods through participation-critical initiatives.

How might we get there? Enacting the sort of aggressive federal climate legislation outlined in *A Planet to Win* would obviously be a boon. But while we may pray for Joe Manchin to experience the sort of conversion that would make such a bill possible, there are opportunities to act at the state level. References to state programs and initiatives spearheading local adaptation work are in fact sprinkled throughout Merenlender and Buhler's account. Large-scale investments in such institutions could allow salaries to be attached to the work volunteers now do, thus expanding their reach and impact. A state-scale version, the California Conservation Corps (CCC), already exists. It now operates on a shoestring budget ([official motto](#): "Hard Work, Low Pay, Miserable Conditions and More!"), but pouring money into a dramatic expansion, grounded in long-term contracts and livable wages, would enable the state to model an expansive federal corps made up of long-term paid ecological restoration workers.

This approach would meaningfully challenge the alleged opposition between work and environmentalism. Making this point is not meant to diminish the powerful role that volunteers and activists have played in advancing climate adaptation across the state in recent years, or to contradict Merenlender and Buhler's account of the pleasure that such efforts can bring. Rather, it is to recognize that this stewardship is vitally important and deserves structural support to make it sustainable, particularly in communities long marked by environmental injustice. Emphasizing the urgency of valuing this labor is a call for a world where, environmentalist or not, one can do this kind of work and make a decent

living.

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