

The Heart of the Matter

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

To Conserve Unimpaired: The Evolution of the National Park Idea, by Robert B. Keiter.
Washington, DC: Island Press, 2013.

Reviewed by Paul Schullery

FOR MORE THAN HALF A CENTURY, at least since the publication of John Ise's *Our National Park Policy: A Critical History* (1961) and in some respects longer, historical scholars have been attempting to bring some reasonable narrative order to the story of the national parks. It isn't an easy task. The defining characteristic of the national park system—deplored by some, praised by others—is the individuality of each unit. These places have been added to the system, we are often told, because they are unique. And they are unique, we discover, not only for their cultural, ecological, or geophysical character, but also for the means and machinations of their creation and the tricky details of their executive or legislative mandates.

More than that, they are now valuable to us for a host of reasons barely imagined by their founders and early champions. Everywhere in our perception of them, the neatness of some original idea of parks has been replaced by an ever-messier and hugely stimulating set of definitions and hopes. Even the two fundamental categories to which our predecessors so fondly clung in discussing the park system—natural and cultural—are compromised by discomfiting realities. No site is purely one or the other. The grand old “nature parks” are densely under- and overlain with human culture, while many of the most urban cultural sites have echoes of the natural settings that preceded and shaped them. The national park idea is a gloriously convoluted tangle of laws, theories, ideals, and dreams; what's a parkie to do? Though it is the very complexity and administrative intractability of the system that makes it so good to think with, where should we begin to do that thinking? Where can we find some narrative order that will help us make a preliminary sense of it all?

One good place to start is Robert B. Keiter's engaging and helpful new book, *To Conserve Unimpaired: The Evolution of the National Park Idea*. Keiter, a prominent legal scholar of conservation issues at the University of Utah, embraces the messiness. He has constructed a narrative that, though it starts more or less at the beginning and concludes with the near-future, displays none of the constricting obligations of traditional administrative histories that plow steadily along a subject's chronology until arriving at now.

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Instead, *To Conserve Unimpaired* offers a series of overlapping studies of what we today may regard as the central issues of our own participation in the park system's evolution. The first chapter introduces the national park idea by providing brief chronicles of a number of prominent parks, better to display the breadth of definitions the system currently employs and to make the point that the National Park Service (NPS) Organic Act of 1916 "presents the agency with a nearly impossible mission, obscuring an array of hard judgments that the Park Service confronts on an almost daily basis" (p. 9). Those judgments, right or wrong, drive the constant reconsideration of the park idea. Keiter concludes this chapter with a forceful presumption that we, like all preceding generations, are more or less obliged to keep redefining the parks.

Chapter 2 explores the idea of wilderness as it has arisen and evolved in the conservation movement, and the ongoing public and institutional restlessness over the lack of legal wilderness classification in many parks. Keiter sides with those who believe that land classified as wilderness under the Wilderness Act "has the highest level of protection available" and thus parks without it are less well protected. He is confident that parks contain large tracts of land whose wildness is equal to that of legally defined wilderness, but raises a point that is implicit throughout the book: the first parks were originally created for public enjoyment and recreation and thus now feature developed areas in the midst of large wildlands. Keiter repeatedly acknowledges that firm reality but, like many of us today, displays discomfort with it, coming very close on several occasions to finding fault there, as if our predecessors a century ago should have had more foresight about the whole thing and known that some of us would have preferred a few less hotels and roads.

Chapters 3 and 4 are a fine summary of the changing ideas and internal tensions of defining and managing public recreation in the parks. Keiter again makes helpful use of various parks' stories in the changing realm of industrial tourism, from their origins as playgrounds to their present emphasis on a variety of priceless but intangible values as the core of a park visit. I heartily agree with his well-expressed conviction that these intangible values—"silence, solitude, self-reliance, and personal reflection" among them—are now "fundamental values" for park managers to foster. But he and I also seem to share a tunnel vision about this conviction; even though people like us (e.g., readers of *The George Wright Forum*) recognize these, most Americans are at best dimly aware of them. For those people, the parks are still playgrounds.

In keeping with the book's well-constructed overlapping of topics and chronological sequences, Chapter 5 is about park concessioners and other service providers. It brings up another set of essential historic tensions, those between businesspeople seeking to make a living or a fortune from park visitors, against whom are arrayed park managers and advocates seeking to hold some hard-to-define line between service and exploitation of visitors or park resources. Keiter's case studies are again well chosen, a series of Glitter-Gulch-ish episodes that often demonstrate the disproportionate political power wielded by local communities over management decisions that are supposed to be made in the national interest.

By this point in the book, readers new to the saga of the parks may feel overwhelmed, but they must brace themselves for Chapter 6, which presents one of the most instructive challenges facing park managers: the place and role that has been, is, or should be occupied in management deliberations by Native Americans. The relatively recent re-enfranchisement of the ancestral possessors of North America in national park management has compelled park

enthusiasts to think hard yet again about just what parks are preserving, and for whom. Keiter's examples of the process, including Grand Canyon, Badlands, Devils Tower, and Death Valley, illustrate what the American community of cultures is up against in this process.

Chapter 7 introduces the related topics of science and education. While admitting up front that the parks "were not set aside as research or educational facilities, nor with much regard for the on-the-ground ecological realities," Keiter tends toward the prevailing view in NPS circles that a great (and apparently unforgivable) failure occurred among several generations of park managers, who chose not to place science in a central position in management deliberations. There has always been some peril of presentism in this viewpoint. It's not enough to acknowledge that they had no mandate to care about science if you then turn around and criticize them beyond their context for failing to make science part of their job. Besides, in Yellowstone's case at least (that being the park I know something about), managers often did believe that they were supported by science, and it's only with hindsight that we can see that it was just the wrong science. That historical complication aside, Keiter offers several important cases from around the park system that vividly demonstrate a few of the many kinds of trouble the agency's "indifference toward science" has gotten it into. He follows these with more recent stories in which the NPS response to issues involving fire, wolves, watershed management, and climate change do show the essential role science now plays in modern management. Likewise, though acknowledging that early NPS leadership did establish educational (interpretive) programs, he points out that these programs were always the least supported of NPS operations.

Chapter 8 is about wildlife, which here mostly means large mammals—the fugitive resources that have driven park managers to distraction and desperation for more than 140 years now. This chapter is for the most part a review of some of Yellowstone's long-running controversies over elk, vegetation, bison, grizzly bears, and lake trout, with brief bows toward burros in the Grand Canyon, mountain goats in Olympic, and a few others. It is necessarily an extension of the previous chapter's discussions of science's potential role in clarifying management dilemmas, with recognition that science is an imperfect management tool not only because of disagreements among scientists but also because in the modern political and social context science "cannot alone dictate the content" of policies. And throughout the chapter Keiter, at times implicitly and at times explicitly, reinforces the point that wildlife issues in the parks most often arise because the parks themselves are imperfect reserves, never large enough to encompass entire ecosystems—a point that leads handily into the next chapter.

Chapter 9, an introduction to the large nature parks as cores of larger wildlands, addresses "the problem with enclaves" from several perspectives, with substantial reviews of the cases of Glacier and Everglades national parks. The chapter will serve many audiences by exposing the melodramatic cast of interests and personalities that can be counted on to emerge any time national park managers step across their boundaries to play what former Alaska Regional Director Bob Barbee refers to as the "away game." Those of us who started working with parks long enough ago may remember the comforting sense of insularity we felt as we entered a park—a place indeed apart, where everything seemed a little tidier, loftier human values prevailed, and we could comfortably pretend that the rest of the world only existed on some remote and almost irrelevant plane. Embracing the broader view of ecosystem

management may have come grudgingly to us, but this chapter does a nice job of rationalizing the larger, ecosystem-scale view that is our best hope for tomorrow's parks.

Chapter 10 is about how the system can be "grown." Keiter takes us on a concise historical tour of the unruly and haphazard manner in which the park system grew from a few relatively out-of-the-way scenery parks to the sprawling collection of sites-of-many-designations we enjoy today. There is a helpful summary of some of the key legislation that came along, and then influenced, the process, and an equally helpful review of some illuminating cases of new kinds of parks and newly imagined older parks. He reminds us of the source of the venerable Park Service–Forest Service rivalry, often revealed in Congress's willingness to carve new parks out of existing forests. He emphasizes the increasing importance of ecosystem-level thinking, of absorbing damaged but promising and repairable lands, of reaching out to increasing segments of the population who don't have much interest in parks, and of being open to other alternative approaches to getting the job done. Much of this may be familiar to many park advocates, but having it put together like this is a good aid to perspective.

I found the conclusion, Chapter 11, "Nature Conservation in a Changing World," the least satisfying part of the book. Though it does synthesize the essential messages of the previous chapters, it seemed to me to reach a little too far in a series of statements that made me nervous, mostly because they tended to disregard (or trample) points made more guardedly earlier in the book. One example of several must serve here, the following statement about the reduction of wildness in the early parks:

Wild nature was tamed, rendered accessible, and put on display. Paradoxically, just as the public was being invited into the wilderness to witness nature's splendor, the nature they encountered was being disassembled into a destination vacation site and a recreational paradise. Any idea of the park as a wilderness enclave soon lost any real currency.

There is much incautious about these sweeping generalizations. Huge portions of those early parks remained wild (he emphasizes this earlier in the book), and in several cases the creation of the park in question intentionally restored that wildness from former abuses. Grizzly bears survived in the lower 48 states because wilderness values in Glacier and Yellowstone parks were most decidedly not "disassembled." Those same wilderness values retained a vital "currency" from the very beginning of the park movement in the hearts and writings of Theodore Comstock, John Muir, Charles Adams, George Wright, and a host of others. As careless and even foolish as much early park development might have been, it was generally confined to narrow corridors and primary "attractions" rather than to the whole place.

The temptation is to quote more of this chapter's overstatements, but I don't want to imbalance the approval and admiration I feel for the book in general here. But, though I don't regard this chapter as quite the success the others are, it can still be read helpfully if the reader keeps in mind its somewhat hyperbolic tone. Besides, I can hardly blame Keiter for some of this overstatement, considering the self-flagellation NPS thinkers often engage in these days regarding the agency's putative historic failures, especially in resource management. Maybe we haven't always been the good guys we once liked to imagine we were, but in terms of what the parks accomplished we were still far better guys than most.

That said, I hope the book is a big success and sells so well that it needs reprinting almost immediately. And when it is time for it to be reprinted there are some fixable problems that I hope Keiter and his publisher will attend to.

First, there are factual errors surprising both for their content and their number. The number of Yellowstone-related errors suggests to me that it would be worth checking with appropriate area experts to see how the stories of other parks hold up in this respect. Some of the errors I noted include misspelled names, out-of-order chronology, and factual mistakes regarding wildlife, park history, resource management, and more.

Of at least equal concern is that several important stories are presented in unfortunately simplistic and thus incomplete form. On these occasions Keiter has chosen to “print the legend” rather than look past it. Keiter settles for the popularly held, fable-like versions of a number of important national park-related episodes, including: the Kaibab deer herd’s famous but long-disputed irruption and collapse; the now-questioned 90% decline in wading bird populations in the Everglades; how and why the milestone Craighead grizzly bear study in Yellowstone actually ended; the origin of the “natural regulation” concept as it was applied in Yellowstone in the 1960s, and the resultant increase of the northern Yellowstone elk herd in the 1970s and 1980s; and Yellowstone’s ecological “trophic cascade” reported by some investigators a few years following the reintroduction of wolves in 1995, but roundly challenged by subsequent research.

Keiter is a vital scholarly voice in modern conservation dialogues. For more than 20 years I have relied on his thoughtful papers on various important park-related issues for even-handed and well-researched perspectives. He has accomplished much in *To Conserve Unimpaired*, and has given us a fine template for organizing our thinking in the face of an extravagant array of urgent proposals we now are hearing for what we must do to get the parks right. Books like this will be essential in that enterprise.