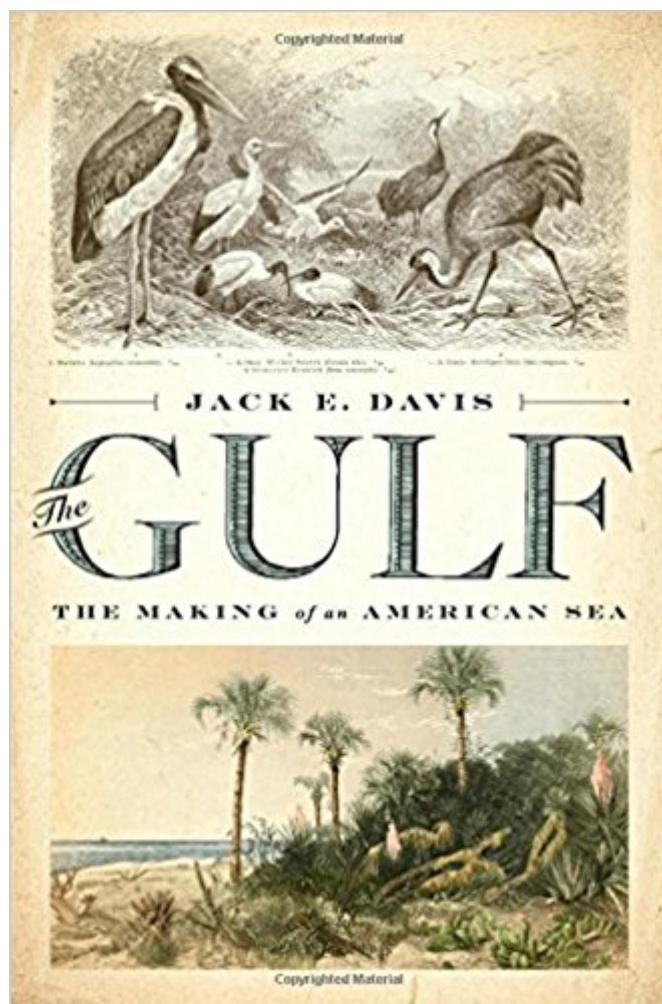


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# The Gulf: The Making Of An American Sea



## Synopsis

The tragic collision between civilization and nature in the Gulf of Mexico becomes a uniquely American story in this environmental epic. When painter Winslow Homer first sailed into the Gulf of Mexico, he was struck by its "special kind of providence." Indeed, the Gulf presented itself as America's sea •bound by geography, culture, and tradition to the national experience •and yet, there has never been a comprehensive history of the Gulf until now. And so, in this rich and original work that explores the Gulf through our human connection with the sea, environmental historian Jack E. Davis finally places this exceptional region into the American mythos in a sweeping history that extends from the Pleistocene age to the twenty-first century. Significant beyond tragic oil spills and hurricanes, the Gulf has historically been one of the world's most bounteous marine environments, supporting human life for millennia. Davis starts from the premise that nature lies at the center of human existence, and takes readers on a compelling and, at times, wrenching journey from the Florida Keys to the Texas Rio Grande, along marshy shorelines and majestic estuarine bays, profoundly beautiful and life-giving, though fated to exploitation by esurient oil men and real-estate developers. Rich in vivid, previously untold stories, *The Gulf* tells the larger narrative of the American Sea •from the sportfish that brought the earliest tourists to Gulf shores to Hollywood's engagement with the first offshore oil wells •as it inspired and empowered, sometimes to its own detriment, the ethnically diverse groups of a growing nation. Davis' pageant of historical characters is vast, including: the presidents who directed western expansion toward its shores, the New England fishers who introduced their own distinct skills to the region, and the industries and big agriculture that sent their contamination downstream into the estuarine wonderland. Nor does Davis neglect the colorfully idiosyncratic individuals: the Tabasco king who devoted his life to wildlife conservation, the Texas shrimper who gave hers to clean water and public health, as well as the New York architect who hooked the  $\alpha$   $\epsilon$   $b$   $i$   $g$   $o$   $n$   $e$  •that set the sportfishing world on fire. Ultimately, Davis reminds us that amidst the ruin, beauty awaits its return, as the Gulf is, and has always been, an ongoing story. Sensitive to the imminent effects of climate change, and to the difficult task of rectifying grievous assaults of recent centuries, *The Gulf* suggests how a penetrating examination of a single region's history can inform the country's path ahead. 26 illustrations

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## Customer Reviews

âœA sensitive and sturdy work of environmental history. . . . [Davis] has a well-stocked mind, and frequently views the history of the Gulf through the prism of artists and writers including Winslow Homer, Wallace Stevens, Ernest Hemingway and John D. MacDonald. His prose is supple and clear. . . . A cri de coeur about the Gulfâ™s environmental ruin.â• - Dwight Garner, New York TimesâœA wide-ranging, well-told story, by turns informative, lyrical, inspiring and chilling for anyone who cares about the future of â™Americaâ™s Sea.â™â• - Gerard Helferich, Wall Street JournalâœIn the tradition of Jared Diamond's best-seller *Collapse* and Simon Winchester's *Atlantic* comes Jack E. Davis' nonfiction epic, *The Gulf: The Making of an American Sea*, which strives both to celebrate and defend its subjectâ•the Gulf of Mexico. . . . Detailed and exhaustive, written in lucid, impeccable prose, *The Gulf* is a fine work of information and insight, destined to be admired and cited.â• - William J. Cobb, Dallas Morning NewsâœSplendid . . . . Davis is a historian, and this book is packed with research, but *The Gulf* does not read like a textbook. He is a graceful, clear, often lyrical writer who makes sometimes surprising, always illuminating connectionsâ•it's not a stretch to compare him to John McPhee. And he is telling an important story, especially for those of us who live around what he calls the American Sea. What happens to it happens to us, and the more we know, the better equipped we'll be to deal with a future on its shores.â• - Colette Bancroft, Tampa Bay TimesâœAn incisive, comprehensive and entertaining portrait of the worldâ™s most diverse and productive marine ecosystemsâ•from its lusty birth in the chaos of shifting continental plates to its slow and agonizing death of a million cuts inflicted by oil and gas extractors, dredge-and-fill operators, â™condo-canyonâ™ developers, industrial-scale fishers, fertilizer-dependent farmers, chemical plant entrepreneurs, love-it-to-death snow birds and so many more. . . . Amid all of the pollution and exploitation, this could easily have been a grim history of

â ^Paradise Lost.â ™ But in Davisâ ™ skilled hands it as much love story as tragedy.â • - Ron Cunningham, Gainesville Sunâ œJack Davis has delivered a unique and illuminating history of the American Southern coast and sea as it should be written: how humanity and the environment evolved over ten millennia as a single system.â • - Edward O. Wilson, author of *The Social Conquest of Earth*â œThis vast and well-told story shows how we made the Gulf of Mexico, in particular, into what local activists have begun to call a 'national sacrifice zone,' at enormous cost to its residents of all species. Itâ ™s a sobering tale, and one hopes that reading it will help us hit bottom and acknowledge the need to change.â • - Bill McKibben, author *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*â œA tremendous book. Davis is not only one of our preeminent environmental historians, but also a first-rate storyteller and prose stylist. Lay readers and scholars alike will be delighted by *The Gulf*, a lovely evocation of the natural world and the problematic ways our nation has profited from it.â • - Blake Bailey, author of *Cheever*â œThe Gulf takes on troubling environmental issues with a lyrical voice and a steady appreciation of history.â • - Mark Kurlansky, author of *Paper: Paging Through History*â œLike its subject, *The Gulf* is big, beautiful, and beguiling. Meticulously researched and sparkingly written, it is also a cautionary tale about a paradise ill-served by humankind.â • - William Souder, author of *On a Farther Shore*â œAn astonishing work of environmental history, sweeping in its narrative scope while also being wonderfully intimate in its richness of detail. The march of history and the vibrancy of place live on its every page, and the environmental story it tells could not make for more urgent reading in these perilous times.â • - Darcy Frey, Harvard Universityâ œSteering seamlessly between nature writing and historical narrative, Davis offers an elegant epic of how Americaâ ™s relationship with the Gulf of Mexico defines our character and our future.â • - Cynthia Barnett, author of *Rain: A Natural and Cultural History*â œWith the narrative force of the Gulf Stream, Jack E. Davis takes readers to an unforgettable geography of wonders, oddities, and characters famous and unknown. Davisâ ™s writing shimmers with salt haze, delights like a flock of pelicans, and threatens like oil on a white sand beach. If you thought you knew the Gulf, guess again. If this is your introduction to it, lucky you.â • - Jordan Fisher Smith, author of *Engineering Eden and Nature Noir*â œThe Gulf starts with the geology of plate tectonics, proceeds through Indian settlements before the arrivals of Europeans, advances to hurricanes, the Dead Zone, and oil pollution, then analyzes the future. And it does all this very, very well. Books which attempt such comprehensive treatments of a subject are too often, as the saying goes, a mile wide and an inch deep. This book is 1,000 miles wide and 10,000 feet deep. It's an extraordinary achievement.â • - John M Barry, author of *Rising Tide and The Great Influenza*â œ[A] magnificent chronicle of the Gulf of Mexico. . . . A work of astonishing

breadth: richly peopled, finely structured, beautifully written. It should appeal equally to Gulf coast residents and snowbirds, students of environmental history, and general readers. - Robert Eagan, Library Journal (starred review) *Vivid. . . . As Davis demonstrates in this absorbing narrative, the history of the Gulf teaches us that nature is most generous whenever we respect its sovereignty.* - Henry L. Carrigan, Bookpage *A perceptive historical survey of America's Gulf Coast, this fascinating work accents the region's nexus between nature and civilization. . . . Marked by thorough knowledge and fluid writing, this work will enhance any collection of American and environmental history.* - Gilbert Taylor, Booklist, Starred review *Comprehensive and thoroughly researched. . . . Davis makes the convincing argument that wiser, far-sighted practices—including those aimed at combating climate change—could help the Gulf region to remain a bastion of resources for the foreseeable future.* - Publishers Weekly, starred review

Jack E. Davis is the author of the award-winning *An Everglades Providence: Marjory Stoneman Douglas and the American Environmental Century*. A professor of environmental history at the University of Florida, he grew up on the Gulf coast, and now lives in Florida and New Hampshire.

As a part time gulf coast resident, I read everything I can regarding the history of the Gulf of Mexico, its wildlife, its ecosystem, its commerce and it's people. This book is a fantastic read...comprehensive, at times tragic and at times hopeful.

Great historical and environmental account of the Gulf. Wish everyone in US could read it.

This book is a must read for anyone who lives on or near the Gulf or for those who rely on it...which is everyone.

Great book. Informative. Great read for those who live on Gulf Coast !!

I have just finished reading *The Gulf*, and found it completely engaging. It is an excellent lens through which to view U.S. environmental history. Though environmental history is by definition an expansive field, I doubt there are many researchers who have carried out the wide-ranging artistic, literary, sociological, scientific, and even medical research, to name but a few fields, that this author has drawn on to write the book. I downloaded the book on my Kindle thinking I would skim it lightly while spending some time on the Florida coast. I did not expect to read the chapters about the

Gulf's creation and evolution, nor its early history. But once engaged I could not put the book down. The author's prose flows beautifully, resulting in a refreshingly accessible book that is also very informative. In my view it is a tour de force. I hope it will be read widely, not only because it is so informative but also because it illuminates the environmental destruction that we as a society have allowed in the U.S. May it serve as a warning against future such acts and planning, and encourage conservation and respect for the land and natural resources that are ours to enjoy if we do the right thing.

This is an excellent book. It's formidably long, but worth the read. It's actually not about all the Gulf, because there's not much about Mexico or Cuba, Mexico having almost as much Gulf Coast as the US, 1,500 to 1,631 miles of it. There's a good deal of history, some natural history and a great deal of environmental history, which has a strong environmentalist flavor. Davis is harsh on some industries, particularly the energy industry, but also fertilizers and chemicals used in agriculture--and the Mississippi drains a very large portion of the US, so all that ends up in the Gulf. He also tells the impressive and sad story of Louisiana and the offshore oil developments. Davis touches on a great deal. The chapters on early exploration and the Spanish, French, British and finally American colonization of the Gulf are excellent. There's a chapter on Indian shell mounds on the coast, which is intriguing. Chapters generally have a focus but range considerably. Chapter 6, on fishing, is about the best I have read about Gulf fishing. Chapter 7 focuses on fishing for Tarpon, which brought fishing tourism and started a good deal of development. There's a chapter on the feather trade that nearly wiped out many species, and also how conservation groups emerged to fight that (one of the book's themes is that when exploitation turns excessive environmental cost, generally people organize to oppose it, sometimes successfully). Chapter 9 looks at the development of beaches, in response to a quickly rising cultural interest in going to the beach--but also includes development of some towns, diseases in New Orleans and more. Chapters 10 and 11 consider oil, both very good and make a complex history readable. Chapter 12 looks at islands, that is, barrier islands, with a main topic the art and life of Walter Anderson, a Mississippi artist who on and off, spent decades on Horn Island, creating some remarkable art--he was a deeply troubled man, but his life is fascinating. Chapter 13 is largely on storms, hurricanes, including Katrina and the Galveston storm early in the 20th century that killed 8,000 people (still the worst disaster in US history). Chapter 14 deals with the "Growth Coast," and has some lively stories about the development of the Gulf Coast of Florida, such as in Coral Gables and St Pete, environmentally costly and nearly criminal, but fascinating! Chapter 15 is mostly a comparison of the development of Pensacola and Galveston, and both the

Florida Panhandle and the Texas coast. Chapters 16 and 17 are perhaps the most strongly environmentalist, on runoff and pollution, and some cheerier stories such as the development of the Seaside community in Florida. Chapter 18 and 19 are largely about losing land--Louisiana is losing 50 square miles or so a year of wetlands, and the bulldozing of vital mangrove wetlands to build housing with access to water--dangerous because mangroves can help blunt a hurricane's force, and because housing then built on the land are extremely vulnerable to storms. Davis doesn't do the first-person interviews so typical these days, but there are a number of people who speak in the book, and their individual stories merge with the large one Davis spins. He really is an excellent writer, and the writing sustains a reader's interest throughout. There are some villains in the story--some energy firms, polluters who try to quash complaints, state legislatures that practically handed massive amounts of land free to corporations (my state of Florida is the worst). The book covers all the Gulf States, including Alabama and Mississippi. The American Sea is a vital part of our history and our present--ports, oil. Davis is guardedly optimistic--but the American Sea is an environmental mess. The book has some interesting photos but could use many more.

I'm sure this is just a reflection on me, but I had really serious trouble trying to get into the book. I'm interested in the Gulf itself, but Jack E. Davis seems more interested in the people who have been there. We start with Winslow Homer and his watercolors. Then when he gets to the various mounds peoples, instead of writing directly about them, he writes about the archeologists who investigated the mounds and other remains. Writing about the natural elements of the Gulf is again almost entirely through the eyes of people who fish and farm there, or travel across it, and descriptions of the natural world are always interrupted by anecdotes about people. There are too few maps and other illustrations, and one map of the Gulf is identified simply as "the Gulf of Mexico in the age of European conquest," which could be anywhere from 1492 to the issues over Cuba in the early 1960s. The wonderful frontispiece picture of some beach, maybe around 1900(?) p. v-vi, isn't identified at all. What Davis calls "[Winslow] Homer's truth," the "vital connection linking humankind, nature, and history" (p. 5) turns out here to be mainly humankind, then history, then nature as it has been affected by the first 2. I wish it were the reverse of that.

FABULOUS BOOK and my understanding of the Gulf of Mexico, the states abutting it, and the states feeding into it is forever changed for the better because of the years Jack E. Davis spent researching and writing this treasure. Davis's environmental perspective and understanding of history not only from the top down is music to my ears. Professor Davis does not skim over all the

harm that has been and is being done to the Gulf and he leaves us with a feeling of hope for the Gulf's future. For someone like myself who is rowing on the Gulf every other day his book helped me develop a much greater appreciation of this inland sea.

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