

Why National Parks?

Detailing why there are national parks in THE GEORGE WRIGHT FORUM would seem like rehashing what is obvious for those already convinced. Who better than park professionals know the evolution of the national parks, from cultural pride to biological sanctuary to historic preservation and urban redemption? More, who believes in these mandates without question? Who better understands—and again accepts—why the size and diversity of the system requires the federal government, including the power of the federal purse to buy out local frivolities and special interests?

It is the common knowledge of 130 years. At their largest, America's national parks maintain the hope of preserving natural systems; as historical parks, they remain the nation's shrines. Parks of the people should be owned by the people, managed by the people, and remain a statement of pride to the world. The national parks are indeed a national mission, the country acting in Congress assembled.

So again, why do we need the reminder? Simply, we need it because others do. Always ready to honor an open dialogue, we have let every detractor into the tent. Now some want to own the tent, and us to give it up. Our openness is their opening wedge. Certainly throughout the twentieth century the principal threats were the traditional ones—economic instead of intellectual. Even then, the controversy was whether parks were too large, not whether the parks ought to exist. People in the West (still with the vast majority of public lands) were themselves not so much against the idea of having parks as they were against the few that allegedly pre-

served too much.

Today the opposition is as likely to come from anywhere, and indeed, dares ask why the nation should have parks at all. To re-emphasize, in the past that was mostly a subliminal question, and largely from those perceiving some economic loss. Consequently, it remained possible to write off the worst attacks on the national parks as principally a regional outburst. By itself, the West did not speak for American culture, in whose heart affection for the national parks was secure.

The difference today is that the public lands are everywhere under attack—all of them, including parks. “The time has come to rethink wilderness,” writes the historian William Cronon, for example. “This will seem a heretical claim to many environmentalists, since the idea of wilderness has for decades been a fundamental tenet—indeed, a passion—of the environmental movement, especially in the United States. For many Americans wilderness stands as the last remaining place where civilization, that all too human disease, has not fully infected

the earth.” Think again, he further insists. If civilization is “contaminated,” so must be the wilderness. “Wilderness hides its unnaturalness behind a mask that is all the more beguiling because it seems so natural. As we gaze into the mirror it holds up for us, we too easily imagine that what we behold is Nature when in fact we see the reflection of our own unexamined longings and desires.”

Arguing with Cronon is not the point here; rather, it is why anyone in his position would make this argument. Historically, people of letters were the preservation movement, just as people in extractive industries were its antithesis. As Roderick Nash put it in *Wilderness and the American Mind*: “The literary gentleman wielding a pen, not the pioneer with his axe, made the first gestures of resistance against the strong currents of antipathy.” Now it would appear that antipathy to the national parks has spread even to America’s universities. Certainly William Cronon’s, the University of Wisconsin, is a major institution. So is the University of California at Santa Barbara, which has not replaced Roderick Nash since he retired.

For the question, why national parks? both examples are troubling portents. There is more going on here than free speech or a predictable Devil’s advocacy. Increasingly, scholars are serious about the argument that the national parks are out of date. It begins by chastising anything American that allegedly fails diversity and multiculturalism. Fine, start over with that history; how does it follow the parks have failed? Is there another institution that has done more for

international relations and goodwill? Is it not possible the tensions of the Cold War and European colonialism were eased by the spread of parks? Is any country poorer for having established them, either culturally or economically? Would any country—would the world—be better off without the natural wonders and wildlife populations the national parks have undoubtedly saved?

Where does it say the national parks reject humanity just because they demand of civilization a bit of sacrifice? What do diversity and multiculturalism mean—the right to forget posterity? Yes, parks are always a deprivation to those who wanted something else, and to anyone who wants it now. They fall hardest on the local populace whose extractive traditions may be disrupted. The point is whether they should be disrupted, as in what would happen to those resources in the future were they not. Do we personally go on a diet just for today, or because we hope to live more tomorrows? As it stands, technology far more than parks has forced people to give up one livelihood and accept another. Blaming parks is but another convenient scapegoat for changes that would have come to the world regardless.

The worry is when citizen educators cannot see the difference. After all, it is in universities that we prepare the future to resolve the issues without choosing scapegoats. If the parks must give way to anyone, whether led by the Sagebrush Rebellion or New Left—or others—what is it we have really saved? Besides, the vast majority of parks are marginal lands, both in the

United States and abroad. If they had ever been more than marginal the vast majority would not have been parks in the first place. In truth, the straw man of wilderness is so easily blown over there is practically no straw there.

Meanwhile, the voice of history reminds us that the critics are wrong. Parks have always been more than sentimental. As early as 1870, the Berkeley geologist Joseph LeConte took his students to Yosemite Valley to study science. That was two years even before the establishment of Yellowstone National Park, and only six after Congress granted Yosemite Valley to California. True, the general public was drawn to Yosemite and Yellowstone as repositories of cultural nationalism—waterfalls, mountains, canyons, and geysers that could be waved under the nose of Europe. Scientists, on the other hand, were already looking behind the scenery. As America's "outdoor laboratories" the parks filled a critical, practical need. When William Cronon describes affection for wilderness as "unexamined longings and desires," he most certainly does not speak for geologists and biologists who believed in parks for the study of creation.

It is a relationship that has only grown, flourishing today in cooperating arrangements between the National Park Service and a number of universities—many institutions if the list includes individuals pursuing contracts. But again, beyond that, history by the term "tradition" means something larger. It is rather the vitality given conservation by intellectuals who made no apologies for believing in parks. Consider Wallace Stegner, as

a professor at Stanford University, declaring the national parks "the best idea we ever had." Consider Joseph Grinnell, A. Starker Leopold, and Roderick Nash at the University of California, urging—indeed inspiring—their students to pursue careers on the public lands.

What happened to the tradition of a national faculty pursuing criticism without being cynical? It is the cynicism that is new—and dangerous. Suddenly, as another example, the national parks are "unfriendly" to women and minorities. But again, is it true? As early as 1967, I was told in the Washington, D.C., headquarters of the National Park Service that slots in the agency were being "banked" for women and minorities. I should not expect an easy time of it being hired right out of college. When in 1980 I did put on a Park Service uniform as a seasonal in Yosemite, my colleagues indeed represented every ethnic group with a claim to the nation's past. As interpreters we were Native American and Hispanic and European and African American. We were equally divided between women and men. What kind of "unfriendliness" to women and minorities is that?

If the point is really to suggest that the interpretation is flawed, again, where is the evidence? In Yosemite, the tragedy of the Miwok was boldly interpreted, and no less than the contributions of John Muir. Just because our emphases were often different, no one would have dreamed of saying the park was illegitimate. The Miwok had been dispossessed, and that was tragic, but so would be the tragedy of dispossessing the future of the right to

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have national parks.

Now that the teaching of parks has turned either my way or no way, it is no wonder the question why parks has regressed, as well. Fashionably, revisionists second-guess the past rather than admit its events can never be changed. Then would we change back the national parks into other than protected lands? Again, it would be a stupid question were it not for the fact that many have proposed just that.

Fortunately, it is not a proposition likely to get very far because history has answered it boldly. The very fact we have parks says loudly we wanted them, and yes, the royal “we” is here inclusive. Minorities do not need to be patronized to fall in love with parks.

All we need protect is the existence of parks and the dream will catch up with everyone. For me the year was 1959. My father had died the previous year, leaving my mother, my brother, and me without our primary means of support. We were that very family now allegedly denied the parks, living just above the poverty level first identified by the federal government in 1964. Worse, my mother had only a ninth-grade education, having been forced out of school during the Great Depression to help save the family farm.

Cynically, what had the national parks ever done for her? Just this—they had inspired her. Rural Americans, no less than urban Americans, could at least subscribe to national magazines. *Life* and the *Saturday Evening Post* were among her favorites. In the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, as we recall, George Bailey waves at Mary a copy a *National Geographic*.

See here what I hope to see. As poor as my mother was she could have such dreams. She could dream beyond her limitations to the hope of one day getting out of Bedford Falls (in her case, Binghamton, New York).

When finally her opportunity came it was because my father had left her a small life insurance policy. Well might she have spent it on many other things we needed. Instead, she gathered her courage to realize her dream: It was more important that she and her family see the country. It was time to live her dream and see the national parks.

It was not a new car we drove west (she drove, my brother and I navigated) but rather a station wagon five years old. All four tires were retreads. But it was all we needed to feel the magic of a country as magnificent as it was healing. Although at the time we knew little about who had established the national parks, we needed nothing more than being there to convince us they were special. Nor did mother feel intimidated, or uneasy, coming as a woman to the national parks. Her only confrontation was with three bears in the Tetons she believed had gotten too close to our tent. Mother prevailed, as she always did, believing that the bears themselves had done nothing wrong.

She returned from that trip determined to obtain her high school equivalency (which she did) and that her sons would finish college (which we did). If, at the opening of the twenty-first century, that is such a troubling result of wilderness, I thank my good fortune that I was born in the twentieth century before the world had turned so selfish.

It would seem that being against

everything has replaced being for anything; institutions need only be attacked rather than be explained. Critics know how to drag everything down. It is not a matter of proving whether a charge is warranted, but rather making as many charges as can be imagined.

Fortunately, an honest debate can always be won, and the national parks need only be defended simply. "I am glad I shall never be young without wild country to be young in," wrote Aldo Leopold. "Of what avail are forty freedoms without a blank spot on the map?" Is the blank spot artificial, in that maintaining it takes constant effort? Of course. Does it mean that some people are denied access because they never wanted it to be blank? Of course again. But does that mean the idea is bogus? No, it simply means that the idea of preservation in any form is controversial.

Those who dreamed the national parks said all that is needed about why they should exist. They knew the world to be changing destructively, and they were right. They knew that beginning with indigenous peoples everyone would get swept up in those changes, and they were right again. There would be no turning back the clock on technology and population. On that point their foresight was downright sobering. The country that invented the national parks had a population of 30 million. When my family and I visited the parks the population was six times that. Within what remains of my lifetime it promises to

double again.

The time is past for arguing who has been dispossessed of what used to be the privileges of the public lands. We have all been dispossessed of the freedom to choose the future as individuals. Buying more time, we could sacrifice the national parks, but it would be a huge sacrifice and not very much time. Every ending would be the same. Now added to a more crowded world without natural resources, we would have bought only a future without national parks.

As for the charge that wilderness is artificial, remember that the forces creating the national parks are abundantly real. Yellowstone National Park could blow at any time; Mount Lassen did blow, and will again. Crater Lake exists because Mount Mazama exploded with the force of a million bombs. The Tetons still are rising and Jackson Hole falling, and there is no stopping the earthquakes that rattle Yosemite.

Only we can allow these experiences to be cheapened; they are hardly that in themselves. I think what my life would have been without the national parks, and I would not want that for posterity. I concede all that is imperfect about civilization and the expenses so many pay for others' preferences. The national parks may indeed be a preference, but they are hardly a frivolity. The real debate here is not about extravagance. It is rather about believing that some things are larger than we are, and that such things are always so good to have.

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