



# Q&A: Geohumanist Jared Farmer

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*Jared Farmer, a self-described geohumanist, has published books and articles spanning a variety of subjects as diverse as the mass introduction of trees to California, Mormon church history, and landscape photography. On Wednesday, he was awarded the \$50,000 Hiatt Prize by the Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture. We asked Farmer to explain the work that led to the prize.*

## **What is a geohumanist?**

It's a term I invented for my Twitter handle. I've written three books — one about a river, one about a mountain, one about trees. But I'm not a hydrologist, geologist or botanist. My books are really about people and how they interact with aspects of the nonhuman world. I would describe geohumanism simply as the study of humans through the natural world with the recognition that nature contains a lot of culture and vice versa.

## **What have you done to deserve the Hiatt Prize?**

The Hiatt Prize is an early-career award, the opposite of a lifetime achievement award. I can't speak for the prize jury, but I believe I've made three kinds of contributions as a young scholar. I'm a writer-historian who uses imaginative prose to enliven and humanize the past — even when the subject is seemingly inert, like a mountain. I embrace cultural studies as well as environmental sciences and strive to bring the two into conversation. And I actively use new media as well as old to reach multiple audiences.

**Your recent book *Trees in Paradise* looks at the mass introduction of trees to previously treeless parts of California. What's your verdict: beneficial or harmful?**

Both. Lowland California — the part of the state where most everyone lives — used to be marked by marshlands and grasslands more than tree cover. American settlers carried out a landscape revolution: They converted treeless foothills and valleys into commercial groves and garden cities. As a result, lowland California contains more trees today than at any time since the late Pleistocene. Greater Los Angeles has an amazing urban canopy with species diversity comparable to a tropical rain forest. The suburban California [popular image] is floral — you know, sitting in your backyard under flowering trees and watching the sunlight play on rows of skyscraper palm trees.

Meanwhile, in the Central Valley, California derives billions of dollars of wealth from commercial orchards. The Golden State has a virtual monopoly on the domestic supply of [popular fruits and nuts]. Introduced trees have brought great beauty — and astonishing wealth — to Californians. But this transformation had definite harmful effects. In order to plant and water their flowering groves and floral suburbs, Californians drained millions of square miles of wetlands, and captured entire rivers — dammed them, siphoned them away, lined them in concrete. Wildlife habitats and indigenous landscapes vanished. Tulare Lake is gone. Owens Lake has become a dry, dusty salt pan. Just over the border in Mexico, the delta of the Colorado River is a parched ecological disaster.

**Humans, for better or worse, are a part of the world's ecosystem. Our technologies have caused zebra mussel migrations into lakes across the country and the introduction of the deadly Pacific lionfish into the fragile Caribbean. Does that trouble you?**

We inhabit an eco-cosmopolitan world; globalization is here to stay. Increasingly, out-of-place species are the norm rather than the exception. In this post-wild situation, the old dichotomy of native vs. non-native often doesn't apply. That said, I'm not excusing apathy or advocating anything goes. There's something disquieting about our contemporary global experiment in species shifting — the so-called “great reshuffling.” Only a small percentage of introduced species will become nuisances, but we're bad at predicting which ones. Separately, we are facing the question of assisted migration in a time of climate change. Many nonmobile species, notably trees, will not be able to

move to higher latitudes or altitudes to keep pace with global warming. Ecologists are talking openly about the logistics and the ethics of transplanting rare, threatened or otherwise sensitive plant species. In other words, should we garden the wild?

**What drives your interest in Mormons and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?**

It's personal and it's place-based. I grew up in Provo, Utah, arguably the most Mormon place on earth — the home of Brigham Young University and the Missionary Training Center. My family history includes all the major Mormon touchstones: Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, pioneering, missionary work, polygamy, persecution, hardship and perseverance. But I'm a bad Mormon for all sorts of reasons, starting with the fact that genealogy doesn't interest me much. I study the Mormon past primarily because I care about Utah's future, especially regarding environmental issues, and you simply can't make a difference in Utah politics without being conversant with Mormonism.

**A front-page *New York Times* article last week cast an unfavorable light on the polygamist actions of the church's founder, Joseph Smith. What's your take on this?**

The LDS Church is in the process of releasing an online series of footnoted essays on difficult issues in church history. The latest one — the one picked up by the *Times* — is about the origins of Mormon polygamy, a practice officially discontinued in 1890. Nothing in the essay is news to historians, but it's newsworthy insofar that it's more accurate and forthcoming on that topic than the church has ever been in public — including to its own core audience of believing members. There are at least two ways to read this. On the one hand, you might say that the church is defensively and desperately trying to stop the hemorrhaging of young Mormons who lose their religion after encountering online information that contradicts the faith-promoting history they have received in Sunday school. On the other hand, you might say that the church is playing smart offense: demonstrating a new and refreshing openness about its problematic past. Maybe both readings contain some truth.

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