

The Heart of the Matter

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

Revolutionary Parks: Conservation, Social Justice, and Mexico's National Parks, 1910–1940, by Emily Wakild. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011.

Reviewed by Nelly Robles García

WHILE FOR MOST FOREIGNERS, including Americans, the Mexican Revolution is a dramatic period embracing the country's struggle for democratization and agrarian reform, in her thoughtful treatment of the creation of Mexico's system of national parks Emily Wakild demonstrates how the Revolution affected other arenas of national life. She starts with a very simple question: in the aftermath of a violent revolution that upended political leadership, shook the social structure, shattered the economy, and left Mexicans uncertain about their future, how did the country find the will and energy to create a national park system? How can we explain the emergence of a park system at a time when presumably Mexico needed to assure political stability, create essential institutions, restore the economy, and address the basic needs of the millions of rural Mexicans hitherto excluded from national life?

Wakild argues two central factors explain the attention given to the creation of a national park system. First, the impulse for resource conservation did not originate with the Revolution but in fact began decades before as Mexican intellectuals and scientists, disturbed by the ways in which late-nineteenth-century industrialization laid waste to the forests, polluted air and water, and degraded long-standing relationships between humans and nature, began to call for constraints on unbridled exploitation. The degradation of forests around Mexico City, with negative impacts on urban life, offered a ready focus for revolutionary reformers eager to bring the authority of a new political regime to bear on the problems confronting the general population. Second, a concern for conservation provided a mechanism for pursuing social justice for those Mexicans disadvantaged by the policies of exploitation and exclusion marking the long reign of Porfirio Díaz. National parks accessible to all and managed for the public good would symbolize the social perspective of the new government.

Although the pioneers of Mexico's national park system drew inspiration and practical lessons from conservationists and practitioners in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere, they placed post-revolutionary values at the center of the system they created. Wakild argues that unlike the American system, with its emphasis on wildness and the centrality of nature, "Mexicans promoted a concept of human integration with nature" (p. 14). Thus many of the

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national parks created prior to 1940 were relatively close to urban centers with the explicit mission of serving as centers of education and recreation for the general population. By exposing ordinary Mexicans to the value and benefits of conservation, park proponents sought to build a constituency that would sustain the system against long-term pressures from competing interests. “Lessons from the era of revolutionary environmentalism demonstrate the symmetry between sustaining social justice along with protecting nature and the precarious risks involved with balancing both” (p. 15).

The core of Wakild’s analysis is a framework of five themes—science, education, productivity, property, and tradition—that she applies to the creation of four national parks in the vicinity of Mexico City. Wakild’s choice of these parks flows from her view that in effect they served as accessible laboratories for the political leaders and professional foresters seeking to implement revolutionary environmentalism. In the decades prior to the Revolution, the overexploitation of Mexico’s forests as a consequence of industrialization, urbanization, and technological change prompted a cadre of scientists and citizens to create organizations such as the Mexican Forestry Society, to pursue contact with counterparts abroad, and to create the foundations for institutionalized protection of forests. The triumph of the Revolution opened the door for such protection but also unleashed expectations of social justice and opportunity for marginalized millions. The administration of President Lázaro Cardenas (1934–1940) established a cabinet-level Department of Forestry, embedding within it the National Parks Office. But the revolutionary commitment to social justice led to the creation of parks intended to include, not exclude, people and anticipated controlled multiple-use rather than a dedication to wilderness.

Through exhaustive review of a broad array of documentary sources Wakild walks readers through the interactions of government officials with citizens, organizations, agencies, companies, and communities. The common thread linking her case studies with the five themes mentioned earlier are detailed accounts of specific experiences, such as the recurring struggles of Tepoztlan to protect its lands or the creation of educational programs at Zempoala National Park. Such accounts are a major strength of the book as they provide an extensive foundation for her more general assessment of revolutionary environmentalism and its engagement with social justice. They underscore a major dilemma for the Department of Forestry and the national parks movement: conservation of forest resources had been a central goal for more than five decades, yet the same revolution that facilitated such conservation unleashed popular expectations of access to those resources. Any effort to constrain access therefore challenged revolutionary values and needed to be managed with great care and discretion, placing a premium on education and building collaborative relationships.

In the end Wakild’s assessment of the convergence of social justice and conservation underscores the centrality of land as a critical component in understanding not only the origins of Mexico’s national park system but also the difficulties in sustaining its early momentum in the decades after 1940. Unlike the United States, where great national parks like Yellowstone or Grand Canyon were established on land wrested from its original inhabitants, Mexico’s national parks overlay lands owned and used by individuals or communities. The original parks, like the country’s protected areas today, were superimposed upon occupied landscapes. This proved to be a point of continuing tension as the prospect of a far-away government imposing controls over land use frequently provoked strains with local com-

munities. Wakild notes that in cases such as Tepoztlan the national government appeared as benevolent and a protector, while in other cases the goal of long-term conservation clashed with the desire for short-term gains or traditional practices that had the effect of undermining forest health. A Revolution celebrating the notion of “land to those who till it” found it difficult to protect forests from those seeking to plow and pasture even when the expansion of agriculture was in direct contradiction to conservation.

Confronted with the pressures to modernize Mexico and respond to multiple demands, the national government drifted away from revolutionary environmentalism. Sustaining it brought many headaches while abandonment had few immediate costs. The ideal of communities protecting their resources frequently foundered on the realities of population growth, monetized economies, urbanization and infrastructure development, and other competing priorities. Many of the original national parks proved too small to offer meaningful ecosystem protection and too vulnerable to micro-level exploitation for other uses. The removal of a few trees here or construction of a house there seems eminently reasonable to residents of a community that, after all, is the original owner of the land. Across time, the realization that the cumulative effects are devastating to the national park comes when it is too late to establish effective controls. This is where Wakild’s earlier description of specific relationships becomes important: it foreshadows the multitude of demands, interactions, conflicts, and expectations that combine to sap the national park system of vitality and dynamism.

Revolutionary Parks provides a window on the Mexican Revolution that was previously opaque to most non-Mexicans. More important, it demonstrates that in the wake of the Revolution the Mexican government was willing to pursue a conceptual framework for national parks that sought to integrate principles of conservation with the need to address the social realities of marginalization and exclusion. While this effort to innovate ultimately proved to have grave weaknesses, Emily Wakild demonstrates revolutionary environmentalism provided a springboard and inspiration for the conservation efforts of later generations.