

MISSION STATEMENTS

Reading the Earth: From Wonder to Appreciation

Robert Sterling Yard

*Ed. note: An important figure in the early development of the National Park Service, Robert Sterling Yard was hand-picked by Stephen Mather to spearhead publicity for the new national park system. A former editor with several widely read national magazines, Yard was enthusiastic and effective in helping make the national parks into beloved American icons. In this excerpt from the first chapter of *The Book of the National Parks* (1919), Yard extols the benefits of a deeper understanding of natural phenomena as a way to achieve real appreciation of the parks.*



To the average educated American, scenery is a pleasing hodge-podge of mountains, valleys, plains, lakes, and rivers. To him, the glacier-hollowed valley of Yosemite, the stream-scooped abyss of the Grand Canyon, the volcanic gulf of Crater Lake, the bristling granite core of the Rockies, and the ancient ice-carved shales of Glacier National Park all are one—just scenery, magnificent, incomparable, meaningless. As a people we have been content to wonder, not to know; yet with scenery, as with all else, to know is to begin fully to enjoy. Appreciation measures enjoyment. And this brings me to my proposition, namely, that we shall not really enjoy our possession of the grandest scenery in the world until we realize that scenery is the written page of the History of Creation, and until we learn to read that page.

The national parks of America include areas of the noblest and most diversified scenic sublimity easily accessible in the world; nevertheless it is their chiefest glory that they are among the completest expression of the earth's history. The American people is waking rapidly to the magnitude of its scenic possession; it has yet to learn to appreciate it....

“Is it true,” a woman asked me at the foot of Yosemite Falls, “that this is the highest unbroken waterfall in the world?”

She was an average tourist, met there by chance. I assured her that such was the fact. I called attention to the apparent deliberation of the

water's fall, a trick of the senses resulting from failure to realize height and distance.

“To think they are the highest in the world!” she mused.

I told her that the soft fingers of water had carved this valley three thousand feet into the solid granite, and that ice had polished its walls, and I estimated for her the ages since the Merced River flowed at the level of the cataract's brink.

“I've seen the tallest building in the world,” she replied dreamily, “and the longest railroad, and the largest lake, and the highest monument, and the biggest department store, and now I see the highest waterfall. Just think of

it!"

If one has illusions concerning the average tourist, let him compare the hundreds who gape at the paint pots and geysers of Yellowstone with the dozens who exult in the sublimated glory of the colorful canyon. Or let him listen to the table-talk of a party returned from Crater Lake. Or let him recall the statistical superlatives which made up his friend's last letter from the Grand Canyon.

I am not condemning wonder, which, in its place, is a legitimate and pleasurable emotion. As a condiment to sharpen and accent an abounding sense of beauty it has real and abiding value.

Love of beauty is practically a universal passion. It is that which lures millions into the fields, valleys, woods, and mountains on every holiday, which crowds our ocean lanes and railroads. The fact that few of these rejoicing millions are aware of their own motive, and that, strangely enough, a few even would be ashamed to make the admission if they became aware of it, has nothing to do with the fact. It's a wise man that knows his own motives. The fact that still fewer, whether aware or not of the reason of their happiness, are capable of making the least expression of it, also has nothing to do with the fact. The tourist woman whom I met at the foot of Yosemite Falls may have felt secretly suffocated by the filmy grandeur of the incomparable spectacle, notwithstanding that she was conscious of no higher emotion than the cheap wonder of a superlative. The Grand Canyon is the stillest crowded place I know. I've stood among a hundred people on a precipice and heard the whirl of a bird's wings in the abyss.

Probably the majority of those silent gazers were suffering something akin to pain at their inability to give vent to the emotions bursting within them.

I believe that the statement can not be successfully challenged that, as a people, our enjoyment of scenery is almost wholly emotional. Love of beauty spiced by wonder is the equipment for enjoyment of the average intelligent traveller of to-day. Now add to this a more or less equal part of the intellectual pleasure of comprehension and you have the equipment of the average intelligent traveller of to-morrow. To hasten this to-morrow is one of the several objects of this book.

To see in the carved and colorful depths of the Grand Canyon not only the stupendous abyss whose terrible beauty grips the soul, but also to-day's chapter in a thrilling story of creation whose beginning lay untold centuries back in the ages, whose scene covers three hundred thousand square miles of our wonderful southwest, whose actors include the greatest forces of nature, whose tremendous episodes shame the imagination of [the Romantic illustrator Gustave] Doré, and whose logical end invites suggestions before which finite minds shrink—this is to come into the presence of the great spectacle properly equipped for its enjoyment. But how many who see the Grand Canyon get more out of it than merely the beauty that grips the soul?

So it is throughout the world of scenery. The geologic story written on the cliffs of Crater Lake is more stupendous even than the glory of its indigo bowl. The war of titanic forces described in simple language on the rocks of Glacier National Park is unexcelled in sublimity in the history of

mankind. The story of Yellowstone's making multiplies many times the thrill occasioned by its world-famed spectacle. Even the simplest and smallest rock details often tell thrilling incidents of prehistoric times out of which the enlightened imagination reconstructs the romances and the tragedies of earth's earlier days.

How eloquent, for example, was the small, water-worn fragment of dull coal we found on the limestone slope of one of Glacier's mountains! Impossible companionship! The one the product of forest, the other of submerged depths. Instantly I glimpsed the distant age when thousands of feet above the very spot which I stood, but then at sea level, bloomed a Cretaceous forest, whose broken trunks and matted foliage decayed in bogs where they slowly turned to coal; coal which, exposed and disintegrated during intervening ages, has long since—all but a few fragments like this—washed into the headwaters of the Saskatchewan to merge eventually in the muds of Hudson Bay. And then, still dreaming, my mind leaped millions of years still further back to lake bottoms where, ten thousand feet below the spot on which I stood, gathered the pre-Cambrian ooze which later hardened to this very limestone. From ooze a score of thousand feet, a hundred million years, to coal! And both lie here together now in my palm! Filled thus with visions of a perspective beyond human comprehension, with what multiplied intensity of interest I now returned to the noble view from Gable Mountain!

In pleading for a higher understanding of Nature's method and

accomplishment as a precedent to study and observation of our national parks, I seek enormously to enrich the enjoyment not only of these supreme examples but of all examples of world making. The same readings which will prepare you to enjoy to the full the message of our national parks will invest your neighborhood hills at home, your creek and river and prairie, your vacation valleys, the landscape through your car window, even your wayside ditch, with living interest. I invite you to a new and fascinating earth, an earth interesting, vital, personal, beloved, because at last known and understood!

It requires no great study to know and understand the earth well enough for such purpose as this. One does not have to dim his eyes with acres of maps, or become a plodding geologist, or learn to distinguish schists from granites, or to classify plants by table, or to call wild geese and marmots by their Latin names. It is true that geography, geology, physiography, mineralogy, botany and zoology must each contribute their share toward the condition of intelligence which will enable you to realize appreciation of Nature's amazing earth, but the share of each is so small that the problem will be solved, not by exhaustive study, but by the selection of essential parts. Two or three popular books which interpret natural science in perspective should pleasurably accomplish your purpose. But once begun, I predict that few will fail to carry certain subjects beyond the mere essentials, while some will enter for life into a land of new delights.



“Mission Statements” is an occasional column that presents compelling statements of values and ideals that are important to the people, places, and professions that the Society serves. We are looking for inspirational and insightful writings that touch on close-to-the-heart issues that motivate us to do what we do as park professionals. We invite readers to submit their own Mission Statements, or suggest previously published essays that we might reprint in this column. Contact GWS executive director Dave Harmon at dharmon@georgewright.org or by phone at 1-906-487-9722.