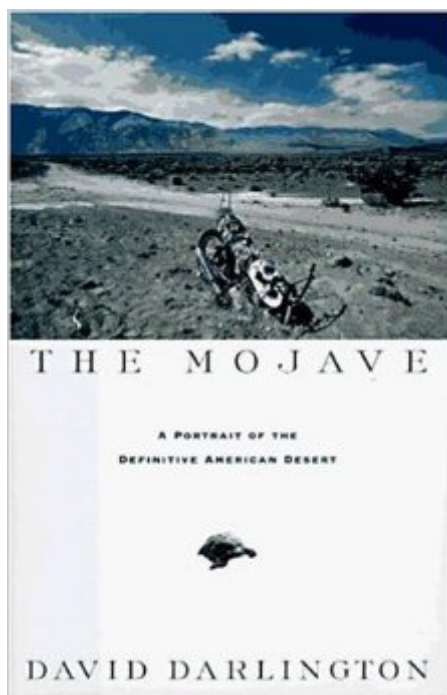


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# The Mojave: A Portrait Of The Definitive American Desert



## Synopsis

From the twisted silhouette of the Joshua tree to the pencil-straight blacktop of Route 66, the author of *In Condor Country* and *Angels' Visits* explores a unique and embattled region: the quintessential American desert.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

David Darlington evokes how humans perceive and evolve in relation to their environment better than anyone, perhaps save Mike Davis ("City of Quartz"). I'm originally from Barstow and the sea-change in attitude about the desert is accurate in every respect. His chapters on dirt bikers and the Las Vegas-to-Barstow race is a must-read for anyone who cares both about the desert \*and\* about how to enjoy it responsibly. My only quibble is that it could've been longer-- Route 66, the definitive Mojave highway, is barely mentioned and the impact of the railroad-- the \*real\* reason the Mojave is inhabited-- is never even mentioned. But these are minor complaints. Each subject is worthy of a book in its own right, so adding would've made it a rather massive read. Darlington bravely lets the people involved in the desert speak for themselves, in all their moral ambiguity and colorfulness. No one in the debate over desert land management becomes either a saint or Satanic (with one exception, and he's gored by his own words, not Darlington's). A must-read for anyone who has ever loved the desert.

This series of essays on the Mojave desert pulls together some of the many strands that make the principal California desert what it is today. Characters met along the way show the desert from the

human angle and give animation and relevance to the places visited that no travel guide can. Outlaw bikers, clandestine speed labs, alien searchers, ranchers, ecowarriors and hikers all have their stories told through Darlington's easy prose. The author paints the truest picture yet of this much-misunderstood region between the playground of Las Vegas and the dreamland of Los Angeles.

A feature article from Outside magazine back in 1988 asked "Whose Desert is it Anyway?", with a striking photograph of Joshua trees and the surreal backdrop of the then-called Joshua Tree National Monument in the magic hour of low sunlight (the article, if I can remember clearly, was about the proposed California Desert Protection Act). Since then, many desert lovers, myself included, have reveled on the upgraded status of Joshua Tree and Death Valley to national parks and the establishment of East Mojave Scenic Area to ensure the protection of these desert areas for the future. The same question is the outright message of Darlington's book. The book starts as an almost tantalizingly and compellingly readable account of what makes people love the desert, and in this particular instance, the Mojave, part of which is what other people I know have said is "that stretch between L.A. and Las Vegas" that is "just desert", short of saying, "there is nothing there". Admittedly (for me) the best part of the book is the beginning, where the author spends some time traveling the area with a naturalist who is very particular about the boundaries of the Mojave desert and about finding the southernmost Joshua trees, and when the author follows the Old Spanish Trail and the Mormon Trail, thereby giving us the history of exploration and settlement of California's arid quarter. Beyond scenery, geology, and natural and human history, Darlington also provides a balanced expose of how people have used the desert and have come to love it. Surely the desert does not belong to one interest group exclusively. And to quote the biologist Kristin Berry from Darlington's book: "where there's goodwill, there are all kinds of possibilities for compromise that won't compromise the long-term welfare of the animals [in the Mojave]", and I guess the same can be said of the fragile desert as a whole. For even the deceptive distances, the forbidding temperatures, and the unforgiving terrain cannot belie the vulnerability of this ecosystem to the potentially irreversible damage that humans can inflict on it. We have to respect the Mojave's unique biological attributes and the psychological benefits of open space and breathtaking scenery if we want to make sure the desert will always be there for everyone.

The Mojave Desert occupies a large part of southeastern California (including Death Valley and Joshua Tree National Parks) and a portion of western Arizona. It is one of the four major deserts in

the North America (the other three being the Sonoran, the Chihuahuan, and Great Basin). It's a pretty comprehensive book and worth reading if you plan to spend time in the Mojave.

I was hoping for detailed descriptions of the plant and animal life, the colorful characters and local lore of the area. Darlington delivered that and more - his perspective is not one of what would often be called the "Tree Hugger" movement, he is quite objective and at the same time is a voice for wise use of resources and preservation of habitat where it makes sense. I especially enjoyed the description of the Mojave Road tour, with its stops at Pauite Creek and Marl Spring. I would have given much to have gone along and chatted with the author during the adventure.

Anyone that has the slightest amount of sensitivity can see that the author loves the desert and wants the various mineral concerns and offroad enthusiasts to stop mucking about in it. This said however he makes little or no judgements about the many different sides to the question managing desert resources. He interviews all participants in the discussion and paints a full picture. Not to say that is by any means a dry account. For nonfiction writing it is very colorful and moving. He has a great storytelling sense and will read the rest of his books.

David Darlington takes us hunting for Joshua Trees, exploring volcanic cones and pleistocene lakes, for a survey of the great American desert that may seem heavy on geology and flora until you notice that, along the way, Darlington is introducing us to an impressive cast of real-life characters who define this portrait of the Mojave. His prose does not call attention to itself, but he deftly weaves scientific information with human behavior in a portrait of the desert at a certain time in its relationship with humankind.

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