

Visual Legacies: Reimagining the Borderlands Environment

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Visual Legacies: Reimagining the Borderlands Environment, an environmental and cultural history of the US-Mexico borderlands, explores representations of the shared border environments in both Mexico and the United States since the late nineteenth century.

In the 1890s, naturalist Edgar Alexander Mearns and photographer Daniel Payne, alongside their Mexican counterpart topographer and photographer Louis Servín, collaborated in collecting and cataloging arid borderlands flora and fauna as part of the 1891–1896 International Boundary Commission resurvey of the US-Mexico border. Beginning with the 1890s border resurvey, this book project traces how such visual works have been used through time, in US and Mexican political, scientific, and cultural conversations. The chapters delve into “borderline visualization projects” to unpack the shifting cultural and environmental conversations. They focus on particular sets of photographs—ones that offer the opportunity to situate them in their own historical moment of creation as well as to examine their multiple uses through time in both the United States and Mexico.

One chapter, for example, traces the specific visual legacy of the border photographs. Twentieth-century environmental scientists, especially plant ecologists, have returned time and again to the 1890s survey photographs. Since the 1930s Robert Humphrey, Ray Turner and others have used those nineteenth-century border monument photographs as part of their re-photographic surveys—retaking photographs at the same places as the 1890s photographers, and using the images to compare vegetative change over time. Part of an international community of botanists, they examined photographs as faithful records, seeking factual knowledge incidental to the original intents. Yet these constituted archives of border photographs are more than a scientific tool, a form of measurement, and markers of change. They are also cultural documents that reveal shifting environmental and social ideas, from restoration to sustainability, from ecological to climate change.

Environmental factors have constantly challenged efforts to delineate and maintain political borders. Natural forces, migration patterns, and ecological habitats stretch across the artificial lines. The Rio Grande, as an international and interstate river, has been central to water and land controversies from both sides of the borderline. The fluidity of the Gulf of Mexico-El Paso riverine border particularly challenged diplomatic and practical efforts. Another chapter examines the aerial photography and cartography employed to combat the frequent environmental changes. The material environmental impacts and the failures of visual efforts point to the tensions inherent in border control in a region of diverse ecological regimes.