

## Telling Stories of Nature and Humans in Midwest National Park Units

**Robert Pahre**, Department of Political Science, University of Illinois, 382A David Kinley Hall, MC#713, 1407 W. Gregory Ave., University of Illinois, Urbana, IL 61801; pahre@illinois.edu

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HUMANS AND NATURE HAS LONG CHALLENGED THINKERS on environmental issues. The National Park Service (NPS) has traditionally approached the relationship in dualist terms: wilderness excludes people, and civilization excludes nature. Wilderness theorists have profoundly challenged such dualism over the last thirty years (e.g., Nash 2001; Callicott and Nelson 1998). The literature has clarified that one might conceive of humans as part of natural systems, view humans and their domesticated species as separate from nature, or see the humans of civilization as separate from both nature and from their pre-industrial predecessors.

Some newer interpretive programs at smaller park units have begun to interpret such complications. Preserving the tallgrass prairie, and not Daniel Freeman's homestead, has shaped the stories at Homestead National Monument of America, in Nebraska. The ranching communities around Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve (TPNP), in Kansas, have forced a model on the park that struggles over whether it preserves a natural landscape or a cultural landscape. Partnerships with affiliated tribes have helped the process of changing interpretation at Effigy Mounds National Monument in Iowa. While these programs are not perfect, they point the way toward more realistic accounts of human relationships with nature over time, and human relationships with one another. Following their example can contribute to a healthier public conversation about the role of nature in the Anthropocene, even if it challenges some cherished beliefs about the crown jewel parks.

### Humans, nature, and wilderness

The NPS constructs the large scenic parks as examples of "wildernesses" that are "untrammelled by man," and without human use (Spence 1999). Yellowstone National Park (in Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming) continues to interpret itself this way, mostly without indigenous people in the past or without tourists in the present (Pahre 2011). Point Reyes National Seashore (California) and Isle Royale National Park (Michigan) have erased evidence of their human histories to recreate a

---

**Citation:** Weber, Samantha, ed. 2014. *Protected Areas in a Changing World: Proceedings of the 2013 George Wright Society Conference on Parks, Protected Areas, and Cultural Sites*. Hancock, Michigan: George Wright Society.

© 2014 George Wright Society. All rights reserved. Please direct all permission requests to [info@georgewright.org](mailto:info@georgewright.org).

“wilderness” (Wockner 1997; Watt 2002). Guadalupe Mountains National Park, established for its wilderness values, interprets Mescalero Apaches, Anglo ranchers, and modern backpackers as both present and absent from wilderness (Pahre 2012).

NPS visions of wilderness reflect how most Americans viewed wilderness in the agency’s formative years. It imagines wilderness as a place that people visit, not as a place where people live. It downplayed the Native Americans who used to live in each park, and who were removed as part of park establishment. It ignores its own role as an architect of wilderness (Wockner 1997; Watt 200).

The wilderness lobby has reinforced NPS dualism. As opposition to auto tourism emerged in the 1920s, The Wilderness Society and other groups pressed for roadless wildernesses, reaching their greatest success in the Wilderness Act of 1964. Those views have polarizing political consequences. Many communities near the national parks have resisted wilderness designations or even the use of the word “wilderness.” Rural communities believe that wilderness designations “lock up” land and its resources that they might someday want to use for economic purposes other than backcountry recreation.

These views do not accurately reflect current mandates and policy. Grazing is explicitly allowed in wilderness, for example, as is non-motorized recreation. Conflict ensues because dualist images of wilderness do not let us see wilderness as part of a cultural and natural landscape that include certain human presence (Watt 2002). Dualist mental images exacerbate political conflict.

Three park units that lack wilderness designations can help us see other ways to conceptualize human relationships with nature in preserved landscapes. These smaller park units exist on a wider landscape, and their natural resources interact with humans and natural systems outside park boundaries in ways that require interpretation beyond dualism.

### **Homestead National Monument of America**

Homestead National Monument of America commemorates the first homestead established under the Homestead Act of 1862. Remarkably, when the NPS arrived in 1936 it decided to preserve the tallgrass prairie as it appeared *before* homesteading. Prairie restoration began in 1939, the first such program in the national park system and the second-oldest in the USA. Homestead was the first national park unit to use management fire to mimic wildland fire.

Homestead portrays settlers as struggling against both the land and the Native Americans who lived on it. The visitor center acknowledges that, “To settlers, the West was a vast, unused land. To American Indians, it was home.” As the settlers triumphed, “Prairie grass gave way to wheat fields. Prosperous homesteaders replaced sod houses with wood frame homes.” If nature triumphed, as in the 1930s Dust Bowl, “Dreams Turned to Dust.”

Those themes dominate the 25-minute film in the visitor center (NPS 2009c). By using many off-camera voices instead of a single narrator, the film contrasts statements such as “The French sold the land to the United States government” and “We never put our land up for sale”; or, “Their dreams were to see a community spring from the ground up” and “We’ve been on this land from time immemorial.” Those many voices also provide a wide range of perspectives that no single, authoritative narrator could provide.

Yet the film also draws lines—Native Americans have a relationship with the land, while settlers transform it into something else. While the film shows members of various tribes, a voice says, “Our relationship with the earth was a very sacred relationship.” Then the film presents settlers and their descendants speaking of America as the story of “land transformation,” dreaming “to see a community spring from the ground up.”

While recognizing the complexity of the relationships among different groups of people, Homestead tends to draw a stark contrast between Native Americans living in harmony with na-

ture, and the settlers who transform the prairie in opposition to both nature and Native Americans. Though the park is honest about the costs of settlement for Native Americans, it sees settlers and Native Americans only in opposition. As Mark David Spence (1999) has argued, this dualism tends to support a strategy of dispossessing Native Americans along with transforming nature.

### **Humans and nature at Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve**

The legacy of dualism is also evident at TPNP. It protects a large remnant of the tallgrass prairie, an ecosystem that the first Euroamerican experienced as an inhabited “wilderness” before plowing it under. Because the soil is poorly suited for grain crops, the region was available for large-scale preservation when American opinion came to value prairie ecosystems (see Tallgrass Historians L.C. 1998).

Discussions about preserving this region began in the 1920s, but local public opinion in the region has been reluctant at best. Because private land trusts were more acceptable to the local community, Congress established TPNP in 1996 as a unique public-private partnership. The NPS is prohibited from owning more than 180 acres in TPNP, but the NPS provides the bulk of the staff and maintenance budget. Conservation trusts contribute over 10,000 acres to the reserve. Texan millionaire Ed Bass helped the trusts buy the land; in exchange, his cattle graze on most of the pastures in the preserve. As a result, TPNP remains a working cultural landscape.

This history poses one of the challenges for interpretation today. Within a dualist framework, the NPS struggles to make sense of an endangered ecosystem being preserved because Euroamericans only found it useful for cattle grazing. If it represents the cultural landscape of settler ranching communities, then the cattle that graze in the park should remain there. If, in contrast, TPNP preserves a natural landscape, then the park should include wilderness designations and perhaps exclude cattle.

Interpretation emphasizes the prairie ecosystem, the human experiences on this land, and the relationships between them, reflecting “influence of the land on the people and the people on the land” (NPS 2005, 16). Interpretation also features the preserve’s model of “public/private partnership dedicated to preserving and enhancing a nationally significant remnant of the tallgrass prairie ecosystem and the processes that sustain it...” (NPS 2005, 11). The park brochure interprets continuity between Native American and rancher uses of the land (NPS 2008). It begins with the native peoples who lived here, and signs at the Spring Hill Ranch continue this theme. At the same time, the management plan says that the park’s viewshed “offers opportunities for extraordinary and inspirational scenic views of the Flint Hills prairie landscape.” (NPS 2000, 8). Despite the supposed lack of “modern intrusions,” the park also explains how the NPS seeks to restore nature from its human uses—including a railroad spur, corrals, fences, and roads at the Fox Creek site.

Taken together, these claims are incoherent if seen in dualist terms—humans are present and absent, with and without impact. The environmental trusts do not challenge this perspective, recognizing that they were able to preserve a natural prairie landscape only by preserving part of it as a cultural landscape.

A visitor might reasonably ask if we can restore “nature” at TPNP, why not restore a prairie “wilderness”? The park’s paradoxical answer is that restored nature cannot be wilderness because even the restored landscape will retain evidence of historic human use (NPS 2009a, 20). Most of those signs of human use concern livestock grazing, but grazing is an allowable use of designated wilderness areas.

The NPS might try to rethink wilderness at TPNP, interpreting wilderness *as* a human use, one that allows recreation, grazing, and aesthetic appreciation. However, dualism gets in the way. Rather than merely playing catch-up with the scholarship, TPNP provides a place where the NPS could participate in the wilderness conversation as it unfolds. Instead, like Homestead, TPNP

still reflects dualist inertia. Yet both sites' dualisms are complex, laying the foundation for more innovative approaches in the future.

### **Connecting nature to multiple histories at Effigy Mounds**

Effigy Mounds National Monument (EMNM) lies along the Mississippi River in northeastern Iowa. It protects a unique set of earthen mounds that date to about AD 600-1150, built in the shape of animals, mostly bears and birds. It also includes many non-effigy mounds in geometric shapes that were often used for burials.

Some people proposed a "Mississippi National Park" in the 1920s that would have encompassed many of these mound sites. Though the NPS rejected a Mississippi park for lacking the monumental scenery of Western parks, it recommended establishing a national monument to protect the most important mound sites (NPS 2012; Lenzendorf 2007, 71-80; O'Bright 1989). With the support of both Congress and the State of Iowa, President Harry S Truman proclaimed such a national monument in 1949.

Where Mississippi National Park might have been, we now have a fragmented landscape with many state parks, state conservation areas, and game management areas scattered across Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Illinois. The largest of these is the Upper Mississippi National Wildlife and Fish Refuge, which encompasses 200,000 acres stretched along 260 river miles. These various units define a complex landscape of public and private property, serving various purposes.

To a degree, EMNM can serve as a visitor center to interpret the stories of the wider region. The NPS rises to this challenge. It emphasizes the mounds and the mound builders, the nature and scenery of the area, and a cluster of relationships among these themes: between mound builders and nature, between modern people and historic people, and between modern people and nature.

The visitor center and trail guides describe the cultural continuity between mound builders, their successor agricultural culture (Oneota), and the Ioway, Otoe, and other Siouan-speaking tribes of the region in historic times. These people still live nearby, as Chloris Lowe of the Ho-Chunk nation reminds visitors to the North Unit Trail:

We ask that as you walk over this land to please remember this is sacred ground to those of the mound building culture. The descendants of this culture are not a lost people but rather living, thriving American Indian cultures that today reside in what is now called the Midwest. These Native descendants continue to honor their ancestors buried here in religious ceremonies on these sacred sites. Please enjoy and respect your time among the "Old Ones" as their spirits will watch over you while you are here.

While emphasizing resource protection, the sign makes a secondary point about cultural continuity. The NPS also highlights Native American relations with Euroamerican explorers and early traders, who created "relationships with one another that changed each." The visitor center glosses over the process of conquest, while shifting interpretation to the archaeologists who investigated the mounds. After a period of excavation, the park realized that the mounds constitute part of a sacred landscape that remains important to modern tribes. The NPS removed human remains from display in 1971.

By requiring consultation with the modern peoples affiliated with those human remains, the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act reinforced these changes. Consultations with the twelve affiliated tribes helped shape a new approach to interpretation that characterizes the site today. Upgraded exhibits in 1988 focused on the relationship between the mound builders and changes in the natural environment, such as seasons, drawing on oral tradi-

tions and contemporary spiritual practices to help illuminate the meaning of the mounds to the people who built them.

Overall, EMNM allows the NPS to interpret prehistoric peoples in ways that avoid assumptions about the nature of “wilderness” and the role of humans within it. The NPS interprets the mound builders’ relationship with the natural environment. The NPS brings the story forward to contemporary native peoples of the region while also discussing modern uses of the land by non-Native Americans. The site chooses not to use words such as “wilderness” or “civilization,” but simply “people” or “culture”—applied to modern, historic, and prehistoric peoples alike. In addition, by interpreting the mounds as part of a wider landscape, park interpretation here takes this national monument some distance toward telling the stories of the Mississippi National Park that never was.

## Conclusions

We are accustomed to think of the national monuments and national historic sites as junior members of the national park system. They are smaller, less prestigious, less well-known, and generally less popular postings for NPS staff. We imagine that ideas from the big, “crown jewel” national parks trickle down through the rest of the system.

This paper shows that smaller sites have things to teach the big, famous parks. The great scenic parks imagine themselves isolated from the civilization that surrounds them, and tell a dualist story of human relations with nature. The historic sites and monuments are under no such illusions. They know that preserved lands are but a part of a larger human matrix, and they tell stories of human relationships with nature.

## References

- Callicott, J. Baird, and Michael P. Nelson, eds. 1998. *The Great New Wilderness Debate*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Lenzendorf, Dennis. 2007. *Effigy Mounds: A Guide to Effigy Mounds National Monument*. Fort Washington, PA: Eastern National.
- Nash, Roderick Frazier. 2001. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. 4th ed. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- NPS [National Park Service]. 2000. General management plan/environmental impact statement for Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve. Cottonwood Falls, KS: NPS, Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve. [www.nps.gov/tapr/upload/TAPRFinalBisonEA.pdf](http://www.nps.gov/tapr/upload/TAPRFinalBisonEA.pdf).
- . 2005. Long-range interpretive plan: Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve. Washington, DC: NPS. [www.nps.gov/history/history/online\\_books/tapr1/ip.pdf](http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/tapr1/ip.pdf).
- . 2008. Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, Kansas. Park brochure. Washington, DC: NPS. GPO 2008 339-126 80101.
- . 2009a. *Bison Management Plan: Environmental Assessment*. Washington, DC: NPS. [www.nps.gov/tapr/upload/TAPRFinalBisonEA.pdf](http://www.nps.gov/tapr/upload/TAPRFinalBisonEA.pdf).
- . 2009b. *Effigy Mounds National Monument, Iowa*. Park map and guide. GPO 2009 349-224 80363. Washington, DC: NPS. [www.nps.gov/efmo/planyourvisit/brochures.htm](http://www.nps.gov/efmo/planyourvisit/brochures.htm).
- . 2009c. *Land of Dreams: Homesteading America*. Film produced and directed by Charles Dunkerly. Harpers Ferry, WV: NPS.
- . 2012. The creation and evolution of Effigy Mounds National Monument. [www.nps.gov/efmo/historyculture/stories.htm](http://www.nps.gov/efmo/historyculture/stories.htm). Accessed 27 April 2012.
- O’Bright, Jill York. 1989. *The Perpetual March: An Administrative History of Effigy Mounds National Monument*. Omaha, NE: NPS, Midwest Regional Office.
- Pahre, Robert. 2011. Telling Yellowstone’s stories. *Journal of the West* 50:3, 31–42.

- Pahre, Robert. 2012. Reconsidering national park interpretation on the Great Plains and trans-Mississippi West. *Great Plains Research* 22:2, 108–110.
- Spence, Mark David. 1999. *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tallgrass Historians L.C. 1998. *Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve Legislative History, 1920–1996*. Omaha, NE: NPS, Midwest Support Office. [www.nps.gov/history/history/online\\_books/tapr/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/tapr/index.htm).
- Watt, Laura A. 2002. The trouble with preservation, or, getting back to the wrong term for wilderness protection: A case study at Point Reyes National Seashore. *Yearbook of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers* 64, 55–72.
- Wockner, Gary. 1997. *National Park Conundrums: The Wolves of Isle Royale*. Fort Collins, CO: B-Store Press.