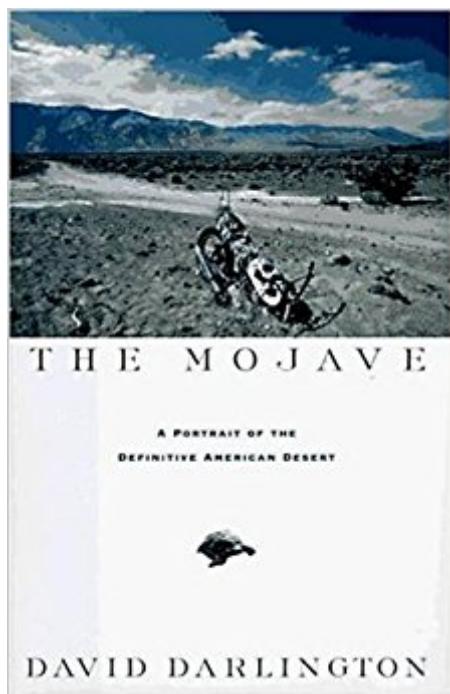


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# The Mojave: A Portrait Of The Definitive American Desert



## **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**

Hardcover: 337 pages

Publisher: Henry Holt & Company; 1st edition (May 1996)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0805016317

ISBN-13: 978-0805016314

Product Dimensions: 9.4 x 6.3 x 1.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.4 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars 14 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #1,485,169 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #96 in Books > Science & Math > Nature & Ecology > Ecosystems > Deserts #31126 in Books > History > Americas > United States > State & Local

## **Customer Reviews**

The Mojave, as David Darlington describes it, is a "wilderness defined by human ambition, an empty place full of activity, a blank slate brimming with meaning, an overflowing void." Darlington writes of the wide-ranging impact of the human presence on a region that appears to be rugged but is actually perilously fragile and vulnerable. From ranchers to the rise and demise of Route 66 to the environmental consequences of mining, tourists, and military activity, Davis shows that despite its peaceful imagery, the Mojave is a damaged battleground. He reports on conservation efforts as well as the depredations of developers.

The Mojave Desert is the realm of the Joshua tree, the desert tortoise, the high-speed jet fighter and the car. Once regarded as a vast wasteland and dumpsite, it is now seen as a refuge and recreation area; recently, it has become an environmental battleground. Darlington (*In Condor Country*) finds the Mojave overwhelming, both physically and psychologically, because of its sheer visual scale. He has written a sparkling narrative of the desert past and present, from the exurbs of Los Angeles to the fringes of Las Vegas. Darlington notes that 95% of the Mojave lies within three miles of some kind of road. Here is Death Valley, Edwards Air force Base, the Army's National Training Center,

Joshua Tree National Park. Darlington writes about secret drug labs, UFO observers, nuclear waste dumps, miners and ranchers, endangered tortoises and dirt-bike racers. He gives a detailed account of the fight to limit the use of off-road vehicles, concluding with the passage of the California Desert Protection Act in 1994. Readers who enjoy the outdoors will find *The Mojave* a gem.

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I've found myself intrigued by *The Mojave* desert for years, but never had someone to explain its history to me. This book is a well-written guide to a rarely discussed region of our country. The Mojave is certainly a mystifying, desolate and unforgiving place -- this book helped me uncover much about its history.

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.

Great book! A real journey to the Mojave through its past and present denizens. Darlington is magic!

We love the Mojave Desert. We've driven part of the Mojave Road in our Jeep and camped several times in the Hole in the Wall Campground. This book made us appreciate this desert even more.

Excellent

I expected this book to have pictures. It's all words.

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 exposé 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.

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.

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