

Author explores many angles of the misunderstood Mojave, from its 'misfits' to politics

By Scott Dickensheets LAS VEGAS SUN

DIRTY John is out there somewhere. A fat dude with a Doberman and a scruffy entourage, he's probably even now humping his VW bus down some nasty Mojave Desert rut, in search of nothing more than a place where he can do what he wants.

The Mojave Desert is a magnet for people like that, always has been. It pulls in outcasts and escapees, freethinkers and no-brainers, from Death Valley Scotty to Charles Manson. But civilization has been closing in lately, land management bureaucracy tightening its grip. As Americans have come to regard the desert less as a big empty to be ignored and more as a resource to be protected, the Dirty Johns are finding themselves with less room to roam, and they're not happy about it. Your stance on the Desert Protection Act is an article of faith out there.

David Darlington knows. That tension between the urge to govern and the desire to be ungoverned was part of what prompted the journalist to write his just-released "The Mojave" (Henry Holt, \$25).

His subject stretches from Los Angeles to Las Vegas, from the Nevada Test Site to Joshua Tree National Monument, and takes in Death Valley. Darlington's book is just as big, covering the human and natural history of the area, mining, recreational activity, the military presence, development, politics.

"I tried to make it an overarching look at the desert from many angles," he says from his Bay Area home.

You meet Dirty John in the first few pages, rude and suspicious at an isolated desert spring. If you try to control people out here, you're gonna get in trouble," he warns Darlington. He's one of an expansive cast of singular characters inhabiting what the author calls "the archetypal American desert."

The desert was an active force in their emotional lives, more like another person than a place," he writes of the people he encountered. "They might be viewed as misfits by people from outside, but they weren't in the desert by accident; they were there because they loved it." Like Dirty John or motorcyclist Bob Perkins, they love it for its unregulated freedom. Like Joshua tree biologist Jim Cornett or the desert's UFO freaks, they love it for its rich mysteries. Like Louis McKey, the Phantom Duck of the Desert, they love it for its beauty and solitude.

Darlington loves the Mojave for all of the above, and more. He's drawn by its paradoxical nature - it looks so open yet guards its secrets closely. It looks so empty yet is filled with life. You can see for miles in the desert and not see the real issues. Example: In the old days, miners knew they'd struck gold when they saw the color. Now technology can strain from the dirt specks of gold you can't even see. "You can mine invisible gold," Darlington says. "And what's the biggest issue at the Nevada Test Site? Radiation. There's no end to that kind of intriguing paradox."

"The Mojave is an unceasing contradiction...," he writes, "a blank slate brimming with meaning..."

The Mojave he renders spooks you or attracts you for deep, intertwined reasons. You can dig the metaphorical allure of a place where nonessential stuff is cooked away, yet fear the price it exacts for a lack of competence. In the desert, if you don't know how to change a tire or plug a radiator, it might be you that gets cooked away.

What makes the Mojave the archetypal American desert, he says, is partly its location Between Los Angeles and Las Vegas, it's our most extensively filmed and photographed desert.

"You can't watch TV for an hour without seeing some commercial filmed in the Mojave," Darlington says. It's also the

most visited, the most studied.

"The Mojave means something to people, they kind of perk up at the word," he says.

He experienced his first desert - the Colorado, near Palm Springs, Calif - in 1970, after growing up on the East Coast. "My first intentional trip into the Mojave, to see what it's all about, was in 1986," - says Darlington, 45. "It opened my eyes to what an interesting place it was visually. And socially - the idea of living in a land without any rules. After that, I started going regularly."

In 1988, he wrote a cover story for Outside magazine about the Desert Preservation Act, the sweeping measure designed to protect the Mojave by designating much of it as protected wilderness area. He was back the next year, notebook in hand, for Sierra magazine.

"By about 1990, I saw there was plenty of material there for writing a book," he says.

"The Mojave" skillfully weaves accounts of Darlington's own adventures in the desert with information on its flora and fauna, economy, history and political landscape. For instance, in "A Weird and Repulsive Countenance," a chapter on Joshua trees - the emblematic plant of the Mojave, it grows nowhere else - he doesn't just dole out horticultural factoids. Rather, the chapter is organized around Darlington and Cornett's search for the southernmost Joshua tree, thinking that would also mark the southern boundary of the Mojave. (They didn't find it.)

"If you just write about the trip, you end up not getting a lot of important technical information in," Darlington says. "But the worst thing would be to write a treatise on the tree without any human interaction."

Other highlights:

- A San Bernardino detective noting, "We find lots of bodies within a few miles of Interstate 15. Depending on which side of the road they're on, you can tell whether they were going to or from Las Vegas."
- A chapter titled "The Tortoise and the Hare-and-Hounds," a long, evocative discussion of the desert tortoise. "At the end of the 20th century, the tortoise is the premier performer in the desert's disappearing act," he writes.
- The clash of pro-tortoise forces with Las Vegas developers and off-road enthusiasts is "a metaphorical examination of attitudes toward land use in the U.S.," Darlington says. But it's not as heavy as it sounds - how could it be when it features a faction of radical dirt bikers (protesting the demise of the Vegas-to-Baratow race) led by someone calling himself the Phantom Duck of the Desert?
- The Integratron, the 25year, \$200,000 project of the late George Van Tassel, who claimed he was given plans for the 38 foot-high atructure from alien visitors. Near Landers, Cali£, it became a focal point in postwar UFO mania.

(While researching alien visitation in the desert, Darlington began looking into the cloud of secrecy and speculation surrounding Area 51, a secret Air Force base near Groom Lake. It wasn't long before he realized that would require a book of its own. He'a at work on that now.)

The book's striking cover image, a photo - taken by the author - of a haltered motorcycle half-buried in the dirt, a stunning desert vista behind it.

"A weird human artifact juxtaposed with the natural element - the Mojave is full of that," he says. So is the book.

And of course, there is the Desert Protection Act. "Wherever I went ..." Darlington writes, "I was always asked to state my position on the Desert Protection Act, usually by people who lived in the desert and opposed it."

His position: Page 7 finds him conflicted. Conferring national park status on large tracts of the desert would make it "a magnet for Winnebagos," and who wants that? "Our nation has no shortage of unique, trampled spots."

Yet unregulated mining and four-wheeling has damaged the desert. And while Darlington cherishes the Mojave's wild,

anarchic spirit, he notes that the area is within a day's drive of 40 million people.

"One of the biggest things we have to keep in mind," he says, "is that this act is not something just for right now. It's for 20, 30, 50 years from now." By then, the urban sprawl of Vegas and LA might mean trouble. Might as well mitigate the impact now.

His support is less than wholehearted, however. "A lot of wilderness roads have been closed," he says. "Now I'm a backpacker, but I'm not hardcore enough to backpack in the desert. Water weighs too much. I've become a car camper, and not being able to get into some of the new wilderness areas is a real pain in the ass."

Beneficial but a pain in the ass - by Mojave desert standards, that's about right.

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