

"America's Best Idea":

A Review of Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History

Richard West Sellars. Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut. 364 pp., clothbound.

Reviewed by Gary E. Davis

The concept of national parks, setting aside unbroken tracts of land and sea for the enjoyment of people, has been called America's best idea. In *Preserving Nature in the National Parks*, Richard West Sellars meticulously traces the evolution of the national park concept and America's national park system from 1870 to the present. From beginning to end, he confronts readers with evidence that disputes tradition. Among other beliefs, he authoritatively challenges the romantic campfire myth of an altruistic birth of Yellowstone National Park and the national park concept. He offers in its place a pragmatic rationale more consistent with the times. This book is a scholarly presentation of carefully researched and documented facts, woven into an unbroken story.

The tale unfolds from the perspective of the National Park Service, the primary governmental agency responsible for conserving parks. It starts with the campfire myth and then follows with renowned landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., crafting and shaping the National Park Service's mission "to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life [in

parks]Éunimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations." It ends with the 1993 creation of the National Biological Survey and the sweeping reorganization of the National Park Service in 1995. Throughout, readers get an insider's view of America's favorite government agency. As the story approaches the present, it necessarily shallows to encompass ever more territory, losing its rich historical texture, but gaining a journalistic perspective that serves readers well.

Great new ideas always create tension and elicit vigorous debate. Sellars skillfully draws our attention to a series of tensions created by the national park idea that shaped the concept and its manifestations in the 20th century. Born as a dream of profit from limitless recreational tourism, the creation of national parks was an attempt to resolve the conflict over how to wrest the greatest good and profit from the land: consumption through private exploitation or through public tourism. Sellars also examines the tension between development in parks to facilitate access, lodging, and consumptive recreation versus wilderness preservation. Landscape architects, engi-

neers, and biologists expressed conflicting interpretations of "unimpaired" during the 1920s and 1930s. This tension has evolved into a continuing discussion of scenery or façade versus ecosystem management.

Clearly, early promoters of national parks had no qualms about developing facilities in parks and consuming park resources. In promoting the creation of the National Park Service in 1916, Robert Sterling Yard wrote in *The Nation's Business*: "We want our national parks developed.... We want good fishing. We want our wild animal life conserved and developed." The first two directors of the National Park Service, businessman Stephen Mather and lawyer Horace Albright, both believed the public needed to be enticed into parks with roads, lodges, and enhanced fishing, in addition to the parks' scenery and other natural assets. They set about building facilities, including fish hatcheries, and planting alien fish in parks as their first order of business for the new agency. They also believed they should 'enhance' the parks by suppressing fires, eradicating predators, and controlling forest pests and diseases, which they did vigorously.

At its inception, national park management was a new human endeavor. No one before had tried to preserve intact large tracts of wild land- and seascapes for public enjoyment and to pass them on to future generations. Unlike forest and fisheries management that had centuries

of precedent and practice, what park managers needed to do had no precedent. They were truly exploring the unknown, and thus relied on extant professions for guidance. Foresters, landscape architects, and engineers who used land to produce commodities and who molded landscapes to fit human perceptions of idyllic and pastoral settings came the closest to fitting the new paradigm, so they got the job: directed by businessmen and lawyers. However, national park management is more than a simple combination of these early professions: it also requires applied sciences, particularly ecology. Adding ecologists to this mix was like combining oil and water. We're still looking for an emulsification agent.

Sellars makes it clear that the tension between scientists and non-scientists regarding national park management was the same in the 1930s as it is today. In part, the differences arise from non-scientists' reliance on untestable, belief-based consensus versus scientists' adherence to a testable, knowledge-based system of learning from experience. If one believes that fire destroys forests, or that wolves threaten elk populations, there is no reason to waste time and money testing the concepts. One simply acts on these beliefs and suppresses fire and kills wolves. Testing such beliefs threatens the belief and the believers, and thus creates a perception that science would make park management more costly, difficult, and time-consuming. This may be at the root of the issue that creates the

tension between so-called traditional and ecological approaches to park stewardship.

Science as a way of knowing should make attainment of the National Park Service mission more certain and cost-effective. The true costs of ecological restoration and of losing America's heritage to unfounded beliefs is vastly greater than the costs associated with learning first how ecosystems work and doing the job right the first time. We paid dearly for early misguided forest fire suppression. First we paid the unnecessary costs of suppression. Now we are paying the costs of restoring fire, with the risk of losing the very assets we sought to protect if we delay any longer. We paid to eradicate wolves and other predators, then paid to reduce elk and deer, then lost soil and vegetation, and now we must pay to restore wolf populations. This kind of cost dwarfs the minimal costs of using science to learn what is in parks, how to restore impaired assets, how to maintain restored parks, and how to protect parks from pollution, unsustainable uses, fragmentation, and alien species. In short, using science to learn from our experience reduces uncertainty and costs.

In the last century, the parks could afford the boosterism, "enhancements," and facilities of Mather and Albright and still recover, because parks were not the islands in a fragmented and diminished landscape they are today. Few refugia exist today, outside legislated wilderness, from which to find replacement

genomes and species to repair the damage wrought by misguided policies. We are already beginning to lose our heritage in the marine environment where we have no wilderness and no refugia, and denial of human impact is rampant even in the National Park System. Time is short. Options to conserve and pass unimpaired parks on to future generations become more limited every year.

Change is inevitable. Will we use science to learn from experience, or continue to blindly accept and act on unsubstantiated beliefs? The National Park Service will not accept a change from its primary goal of recreational tourism to science-guided resources protection until its leaders personally experience success with science. As a result, people such as Richard Sellars run great risk of being attacked by opponents vested in the old system and only moderately supported by skeptics of the new, science-based system. Since the national park concept is new, unique, few have the necessary personal experience, yet. Perhaps the introspection in this book will lead to trying new ways to conserve parks.

In interpretive jargon, scenery is the hook. Once enticed into the parks by the scenery, the public can personally experience the wonders they contain, beyond the view. Mather and Albright believed they had to entice the public to visit parks and support the park concept. The National Park Service did that during the 20th century. The public has found and loves their park system and the Na-

tional Park Service. Now the hard work begins—learning what is in the parks and how they work, restoring impaired assets, maintaining impaired processes, and protecting parks as islands of wilderness in a landscape dominated by human activities.

Until we learn our history, how we

came to where we are, and where we thought we were going, we risk endlessly repeating the same mistakes. This account illuminates our path. Read it. You will like it. You may not agree with everything in it, but you will learn from it. We and our national parks will all be better for it.

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