

The Foundations of the National Parks: Ideals and Realities

In the popular rhetoric of American environmentalism, the survival of the national parks depends on everyone's commitment to the highest standards of preservation. The common value of national parks asserts that the environment should always be our first priority. In reality, the long-term security of the national parks today is no more certain than it was a century ago. Now, as then, every conflict can still be traced to some level of disagreement that a national park exists primarily for the preservation of its natural environment.

Avowed friends of the national parks may also espouse the principle, but are no less tempted to ignore it. Even the magazines of environmental organizations accept advertisements for sport-utility vehicles, mountain bikes, and alcohol, for example. Environmentalism itself, it would appear, has become just another business. Indeed, the Marlboro Man represents more than a single product; rather, he epitomizes the persuasiveness of an entire mind-set, a culture still bent on economic growth and consumerism more than saving the natural world.

In part, the problem lies with history. When national parks were first established, protection of the environment as now defined was the least of preservationists' aims. Rather, the emotions of nature were distinctly cultural, upholding a long tradition in the United States of asserting that natural wonders were themselves a con-

tribution to world civilization. The giant sequoias were compared to the pyramids and Yosemite Valley to the cathedrals of western Europe, for example. Similarly, basaltic formations in the canyon of the Yellowstone River were hailed as the equivalent of ancient castles and storied ruins.

Obviously, if national parks were cultural icons, they had to be opened for all to see. Yellowstone Lake, for example, convinced the explorer Nathaniel Pitt Langford that America would one day enjoy the equivalent of Lake Como, in the Italian Alps. He, too, looked forward not to preserving Yellowstone Lake as wilderness, but rather "to the march of civil improvements that will reclaim this delightful solitude, and garnish it with all the attractions of cultivated taste and refinement."

The National Park Service, established in 1916, inherited that 50-year tradition of extolling the parks pri-

marily as repositories of cultural identity. More, it took important cues from the railroads—and later from Detroit—that the “fundamental purpose” of the national parks, “to conserve the scenery and the natural and the historic objects and the wild life therein,” could be appropriately bent to accommodate visitation. Gradually, planners and landscape architects—no less than concessionaires, contractors, and other business interests—sided with the popular mood of American tourism, locating so-called villages, roads, and parking lots adjacent to the parks’ principal natural features.

The erosion of public transportation, as underscored by the demise of rail passenger service in the United States, further translated—both outside and inside the parks—into promoting the use of automobiles. The stage had been set for a myriad of contradictions, from congestion and the death of wildlife to drunken driving and urban crime.

Originally in August 1865, a distinguished student of American culture, Frederick Law Olmsted, called attention to the problem, noting that the preservation of natural environments was no less immune to human greed and self-indulgence. For every voice of conscience there would always be its counterpart, pleading that preservation had somehow gone too far. On June 30, 1864, President Abraham Lincoln had signed legislation protecting Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of giant sequoias “for public use, resort, and recre-

ation,” to be held “inalienable for all time.” Addressing the Yosemite Board of Park Commissioners, Olmsted both summarized the act’s significance and the likely threats to its integrity. For the moment, he readily conceded that visitation to Yosemite Valley then totaled only several hundred people annually. Yet “before many years,” he predicted with amazing foresight, “these hundreds will become thousands, and in a century the whole number of visitors will be counted in the millions.” The significance of those figures should be obvious to anyone. “An injury to the scenery so slight that it may be unheeded by any visitor now,” he noted, “will be one of deplorable magnitude when its effect upon each visitor’s enjoyment is multiplied by these millions.” The duty of Yosemite’s guardians was clear and unmistakable. Management must protect “the rights of posterity as well as of contemporary visitors.” After all, “the millions who are hereafter to benefit by the Act have the largest interest in it, and the largest interest should be first and most strenuously guarded.”

Olmsted’s insistence on responsibility to the natural environment ultimately proved too demanding and exacting. The dictates of American commerce resisted impositions over the enjoyment of park visitors. Inevitably, a regimen of development took hold in the parks, as underscored by a growing emphasis on rustic lodges and grand hotels. Gradually, the flagship national parks, among them Yellowstone, Yosemite,

Glacier, and Grand Canyon, lost their original sense of wilderness, taking on many of the characteristics of eastern spas and summer resorts.

Fortunately, preservationists were vindicated in their fears about too much development in the fate of Niagara Falls, which, by the 1860s, had totally succumbed to commercialization. To be sure, Frederick Law Olmsted was thinking about Niagara when he enumerated his warnings about the future of Yosemite Valley. For two hundred years, the falls had epitomized the grandeur and freshness of nature in North America. Suddenly, the smoke of adjacent mills drifted skyward along with Niagara's mists, while tourist sharks of every persuasion importuned its disillusioned and harried visitors.

In the West, such deep-seated prejudices for commercial pursuits were momentarily tempered by the excitement of discovery. The point is that Congress was no less insistent on the privilege of later reflection and re-assessment. "At some future time," noted Senator Lyman Trumbull of Illinois, characterizing the debates leading to the establishment of Yellowstone National Park, "if we desire to do so, we can repeal this law if it is in anybody's way, but now I think it a very appropriate bill to pass." In the House, it remained for Representative Henry Dawes of Massachusetts to make the promise no less forcefully or sincerely. "This bill reserves the control over Yellowstone," he clarified, "and preserves the control over it to the United States, so that at any time

when it shall appear that it will be better to devote it to any other purpose it will be perfectly within the control of the United States to do it." And still his qualifications continued. "If upon a more minute survey it shall be found that Yellowstone can be made useful for settlers, and not depredators, it will be perfectly proper this bill should pass" [in other words, be repealed]. "We part with no control; we put no obstacle in the way of any other disposition of it; we but interfere with ... those who are attracted by the wonderful descriptions of it ... and who are going there to plunder this wonderful manifestation of nature."

Yellowstone escaped the ax, its alleged worthlessness perennially supported by Dawes's closing words of reassurance. Not only was the region "rocky, mountainous, and full of gorges," he maintained; why, even "the Indians," he added for emphasis, "can no more live there than they can upon the precipitous sides of the Yosemite Valley."

In contrast, Yosemite National Park, established in 1890 surrounding the 1864 grant to California, materially suffered from preservationists' inability to make the same analogy. Originally, the national park included 1,512 square miles, extending from the peaks of the High Sierra well across its belt of encircling foothills. Cavalry officers patrolling the park reported that the foothills were no less important than its fabled scenery, especially for wildlife populations seeking winter refuge. However, in

the late 1880s settlers and speculators had rushed to claim the region, anticipating the success of preservation efforts. Consequently, more than 60,000 acres within the boundaries of Yosemite National Park had already fallen into private ownership, and thus were still open to logging, mining, and grazing. Observant military officers consistently urged Congress through the secretary of the Interior that these threats should be eliminated, ultimately by purchasing all of the private lands for further maintenance within the boundaries of the reserve.

Instead, in 1904 a special commission sided with state economic interests, recommending to Congress that all private or commercially valuable lands be excluded from the park. Congress agreed, and the next year readjusted Yosemite's boundaries, deleting 542 square miles, regardless of their alleged importance as scenic buffers or wildlife habitat.

As John Muir confessed, America's evolving commitment to scenic preservation had in no way diluted the nation's preoccupation with extracting every possible resource from the public domain. "Nothing dollarable is safe," he bitterly concluded, "however guarded." Merely the size of a national park, in other words, was no guarantee of the nation's pledge to hold it "inalienable for all time." More likely, the larger the national park, the more susceptible it was to being challenged as excessive.

To be sure, well into the 20th century, both the survival and ex-

pansion of the National Park System rested not on dramatic instances of statesmanship, but rather on the compatibility of the nation's long-held cultural biases. In the nation's eagerness to seek out its boldest, most "monumental" landscapes, park enthusiasts invariably idolized those features—mountains, canyons, glaciers, volcanoes—whose potential to be exploited was highly doubtful in the first place. It took a later generation of Americans, specifically, preservationists educated about such concepts as "ecological interdependence" and "biological diversity," to demand that the National Park System protect all elements of the natural world, including endangered species of flora and fauna.

Credit for that reappraisal in large part belongs to the scientific community, and especially to Joseph Grinnell, the distinguished director of the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology at the University of California at Berkeley. As early as the 1910s, he urged fellow scientists, government officials, and the general public to consider that the national parks should protect more than scenic "wonders." Finally, in 1933, the National Park Service released a precedent-breaking report acknowledging the parks' biological limitations, *Fauna of the National Parks of the United States*. Its authors, all protégés of Grinnell's, were George M. Wright, Joseph S. Dixon, and Ben H. Thompson. Experts in the evolving field of wildlife management, they concluded that the national parks

lacked sufficient territory. "The preponderance of unfavorable wildlife conditions confronting superintendents," they wrote, setting the principal theme of their study, "is traceable to the insufficiency of park areas as self-contained biological units.... At present, not one park is large enough to provide year-round sanctuary for adequate populations of all resident species." And that assessment included Yellowstone, still the nation's most renowned and expansive park.

The solution—enlarging the existing national parks to reflect ecological boundaries—depended on how rapidly science might break down existing perceptions and prejudices, most notably, that national parks should protect only representative examples of superlative natural features. In most instances, the wildlife habitat Wright, Dixon, and Thompson had singled out as desirable for addition to the national parks consisted of foothills and lowlands, terrain traditionally considered too "commonplace" or "monotonous" for national park status. Moreover, it was here, in the shadow of mountain peaks, that economic interests, particularly loggers, miners, and ranchers, had staked out their claims. These, then, were the two major hurdles working against park science: first, that neither park managers nor the American public considered general topography sufficiently important, and second, that economic necessity pre-empted any consideration of adding so-called productive lands to the national parks.

The enlargement to Grand Teton National Park in 1950 to include farm and ranch lands in Jackson Hole, coupled with the dedication in 1947 of Everglades National Park, Florida, testified to the weakening of historical perceptions that parks should be confined to both rugged and marginally productive lands. Still, it was one thing to propose national parks with enough territory to protect their biological integrity, and yet another to achieve that philosophy in fact as well as in theory. Even today, continuing threats to the Everglades from powerful agricultural interests recall the traditional limitations imposed on biological conservation. Nor should we forget the lesson of Redwood National Park, whose virgin stands in Redwood Creek were virtually eliminated prior to its establishment and subsequent enlargement, in 1968 and 1978, respectively.

Urbanization, pollution, and population growth still add immeasurably to the problem, pressing in, as never before, to upset the delicate balance between development and conservation. Criticism of the national parks is also common among conservative political interests, much as minorities see little value in protecting lands they allege their members will never get to see.

The problem, quite simply, is that any system restricting nature to "reservations" may no longer be effective. Notably, in the Progressive Era (1890-1920), preservation was more inclusive, insisting on the need

to protect America the Beautiful, not just those lands designated as city, state, or national parks. Ultimately, preservationists looked to the countryside close at hand as the barometer of their success. If the city and its immediate environs were no less healthful and pleasing to the eye, then preservation had indeed fulfilled its mission. But if those “everyday” landscapes also succumbed to ugliness, then saving the parks alone was hardly an achievement in itself.

Carrying the argument for America the Beautiful beyond aesthetics to biology, progressive scientists like Joseph Grinnell further emphasized the thrill of “living” landscapes. Granted, in the tradition of Frederick Law Olmsted a landscape should be picturesque, that is, visually pleasing and inspirational. No less important, however, preservationists should secure every landscape’s ability to provide habitat for indigenous plants and animals. In that vein, Grinnell credited his students with “fieldwork” if they led bird-watching classes, for example, and indeed reveled in their reports confirming the participation of the Bay Area’s leading citizens. Ignoring a common charge in academe today, that he had merely “popularized” his subject, Grinnell looked beyond the university. Sharing the larger vision of progressive conservationists, he believed education should embrace the entire populace. Consequently, introducing the natural world to the citizens of Berkeley, Oakland, and San Francisco was no less important than en-

sureing the protection of distant wonders like Yosemite.

There was just no escaping the realities of the modern, industrial world. Within another half century, the population of the United States had doubled yet again, and a new machine, the automobile, was loosed all across the countryside. Increasingly, preservationists found themselves defending the leftovers, once again, the nation’s public lands. For national parks, the future was especially ominous. At Grand Canyon, the Bureau of Reclamation proposed two major reservoirs. On the boundary of Everglades National Park, a jetport intended for supersonic passenger aircraft had been speedily cleared and graded. Although the jetport was not completed, and the dams in Grand Canyon were defeated in 1968, no one doubted that the future of conservation would be very different from its past.

Increasingly, the challenge of the 1970s and 1980s was to restore the integrity of progressive conservation, renewing its insistence on the preservation of a national landscape rather than just its spectacular bits and pieces. In the private sector, groups such as the Nature Conservancy and the Trust for Public Land picked up where traditional environmentalism still preferred not to tread—asking Americans as a whole, not merely the federal government, to secure and protect natural beauty. Grassroots environmentalism similarly enlisted the support of tens of thousands of volunteers, focusing on campaigns

for local and regional landscapes. In that larger estimation of national need, farmlands and wetlands, for example, enjoyed renewed importance as the ecological equivalent of the national parks, if not obviously their scenic rivals.

More subtle, but no less significant, is the battle still raging inside the national parks over appropriate means of access. The ecological priorities of the 1980s and 1990s have obviously clashed with the traditional view of national parks, extolling scenery as their primary feature. In Yellowstone, for example, winter use has skyrocketed, thanks to the widespread use of snowmobiles. Historically, extending the visitor season would have been considered positive, benefiting both the parks and their concessionaires. Now even the Park Service is not so sure. Rent by criticism from the environmental community, the NPS admits the excessive costs of winter management. Once again, the more that any national park is turned into a business, the more its environmental base erodes.

It is critical that the United States now decide what it wants from the remainder of its public lands. The argument that the parks contribute to tourism is itself utilitarian, alarmingly suggestive that Americans still dare not protect what they cannot turn into a profit. In that vein, pressures to develop the parks solely to accommodate tourism are themselves no less ominous than threats from external forces. It is not just air pollution, de-

clining water quality, and neighboring development that affect the national parks. It is also what people do when they enter the parks, what they expect and then demand. If they demand more than the privilege of entry, the parks are ultimately doomed to fail, for it is only through discipline, not indulgence, that preservation can ever hope to reign supreme.

Too often, the Park Service itself has argued that the American people expect modern conveniences, especially straighter, wider, and faster roads. Such roads are not only the prerequisite of comfort and convenience, but also the safety of park visitors. Historically, Frederick Law Olmsted argued for roads and vehicles that accommodated the environment, and not the other way around. If that concept is still so alien to the American people, again, there can hardly be hope for the permanence of the national parks. For it is only in the giving up, not the giving in, that any standard of preservation can be upheld.

No, rhetoric and good intentions are no longer adequate to secure the future of any of America's national parks. Their survival now depends solely on a renewed commitment to civic duty and public discipline, which, however elusive and resistant to definition, stand for something larger than one's self. True enough, it is evident that most Americans still believe in the *ideal* of their national parks. It is in translating the ideal into reality—upholding the integrity of preservation while accommodating

daily pressures and demands—that filled with conflict as distinct from re-
park management is still so visibly newal and consensus.

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