



Historical and Ecological Considerations in the Establishment of National Parks and Monuments

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Congress declared in the national park system General Authorities Act of 1970 that areas comprising the national park system are cumulative expressions of a single national heritage. Yet the national park system is not representative of the range of natural resources that our nation has been blessed with. While many localities and communities strive very hard to have the places they love become part of the national park system, other communities fiercely oppose the idea. Redesignating federal lands as national monuments by a sitting president under the Antiquities Act is always controversial, and so too were the recent designations by President Obama in the last months of his presidency under this Act.

The Antiquities Act was first exercised by Republican President Theodore Roosevelt in 1906 to designate Devils Tower National Monument in Wyoming. Sixteen presidents since 1906 have used the act to protect some of America's most inspiring natural and historic features, including the Grand Canyon and the Statue of Liberty. Under the act, presidents of the United States are authorized to declare by public proclamation historic landmarks, historic and prehistoric structures, and other objects of historic or scientific interest that are situated upon the lands owned or controlled by the government of the United States to be national monuments. Nearly a quarter of all national park units originated in whole or part from the Antiquities Act.

One of the most recent designations was the Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument. A donation of land by Roxanne Quimby, former owner of Burt's Bees, was made to the National Park Service (NPS) for the purposes of establishing a national park in Elliotsville Plantation in the State of Maine. As most all designations under the Antiquities Act are, this was very controversial.

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The 87,000 acre property, located next to Baxter State Park, home to Mount Katahdin and the northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail, was donated to the federal government in late August 2016 and quickly designated as the Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument. As with Bears Ears National Monument in Southern Utah and some other designations, the loss of local control is a great issue. With the sharp decline of the logging industry in the Northeast there was also a concern that moving 87,000 acres from active logging to conservation land would spell the end of this industry in Maine. However, with 17.5 million acres of forest in Maine, 95% held privately, Quimby's property represents a small fraction of the timberlands that once supported a major wood products industry.

With an estimate of one percent of the state in federal ownership, Maine is under-represented in the national system of national parks. Thus the Quimby property would provide the opportunity to include an unrepresented ecoregion without foreclosing on future forestry options. The donation of land is valued at \$60 million, with Roxanne Quimby providing \$20 million to fund park operations with a commitment to raise another \$20 million.

Another issue expressed by many which will be addressed here is whether the proposed national monument lands were worthy of national park status. Although the question of local control over the management of federal lands continues, whether they be national forests, national wildlife refuges, national parks or national monuments, the conflict over appropriate management will persist. However, the question of the appropriateness of the land in question for national park status is one that needs to be addressed and perhaps dispelled.

Besides re-designations of federally-owned land that occur under the Antiquities Act, only Congress can establish a national park. The NPS is often requested by the U.S. Congress to consider certain properties for inclusion into the national park system. With both processes, the first step is to consider several criteria and make recommendations to the secretary of the interior. Potential additions to the national park system should present an outstanding representation of the broad spectrum of natural and cultural resources that characterize this national heritage.

NPS Management Policies of 2006 state that to receive a favorable recommendation from the NPS, a proposed addition to the national park system must be "an outstanding example of a particular type of resource. It possesses exceptional value or quality in illustrating or interpreting the natural or cultural themes of our nation's heritage. It offers superlative opportunities for public enjoyment or for scientific study. It retains a high degree of integrity as a true, accurate, and relatively unspoiled example of a resource." So it is appropriate to consider the Quimby property in light of these criteria and in light of similar historical examples within the current national park system.

In terms of adding an important element to the national park system there seems to be little doubt that the Quimby property possesses exceptional value as an example of a northeastern conifer-hardwood forested ecosystem. Distinct ecoregional boundaries have been suggested by numerous ecologists, but there seems to be a consensus that forests of central northern Maine are a part of the Laurentian mixed forest ecoregion described as a transition zone between the boreal spruce-fir forest to the north and the deciduous forest to the south. Acadia National Park, more heavily influenced by the Atlantic Ocean, belongs to the eastern broadleaf forest (oceanic) province more to the south.

The land includes spectacular views of Mount Katahdin (Figure 1), several mountain peaks, about 25 miles of the East Branch of the Penobscot River, including four spectacular rapids and falls, and the lower reaches of Wassataquoik Stream, which flows out of Baxter State Park. It is home to moose, deer, bear, lynx, and many bird species.

So, too, is there little doubt of the superlative opportunities for public enjoyment and scientific study. The recreation values of this area were well acknowledged as far back as the late 1880s. In 1895 the Maine Proprietors Association urged the state to turn this area of the Maine woods into a state park to attract tourists. In 1911 a bill was introduced to turn the region into a national park but none of these efforts was successful. Maine has increasingly become a tourist destination since the Civil War and the tourism contribution to the state economy expanded rapidly into the twentieth century, spurred by the robust promotional efforts by the railroads and others as many attempted to capitalize on the growing demand for outdoor experiences by eastern urbanites.

The opportunities for advancing scientific understanding of northern forested ecosystems, wildlife habitats, lakes and mountains environments abound. Most recently the concerns about the potential impacts from projected climate change on wildlife and plant populations, timber production, and insect and disease outbreaks have accelerated research activities in Maine.

Figure 1. View of Mount Katahdin from Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument.



Does the proposed park property retain a high degree of integrity as a true, accurate, and relatively unspoiled example of a resource? Most authors who have written about the Quimby property have rightly noted that it has been heavily logged over the many decades. The previous proprietors, the Great Northern Paper Company, sold the property to Quimby with commercially valuable assets largely removed. This is not unusual as by the 1900s most of the land in and adjacent to the Quimby property was harvested. In fact, most of the timber of New England had by this time had been harvested whenever it became profitable. White pine was the first species targeted but spruce and other species followed as the pulp and paper industries expanded. It may be difficult to conclude that the plantation in question retains a high degree of integrity as a true, accurate, and relatively unspoiled example of a northern forest ecosystem.

Although an important if not critical attribute, how important is it for the property to possess a very high level of integrity now? Although the forests cannot be described as “old growth” or original, primeval, ancient or virgin, not ever having been logged or otherwise affected by humans, they can be described in ecological terms as a forest that was cut long ago but is in ecological recovery on a trajectory to become old growth in our lifetime. There are precedents for establishing national parks from areas that have been highly impacted. Let’s examine two other examples of national parks with extensive land use challenges from the time of inclusion into the national park system and how these properties appear today.

The story of the Great Smoky Mountains

In the early part of the 1920s, with recreation trips to the western USA increasing, an interest developed in establishing a national park in the eastern USA. With funds committed (via philanthropy and even pennies collected by school children), 1929 was spent trying to get landowners to sell their properties in order to establish the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. This was a daunting task, because even though timber companies were the largest landowners, there were many other owners with very small tracts to obtain—over 6,000 in all. Many were descendants of original settlers, some simply loved their homes and didn’t want to move under any circumstances, and a few were big business interests such as the Little River Lumber Company and the Champion Fiber Company (the single largest owner), who held out for as much as they could (Figure 2). It wasn’t until 1931 that the Champion and the Little River Lumber Company sold their property but continued to cut timber for 15 more years.

The larger question that remains is whether a national park’s past land use is important ecologically over time. Had the logging history permanently damaged the Great Smoky Mountains in perpetuity?

The scientific literature is replete with examples of studies documenting the local impacts of logging and other land uses on forested ecosystems, from changes in temperature, nitrogen cycling, carbon storage capabilities, etc. The Great Smoky Mountains is an excellent example of a national park area if left alone can recover from early land use practices to become one of the most ecologically rich and diverse protected areas in the world. An all-taxa biological inventory has documented over 1,300 native vascular plant species, including 105 native tree species, plus nearly 500 species of non-vascular plants—a level of floristic diversity that rivals or exceeds other temperate zone protected areas of similar size (Figure 3). The park is also home to the world’s greatest diversity of salamander species (31)—an important indicator of overall ecosystem health—and is the center of diversity for lungless salamanders, with 24 species. It is also a designated World Heritage site as a place of “outstanding universal value.”

Figure 2. Logging in Great Smoky Mountains in 1920
(photo: George Masa).



One could conclude that although the Quimby property has been heavily logged, this should not have presented an obstacle to national park designation. As stated previously, the 87,000 acre gift to the nation has numerous natural attributes with the logged areas providing the promise of a northern conifer-hardwood ecological recovery for the enjoyment of all.

The story of Grand Teton National Park

As early as 1897, Colonel S.B.M. Young, acting superintendent of Yellowstone, proposed to expand Yellowstone's boundaries southward to encompass portions of northern Jackson Hole to protect migrating elk herds. Neither the Department of the Interior nor Congress acted on this proposal. In 1916, a new bureau called the National Park Service was created within the Department of Interior. Stephen Mather as the first director was committed to expanding the number and sizes of parks. In a report to then Secretary of the Interior, Frank Lane, it was stated that adding part of the Tetons, Jackson Lake, and headwaters of the Snake River to Yellowstone National Park is "one of seven urgent needs facing the Park Service." Over fears expressed by the state of Idaho over the loss of sheep grazing permits with federal jurisdiction, the effort failed. In addition to Idaho sheep ranchers, other groups opposed park extension; these included Jackson Hole businessmen, area ranchers and the regional U.S. Forest Service personnel who feared the loss of jurisdiction on previously managed forest areas.

Proposals soon emerged to dam outlets of Jenny Lake and Emma Matilda and Two Ocean Lakes in 1919. Alarmed businessmen and ranchers felt that some form of protection by the NPS might be their only salvation from commercialization and natural resource destruction. John D. Rockefeller purchased 35,000 acres but attempts by Rockefeller to give these properties to the NPS met resistance.

Difficulties of park-making define Grand Teton National Park and emphasize the visionary ideology of Horace Albright, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and several pro-park residents. Legislation for the new park contained significant compromises: protection of existing grazing rights and stock



Figure 3. Great Smoky Mountains National Park today is among the most biologically diverse natural areas in the world.

driveways; reimbursement to Teton County for lost tax revenues; provision for the controlled reduction of elk within park boundaries; agreement that in the future presidential proclamation could not be used to create a national monument in Wyoming; and allowance for continuation of certain existing uses and access rights to forest lands and inholder properties.

Cliff Hansen, a powerful rancher and Senator, was strongly opposed to designation of a national park. At one point drove a herd of cattle through downtown Jackson Hole in protest of the proposed federal presence. Later he was to write that that was one fight he was glad he had lost.

Each new national park has its own particular enabling legislation that shapes the activities allowed in that park. While all must be compatible with maintaining an unimpaired natural system, examples exist of national parks being established with lands being used extensively for human uses. Grazing and hunting are but just two land uses that were maintained in areas slated to be included into the national park system. So the inclusion of the Quimby property, although heavily logged and with intense local interest in recreational access, may not exclude it from inclusion. Numerous examples of compromises similar to the Grand Tetons exist, from continuing to allow the commercial harvest of shellfish by the towns at Cape Cod National Seashore, Massachusetts, to Big Thicket National Preserve, Texas, where oil and gas exploration and extraction continues in and around the park, authorized by Congress. So, in closing, we think you should take the opportunity to visit a rare occurrence, the establishment of a new unit of the national park system in a part of the country where private property rules.