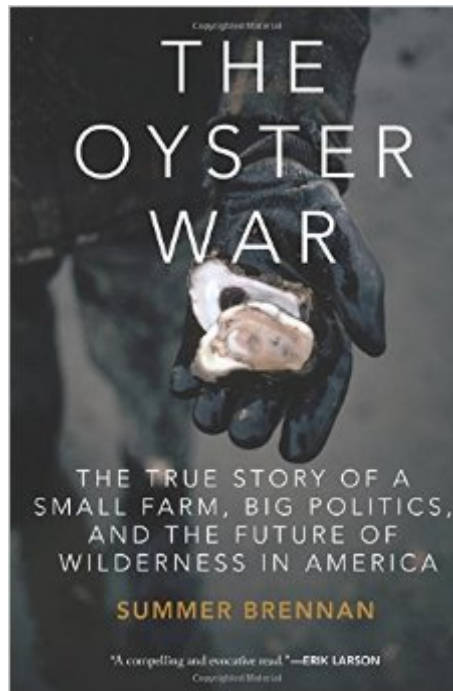


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# The Oyster War: The True Story Of A Small Farm, Big Politics, And The Future Of Wilderness In America



## Synopsis

It all began simply enough. In 1976 the Point Reyes Wilderness Act granted the highest protection in America to more than 33,000 acres of California forest, grassland and shoreline - including Drakes Estero, an estuary of stunning beauty. Inside was a small, family-run oyster farm first established in the 1930s. A local rancher bought the business in 2005, renaming it The Drakes Bay Oyster Company. When the National Park Service informed him that the 40-year lease would not be renewed past 2012, he vowed to keep the farm in business even if it meant taking his fight all the way to the Supreme Court. Environmentalists, national politicians, scientists, and the Department of the Interior all joined a protracted battle for the estuary that had the power to influence the future of wilderness for decades to come. Were the oyster farmers environmental criminals, or victims of government fraud? Fought against a backdrop of fear of government corruption and the looming specter of climate change, the battle struck a national nerve, pitting nature against agriculture and science against politics, as it sought to determine who belonged and who didn't belong, and what it means to be wild.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I loved the book and didn't read it to come up with a solution to who was right and who was wrong and I'm not sure Ms Brennan establishes a strong case for either side. I enjoyed the story of the area, the land, the people involved and why they took the position they did. The author did a good job of reporting on the complicated issues involved in a very interesting way. I live in San Jose,

almost 100 miles south of Point Reyes, where I was on the fringe of the newspaper and TV reporting of this controversy. I didn't have a strong opinion, but I probably favored the continuation of the oyster farm. Now I just wish I had visited it while it was still around. I can now see the reasons why it was closed down as unfortunate as that was. No matter what you might conclude, the book is a heckava good read.

A beautifully crafted book from a writer who profoundly respects both the community and land of which she writes. To learn about the history of oysters in West Marin and San Francisco was fascinating. Agriculture, land, water, wilderness, wild flowers, seals, and exotic deer are woven together in a landscape that is rife with political and personal agendas. The oyster as pawn in a war that like all wars, has no happy ending.

Too much advocacy for the so-called wilderness advocates; too little of the sustainable food and scientific communities. She begins by espousing how fair she will be and in short order takes up a strident view against truth and reality. Too bad. It's a great story with more nuance that she was willing to consider. Further, to begin personal attacks against scientists was ... odd. Is the science valid or isn't it? Did the state alter the conclusions of their own expert or didn't they? Is the water way better for having oysters or isn't it? Too few of those answers faced proper scrutiny.

Deeply researched and beautifully crafted, this book should be of interest to readers who treasure excellent nature writing, as well as those familiar with this particular conflict. The author poses large questions, such as what wilderness means today, when just about every corner of the earth has been touched and manipulated by man. She also asks, how do we value and protect what is wild? The prose is lyrical and many of the descriptions of the Point Reyes area are simply stunning. I read another review here questioning the research methods of the author, but the selected bibliography at the book's end is over fifteen pages long, and the variety of sources suggests the research was quite thorough. I liked that the author invites readers to form their own conclusions about the oyster conflict. In the end she tells you which side she came down on, but the book doesn't promote one particular argument. All in all, a fascinating story by an author whose words are a force on the page.

Told with humor, style and insight, it chronicles the inevitable complexity when individual, community and governmental interests collide. It is a rare chance to step into the center of such a

maelstrom while buffered by the engaging narrative. Humans and their institutions are fascinating subjects, and the author delivers them perfectly for our inspection and, yes, amusement. A joy in both the reading and reflection.

I very much enjoyed this book and appreciate the first hand narrative. She's a very captivating writer who spins a great tale. Naturally, her conclusion will upset those who supported the oyster company. That being said, I think she does a good job at explaining that regardless of whoever's science you want to use, ultimately the oyster company bought a lease that was set to expire.

This book continuously surprised me with the depth of history, insight, and intrigue that surrounded a seemingly simple story about private user of public property. I came away with a much richer appreciation for a place I love and the people in it.

Though I have given this book a moderately good rating (4 for me is pretty good), it is not without hesitation. And for the most part, the glowing reviews I have read on thus far appear to be from people that just agree with the conclusion (the same I guess for the really bad reviews too). But first the good. The book describes in detail the controversy (only recently resolved) over whether a pre-existing oyster farm could continue operations in what has since become a National park. that is a necessary abbreviation of a lot of history and so it is not 100% technically accurate, but that description is pretty much on target. Given that oyster farming is generally considered a GOOD thing environmentally, but also considering that a "wilderness" area within a Park is supposed to not have commercial operations, the issues became complex and emotional, deeply fought and probably with no real clear cut right or wrong. Most of this is described pretty well. and if you are interested in the policy debates that swirl around utilization of our Parks this is a good, albeit incomplete, read. The reason for the hesitation however is that though Ms Brennan claims to have worked through all the issues without initially taking sides, and I have no reason to doubt that, she clearly - by the time she wrote the book - had. I came away with the feeling that she actually did not need to take either side at all and the book would have profited from being balanced throughout. But that is not the book she wrote, and it is clear early on that, even though she says it took her to the end to decide, she was actually writing from mainly one point of view. This is evident from the fact that she pays virtually no attention to the reality that oyster farming doesn't just have a hopefully neutral environmental impact, but they can do a lot of good. At the very end she devotes a single page to dismissing these advantages (incorrectly), after that point in the book where she had

already decided the farm must go. She spends a lot of time discussing seals and whether or not they are disturbed. In other words, whether the farm is neutral or not. But almost none on why it is good to have such farms. It will be interesting to see how the water in question reacts to the removal of several million shellfish, each filtering 50 gallons of water a day. That is a natural filtration system for over 2,000 Olympic sized swimming pools each month for each million oysters. How can that be ignored in this book? If the water reacts badly when that filtration is removed, that is an issue that won't have been discussed in the policy debates of this book at all. Which is too bad. A clear victim of a one-sided presentation. If well understood and recognized facts like these are missing, then one has to wonder just what else is missing in Ms Brennan's description of the fight? At what point did her choice to back one side mean that the other side got less than fair treatment. I don't have the facts to know, but by the end of the book I guess I have to say that I didn't trust that I was getting the whole story from her. Given that her analysis eventually comes down on the side of policy and not science (her own dichotomy), it would have been exceptionally interesting had she compared various individual's positions here with those they have taken with regard to the Hetch Hetchy dam and reservoir which is located inside Yosemite. Many of the people and constituencies covering these two issues (oyster farms and free water, both in nearby National Parks) overlap. It would be interesting to see whether the same people of San Francisco are prepared to fight against the oysters to the same degree as their dam and drinking water. It may seem that this issue would have been outside the scope of the book, but the fight over Hetch Hetchy provides the most direct policy comparison available. And true consistency and neutrality could have been judged here on that basis. But it wasn't. You know, on that basis alone I am going to reduce this review to three stars. The one sided nature of the book and the failure to even mention Hetch Hetchy did it in for me. If Ms Brennan writes a book on Hetch Hetchy, I promise to come back and change my review here. Having said all of that, I got a lot out of reading this. I had heard about this oyster war, and this gave me a ton of good information about it. And Ms Brennan writes well, which I always appreciate. A few typos. How does that happen???

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