

☪ The Heart of the Matter

New essential reading on parks, protected areas, and cultural sites

Uncertain Path: A Search for the Future of National Parks, by William C. Tweed. University of California Press, \$24.95 (hardcover), 236 pp., index. ISBN: 978-0-520-26557-8. 2010.

Reviewed by David J. Parsons

THE PRESERVATION OF NATURALNESS represents *the* core value of national parks and wilderness. Belief that there is a “natural” state that can be sustained indefinitely has long formed the basis for protected area management in the United States. However, in recent years there have been increasing calls to re-evaluate this core value.

Environmental change, including changing demographics and societal values, has spurred considerable recent discussion over the future of national parks and wilderness. In the last issue of the *Forum*, David Harmon reviewed a significant new contribution to this discussion. *Beyond Naturalness: Rethinking Park and Wilderness Stewardship in an Era of Rapid Change* (2010, Island Press, David N. Cole and Laurie Yung, editors) provides a thoughtful, science-based analysis of the key challenges facing park and wilderness managers in the 21st century.

Now, in another new book, *Uncertain Path; A Search for the Future of National Parks*, William C. Tweed uses a less technical but equally effective approach to present many of the same challenges. In *Uncertain Path*, Tweed uses the story of a 240-mile, 30-day hike through the high country of the Sierra Nevada to address many of the same issues, and ultimately reaches the same conclusions as found in *Beyond Naturalness*; namely, that if national parks and wilderness are to maintain their historic role it will be necessary to redefine their core mission and management goals.

Uncertain Path recounts the story of the author’s journey along the John Muir and High Sierra Trails in the Sierra Nevada of California, revisiting landscapes he first visited 40 years earlier. Starting in Tuolumne Meadows in Yosemite National Park, Tweed ventures south through the Ansel Adams and John Muir Wildernesses (Inyo National Forest), and Kings Canyon National Park, before completing his trip in the heart of the Giant Forest of Sequoia National Park. The author’s vivid prose brings out the best of the magnificent landscapes of the high Sierra: from the scenic grandeur of 14,000-foot peaks to the beauty of high-mountain wildflowers. His knowledge of natural history is reflected in descriptions of the local flora and fauna, such as the patterning of foxtail and lodgepole pines around the sandy

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plateaus and meadows on the Chagoopa Plateau and the activities of bird species using the willow communities bordering Hamilton Lake.

The story Tweed tells effectively intersperses observations of history, geology, ecology, and visitor use with provocative discussion of the critical “issues” faced by the stewards of these precious lands. These issues include such diverse topics as invasive species, bears, air pollution, fire management, stock impacts on streams and meadows, and the use of mechanized equipment to supply rangers or trail crews. Particular attention is given to climate change, which the author concludes is the greatest single threat to Sierra landscapes, leading, for example, to the likely loss of species and earlier snowmelt. Tweed’s 30-plus years as a park naturalist and park planner give him a particularly insightful view of how these issues play into the challenge of updating park management practices to reflect ever-changing knowledge. His primary thesis is the need to recognize that change is inevitable and much of that change runs counter to the traditional expectation that parks are protected in a manner that will assure they remain “unimpaired” (intact and unchanged) for the enjoyment of future generations. The public has been educated to believe this, and agency policies and practices reinforce such beliefs.

As might be expected from a historian, this book provides important insights into the history of the national park and wilderness movements, as well as key players in the establishment of the Sierra parks. The latter include John Muir, the Sierra Club, Joseph Le Conte, Stephen Mather, Gifford Pinchot, and Ansel Adams. Tweed also explores the conflict between the historic idea of preserving wilderness as a place defined by the absence of humans (virgin, untouched landscapes) and the reality that most of these areas have been used by native peoples for centuries, if not millennia. For example, he notes the abundance of obsidian shards as evidence of past use of a number of the areas he traversed.

Uncertain Path combines historical analysis and astute observation of both natural history and social interactions to effectively address the myriad of challenges faced by our parks and wilderness. Given the enormous magnitude of the environmental changes (climatic, biological, social) experienced in recent years, and even more so projected into the future, it is important that this story be told in as many ways and to as broad an audience as possible. And, although the focus of the book is on the Sierra Nevada—the local environments as well as the day-to-day challenges of managing the Sierran parks and wilderness—most of the issues are the same as or similar to those faced by park and wilderness managers across the globe.

Among the many interesting storylines developed in *Uncertain Path* is that of the changing characteristics and values of wilderness users. For example, Tweed observes how the John Muir Trail has increasingly attracted goal-oriented through-hikers focused on the physical challenge of completing the Trail in as short a time as possible. This leaves little time to experience the local environment, likely leaving the visitor less aware of the fragile ecology of the area as well as the myriad of threats and challenges to it. He speculates how this lack of a connection to nature, together with an observed paucity of young hikers, likely reflects increased competition for leisure time provided by mechanized recreation and various forms of electronic entertainment. This leads to worries that traditional park values may be of less

importance to society as a whole, and, thus, whether there will be the public advocacy needed to assure future support for the national parks. This challenge is complicated in that a public that has bought into the concept of the protection of naturalness must now be convinced that a new paradigm is needed, a paradigm that recognizes the importance of change and that incorporates a more flexible management approach.

Ultimately, Tweed comes to the conclusion that the national park dream as envisioned over the past century (e.g., naturalness that is preserved unimpaired for future generations) is fast becoming obsolete and must be revised to reflect both modern science and evolving societal and cultural values. He recognizes that this will not be an easy task. It will require difficult choices as traditional values are questioned and challenged. After all, naturalness is a concept that is both inherently attractive and well ingrained in the public psyche. In a world increasingly dominated by pollution, non-native species, and a changing climate, serious questions must be asked as to what “natural” actually means and whether it can continue to provide useful direction for park and wilderness management. Yet, transitioning from a largely “hands-off” management approach to a more aggressive “hands-on” one is sure to be a politically dangerous process that will be opposed by many of those who have traditionally been the parks’ biggest supporters. Ultimately, Tweed concludes that there really is no choice. If we want to maintain the most important resources and values of these special areas, we must adopt a new set of management policies and practices, ones that are likely to be more “hands-on” than we have traditionally accepted.

He proposes three basic conceptual options for future park management goals: managing for change, accepting the wild, or ecosystem museums. The first of these, managing for change (see Stephenson’s chapter in *Beyond Naturalness*), is an experimental approach where active management is used to preserve the things most valued. Examples of such management actions might include watering, planting, feeding, or facilitated migration of key species.

Concern over past failures of attempts to manipulate ecosystems, together with a desire for minimal intervention, provide arguments in favor of the wildness option (see chapter by Landres in *Beyond Naturalness*). Wildness as the primary goal would have humans step back from active management, allowing ecosystems to evolve to new states, even if those states have not previously occurred on the local landscape.

Tweed articulates a third option, where in at least some areas active management would attempt to preserve certain landscapes essentially as museums, preserving key species as well as a general appearance of naturalness. He is particularly intrigued by the idea of focusing on aspects of both biodiversity and wildness. Such an approach would likely require managing different areas for somewhat different purposes, but would also recognize the uncertainties of current knowledge and the necessity of learning and adapting as we go. Perhaps most importantly, Tweed suggests that such a diverse approach is the most likely to generate the public support needed to assure future protection.

In the short term, the most urgent need is to start thinking into the future and to accelerate a dialogue about the future of these precious landscapes. This dialogue needs to incorporate innovative thinking that is based on modern science. And, regardless of what

approach is taken, it will be necessary to educate the public about how these most protected of lands are not truly protected from the inevitability of change. It is time to start to think differently about how we should manage our parks and wilderness.

As we approach the centennial of the National Park Service, it is particularly encouraging to see that the foreword to this book is written by NPS Director Jon Jarvis. His attention to and concern about these issues demonstrates understanding of the urgency of the dilemma. Yet we should take note of his caution against rushing too quickly into any single new paradigm. The challenge is daunting; and while time may be short, we must be careful to try to understand the outcomes of our options and choices.

I strongly encourage those interested in the future of parks and wilderness to add this jewel of a book to their libraries. It is an important work that is informative and thought-provoking as well as being enjoyable to read. It merits the attention of park professionals as well as those more broadly interested in conservation and natural history.

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