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## A Favored Place: San Juan River Wetlands, Central Veracruz, AD 500 to the Present. By Alfred H. Siemens

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nanas and that the harvesting of the two occurs at different times, he suggests that other causes must be explored for those situations in which food production is declining.

In conclusion, Grossman has provided us with a serious piece of scholarship that will interest anyone who is concerned with the Caribbean or with agricultural issues more generally. For someone like myself, whose primary research interest is the international banana trade, the book provides a valuable link to the local producers affected by the trade dynamics that are my usual subject. Its effective organization and logical progression render it a valuable learning tool for individual scholars and graduate seminars.—JAMES WILEY, *Hofstra University*

A FAVORED PLACE: San Juan River Wetlands, Central Veracruz, A.D. 500 to the Present. By ALFRED H. SIEMENS. xvii and 301 pp.; maps, diags., ills., bibliog., index. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 0292777272.

As the title of this book implies, inhabitants of the tropical lowlands near the port of Veracruz, Mexico, have long treated the backswamps along the Río San Juan as a favored place. During the dry season, the view westward from the crest of one of the dunes guarding the landward approaches to the port suggests the reason for that status: Although the thickets of the piedmont crouch leafless and gray under the cloudless sky, a verdant belt of wetlands along the San Juan meanders over the narrow coastal plain, dividing the dunes and the piedmont. Less than an inch of rain falls from November through May in this subhumid enclave along the Gulf Coast; surviving that parching dry season has made using those wetlands an imperative for Totonac and Nahua, for Spaniard and African, and for their predecessors and descendants. Siemens explicates the long-term dynamics of that land use, revealing how and why the cultural ecology of the San Juan wetlands has changed over the past fifteen hundred years.

But the title has another meaning as well. As is clear from the narrative, Siemens himself favors this place. It has been an agreeable field area with a rich history to decipher and has served as an intellectual incubator for insights of broader relevance. That meaning of "favored place" also finds expression in what is a highly personal account of Siemens's long engagement with tropical lowlands, and most doggedly with the Veracruz lowlands, from the early 1960s as a doctoral student to the present as an emeritus professor.

That favoring of the San Juan wetlands, both by the succession of local inhabitants and by Siemens, has more general significance. The story of these particular wetlands is representative of the changing cultural ecology of seasonally inundated, Neotropical wetlands from Mexico to Bolivia over the past several millennia. Native Americans have long favored such environments, making them the foci of settlement systems and highly productive agricultural landscapes. Westerners, in contrast, have mainly treated wetlands as an obstacle to development, as nasty tropical wastelands to be claimed for the market through drain-and-fill projects. The story of Siemens's sustained efforts to understand the changing use and meaning of these

wetlands is also representative of a more general phenomenon: the study of such environments, and others also now considered agriculturally marginal, by several generations of geographers and anthropologists seeking culturally and environmentally sustainable antidotes to modernization. In their view, temporal and spatial landscape heterogeneity are valuable resources rather than problems or “natural hazards” that require homogenizing solutions. Annual floods renew soil fertility and moisture rather than threaten agricultural infrastructure. Interdigitated microenvironments represent opportunities for ecological complementarity rather than obstacles to monocropping.

The story of the San Juan wetlands themselves begins in the middle of the Classic period, circa A.D. 500, and proceeds through a series of chapters to the present. The most significant chapters are those that deal with the precolonial and the postcolonial periods. Siemens's purpose, after all, is to understand the relationship between pre-Hispanic and present-day uses and meanings of tropical lowlands.

The first two out of eight chapters address the precolonial wetlands, beginning with questions and hypotheses raised by Siemens's 1968 discovery of intensive wetland agriculture in the Maya lowlands, a discovery that has challenged the conventional wisdom that the Maya lacked intensive agriculture and that their cultural achievements were therefore derivative of highland cultures. The unparalleled detailed mapping of field-canal complexes in the San Juan wetlands, carried out over the past two decades and now presented in detail in chapter 2, allows Siemens to test his hypothetical model of field function, an issue of long-standing controversy. Based on the relationship between canal orientations and basin hydrology, the fields do seem to represent a delicate balance between drainage during the early dry season and irrigation during the late dry season. That conclusion, and the methods used to reach it, will have a significant impact on the study and modeling of wetland agriculture elsewhere, especially the ancient Mayan fields that pattern the flanks of the Yucatan peninsula.

The last three chapters, which focus mostly on the postcolonial period, offer a particularly compelling and original account of the “technocratic pathology of the basin” in this century. In the archives of the Secretariat of Hydraulic Resources, Siemens has discovered reports by the engineers who came to develop the wetlands beginning in midcentury. The documents reproduce the discourse of modernization, imposing a template that ignores historical and cultural context. They “give us many loaded words, flung as epithets: ‘traditional’ above all others, ‘extensive’ (which is almost as bad), and ‘irrational,’ or even ‘vicious.’ There is much ‘disorder’; the plants and animals are mostly criollo, the grasses are only ‘natural.’ On every hand is *subaprovechamiento*, a failure to take full advantage” (p. 213). Just as surely as the planners intended to “mitigate” the putative negative effects of flooding, they failed to recognize—in fact, did not even seem able to articulate the possibility—that such seasonal inundation has long been the basis of highly productive, local cultural ecologies.

The volume is solidly produced, with outstanding illustrations. Particularly impressive are the many transects that so economically model subtle variations arrayed

along elevational gradients and the oblique aerial photographs that act as windows into past landscapes. Some minor glitches—mismatches between citations and bibliography, and between figure labels and text—do not much mar the overall success of the presentation.

This book is a must-read for anyone who is serious about understanding the agroecosystems of tropical wetlands, ancient and present, as well as the possibilities for alternatives to drainage projects.—ANDREW SLUYTER, *Pennsylvania State University*

WISCONSIN LAND AND LIFE. Edited by ROBERT C. OSTERGREN and THOMAS R. VALE. xv and 567 pp.; maps, diagrs., ills., bibliog., index. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 0299153509; \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 0299153541.

*Wisconsin Land and Life*, edited by Robert Ostergren and Thomas Vale, is a collection of well-written articles by geographers, most of whom are affiliated in some way with the University of Wisconsin. The editors have produced a complete volume of regional geography with no lack of depth or detail, providing the reader with a thorough and well-researched overview of Wisconsin's physical and cultural landscapes. The book's readable text should appeal to scholars and students as well as members of the general public who are interested in understanding the processes that have shaped the landscapes of Wisconsin.

The book is organized around three discrete but interconnected sections. Part 1, comprising seven chapters, examines the state's natural environments and wild landscapes. These articles encourage the reader to explore systematically the links between natural phenomena and human interpretation and alteration of the physical environment. The first chapter, by Thomas Vale, introduces the diverse environments of Wisconsin and provides an excellent prologue to the succeeding articles that examine glacial topography, weather and climate, soils, and natural vegetation. The section's concluding chapter, focused on the upland sandpiper, shows the importance of environmental-preservation efforts far beyond the borders of the state.

Part 2, with ten chapters, examines the diverse historical settlement processes and cultural patterns that characterize the region. This collection offers a sampling of the cultural traditions and settlement patterns associated with Polish, Norwegian, Welsh, Dutch, and other European immigrants. The final article in this section, William Gustav Gartner's analysis of pre-Columbian peoples, is a welcome addition to further our understanding of the indigenous people who created a distinctive cultural landscape well before the arrival of the Europeans. In addition, several chapters in this section are on early economic activities and their associated geographical processes and patterns. Lead mining, lumbering, and the extraction of iron ore are explained and intimately connected with people and place. Logically organized and comprehensive chapters by John Hudson and Robert Ostergren illustrate very effectively the role of Wisconsin's early economies in the creation of towns, the advance of settlement, and the development of urban systems.