

For Public Use, Resort, and Recreation: The Struggle Over Appropriate Recreation in Yosemite National Park

Michael Childers

IN THE FADING EVENING LIGHT OF MAY 16, 2015, Dean Potter and Graham Hunt leaped off Taft Point and plummeted towards the Yosemite Valley some 3,000 feet below. Each wore a specially made wing suit, which uses a piece of cloth stretched between the legs and arms and upper torso to allow the wearer to soar through the air with a measure of control. After launching into the air, Hunt veered left and then right while Potter held his line straight towards a subtle notch on the Lost Brother Ridge, the only safe route to the valley floor. Potter's girlfriend, Jen Rapp, stood on the point and watched through the lens of her camera as the men quickly fell out of sight. She then heard a muffled thud, followed by a terrifying silence. Not knowing what had happened, Rapp frantically scrolled through the images on her camera. Seeing nothing in the display, she raced to the valley floor, joining Hunt's girlfriend, Rebecca Haynie, in a desperate search for the two BASE jumpers. (BASE stands for four categories of fixed objects from which jumpers leap: a building, an antenna, the span of a bridge, and the earth, i.e., a cliff). Perhaps they had been arrested, or injured? Maybe they were hiding from park law enforcement? But as the valley was enveloped by darkness, it became clear that the unimaginable had happened. After disappearing from Rapp's sight, both men had hit the Lost Brother Ridge below Taft Point at tremendous speed. Neither had survived.¹

Potter and Hunt's deaths reawakened the decades-long conflict over the National Park Service's ban of BASE jumping within Yosemite National Park. The sport's proponents argued the prohibition on jumping off the valley's sheer granite walls with a parachute was disproportionately arbitrary, particularly given the agency's allowing of rock climbing and hang gliding within the valley. Conversely, the Park Service maintained that BASE jumping had no place within the national parks. "We're not against BASE jumping as a sport," Yosemite

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National Park spokesperson Scott Gediman told the *New York Times*. “But we have to look at the big picture and its *appropriateness* in the park.” Or, as national park ranger Ray O’Neal explained, “We like to think that people come here to enjoy the scenery, and not the spectacle of people jumping.”²

To some visitors, such distinctions can appear infuriatingly arbitrary. According to the National Park Service’s 2006 management policies, appropriate visitor use should foster an understanding and appreciation of park resources and values, or promote enjoyment through the interaction with those same resources.³ Admittedly, what makes one activity appropriate and another not is often a paradoxical mix of tradition, environmental impacts, user conflicts, and how well a particular activity fits within a park. Such ambiguousness opens the National Park Service to criticism. For instance, following Potter and Hunt’s deaths, climber and BASE jumper Steph Davis attacked the Park Service’s ban, calling it “a little ridiculous” when put into context of the millions of visitors swarming into the Yosemite Valley every summer.⁴

And that is where the problem lies. Believing it their birthright, generations of visitors have understood their own recreational enjoyment as compatible, even fundamental, to the preservation of Yosemite’s natural landscapes. National parks were valued as places to play in.⁵ In this manner, visitors’ values shaped Yosemite’s history. Ceded to California in 1864 for “public use, resort, and recreation,” the Yosemite grant reflected 19th-century Americans’ romantic ideals of nature as untamed wilderness whose enjoyment came from the contemplation of its impressive character.⁶ Yet, by the late 1960s Americans’ rapidly changing recreational tastes clashed with a growing national preservationist movement over recreation’s proper role within Yosemite.

Passing the two million mark in 1967, soaring visitor numbers threatened to overwhelm the park. This despite the National Park Service’s efforts under Mission 66 to meet the growing numbers of visitors across the national park system. But rather than solving the problem of meeting increasing visitor needs, many saw Mission 66 as the primary culprit in attracting millions more visitors to the national parks. Moreover, the National Park Service’s embrace of the Leopold Report’s vision that natural parks such as Yosemite represent a “vignette of primitive America” ran directly counter to the agency’s history of promoting visitor use.⁷ For instance, Park Service Director George B. Hartzog, Jr., ordered the end to Yosemite’s popular firefall—in which a bonfire was lit on Glacier Point and the embers pushed over the side of the cliff to create a spectacle for visitors—deeming it as “artificial” and destructive to Yosemite’s natural environment.⁸

Yet, such actions did little to dissuade the growing crowds from continuing to visit the park. Writing some seven years after the firefall’s demise, photographer and Yosemite climbing legend Galen Rowell noted, “Already the flood of people has damaged the wilderness character of far more terrain than has the quiet reservoir in Hetch Hetchy Valley.” This reality, he argued, should shock everyone out of the belief that they could continue to experience Yosemite as they had in the past.⁹

While national media accounts focused on the proposed development of a tramway connecting Happy Isles to Glacier Point, the construction of new campgrounds, paving of trails,

and filming of a television series within the park, a brief, albeit ugly, fight erupted over allowing snowmobiles with Yosemite. Pitting snowmobilers against skiers, the dispute centered not on whether recreation was or was acceptable within the park, but rather on what form of recreation ought to be allowed. Each side believed their preferred form of enjoying Yosemite's beauty justified allowing or excluding the machines within the park.

The winter silence on the morning of February 18, 1973 was suddenly broken by the cacophony of two-stroke engines roaring to life. The stench of burning exhaust quickly filled the air, as the small band of snowmobilers milled around their machines preparing to travel from Crane Flats to Tuolumne Meadows. Incensed by the invasion of sound and smell, a small group of "bewhiskered youth" began angrily hurling obscenities at the snowmobilers from across the parking lot. While trying to ignore the jeers, Donald Brondyke hurriedly tried to get his friends and family moving towards the trailhead. But then, a lone skier strode across the small lot, and in one swift motion stooped down and flung Brondyke's fourteen-year-old son's snowmobile over before quickly retreating across the lot. Furious at the audacity of the act, but fearing escalating the confrontation further, Brondyke quickly righted the machine and frantically motioned for the rest of his group to head out.¹⁰

But after traveling for only a mile on the snow-packed Tioga Road, the snowmobilers came upon another group of cross-country skiers. This time, the skiers blocked the road, refusing to let Brondyke's group pass. Faced with the choice of either running the skiers down or turning around, the snowmobilers chose retreat and returned to Crane Flat. Finding no rangers at the trailhead to file a complaint, they drove to the park's administration building in the valley to report the incident.

There, a ranger dutifully took down Brondyke's complaint, but stated there was very little he could do to remedy the situation. Incensed by the ranger's apparent ambivalence, Brondyke canceled the group's ten-day reservations, and headed home. The final insult came at Yosemite's north entrance, where one of Brondyke's party overheard a ranger mutter to another, "Good, I don't like snowmobiles anyway." Later, writing the park to complain about the encounter, Brondyke thundered, "Certainly the experience at Yosemite Park can be only considered a disgrace and a serious black eye to the Park Service," and, "How can the National Park Service accept, tolerate or explain this type of park management to anybody?"¹¹

In a brief one-page apology, Yosemite's superintendent, Lynn Thompson, agreed that the actions of both the skiers and the park ranger's behavior had been inexcusable and, "Whatever our personal opinions about hair styles, race, snowmobiles, we must treat every Park user with the dignity and grace they deserve. We fell down in your case, and for this I am sorry."¹²

Thompson's apology underscored the increasingly tense clash over snowmobiles in Yosemite. First allowing the machines into the park during the winter of 1969–1970, the Park Service believed they would increase visitors' ability to enjoy Yosemite's winter scenery without damaging park resources. "We are optimistic that snowmobilers will follow reasonable regulations [as] fully as other park users," explained Yosemite's superintendent, John Good.¹³ But, unlike in Yellowstone, snowmobiling failed to gain widespread popularity in Yosemite. Both unplowed during the winter, the Glacier Point and Tioga roads offered the

only possible routes for snowmobiles within Yosemite. While the Park Service allowed snowmobiles access to Glacier Point, most snowmobilers preferred the longer trek from Crane Flat to Tuolumne Meadows along the Tioga Road.

However, the more contentious issue proved to be snowmobiling's larger place within Yosemite. Cross-country skiers and environmental groups saw snowmobiles as an anathema to the national park ideal. The machine's "belching roaring engines, polluting the air with thick streams of dark smoke" shattered Yosemite's winter solace, frightening wildlife and ruining other visitor's quiet contemplation of the park's beauty. "I could not possibly understand how such monstrosity could be permitted in an National Park, supposedly a place dedicated to the preservation of the environment, and a place to rest our fatigued nerves from the noise and pollution of our urban environment," complained one hiker after being accosted by group of snowmobiles on his way to Glacier Point.¹⁴ "This is a major invasion of wilderness, and we all must take immediate and forceful action to have the permission for snowmobiles in wilderness parks prohibited," famed photographer and wilderness advocate Ansel Adams roared in the newsletter of the local chapter of the Sierra Club.¹⁵

The Park Service concurred. Citing President Nixon's executive order 11644, which clarified the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) by requiring federal land managers to allow off-road vehicles such as snowmobiles only if it could be demonstrated that doing so would not adversely affect the "natural, aesthetic, or scenic values" of federal lands, Yosemite's newly appointed superintendent, Les Arnberger, banned snowmobiles from the park in the spring of 1974.¹⁶

A small number of snowmobilers saw Arnberger's decision as discriminatory and capricious. Among those were the members of the Fresno-based Sierra Snowmobile Club, who in January 1975 sued the Park Service. Pointing out that only those with the stamina to ski 35 to 40 miles could now enjoy the park's unparalleled scenery in winter, the club noted, "Certainly you must recognize that one of your responsibilities is making the park available to everyone."¹⁷ While sympathetic to the club's case, Arnberger replied that in light of the highly emotional reactions toward snowmobilers by the majority of park visitors, any decision to allow snowmobiles would be regarded under NEPA as a major federal action with significant environmental impacts that would require an environmental impact statement.¹⁸ The suit was eventually thrown out of court, bringing an innocuous end to snowmobiling within Yosemite.

Recreational access remained a pressing challenge. Besieged by demands for the reduction in the numbers of visitors entering the park, while remaining true to its mandate to provide for the enjoyment of all, the Park Service attempted to address resort activities that some visitors felt were no longer suitable inside a national park by proposing a new standard for appropriate recreational activities to those only "related to park features." Yet, the agency continued to allow a swimming pool, tennis courts, a golf course at Wawona, and the Badger Pass ski hill to remain within Yosemite, determining each to be a "traditional activity."¹⁹ Additionally, hang gliding gained approval on a limited basis within Yosemite Valley. BASE jumping, however, never gained the Park Service's approval. But it was neither golf, nor skiing, nor hang gliding that presented the greatest challenge to Yosemite's preservation. Rather,

it was hiking. Specifically, it was the growing popularity of hiking to the summit of Half Dome by thousands of visitors.

Half Dome was described by J.D. Whitney in 1868 as “perfectly inaccessible, being probably the only one of all the prominent points about the Yosemite which never has been, and never will be trodden by human foot.”²⁰ It took just seven years for mountaineer George Anderson to dispel that claim when he summited the monolith in 1875 by threading rope through six-inch iron bolts pounded into the granite. His route remained in place for decades, allowing others, including Galen Clark and John Muir, to make the ascent. But over time, the bolts became too worn and rusted for safe use, and so in 1919 the Sierra Club installed a cable system that remains in place today. Set roughly a meter apart and suspended through a series of stanchions anchored into the rock, the cables allow novice and expert climbers alike to summit Half Dome. For decades, the only real management issue facing NPS was repairing the lower cable section after heavy winter snows.²¹

Meant to allow its members easier access to the dome’s summit, the Sierra Club’s installation of cables came during a two-decade-long period of significant trail building within Yosemite National Park. While a growing number of hikers ventured to the summit of Half Dome, the trek remained far too arduous for many. Until the 1980s, only a few hundred per day made the ascent.²² By the late 1990s, Half Dome’s popularity soared. On the busiest of summer weekends, daily numbers grew from 575 to over 1,200 per day.²³ The cable came to resemble more an amusement park ride than a technical ascent. With the increasing numbers came increasing environmental costs. Hikers trampled plants, eroded switchbacks, and left piles of litter in their wake. The tread of thousands of rubber soles had polished the granite on the cable route to a gleaming sheen, making the footing particularly treacherous during rainstorms. Rangers fielded numerous complaints of human waste hidden underneath every sizable rock on Half Dome’s broad summit. Additionally, once Half Dome was included in Yosemite’s designated wilderness area in 1984, such numbers violated the Wilderness Act, which states that all designated wilderness areas should provide “outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation.” Clearly, the queue of hundreds standing at the base of the cable did not fit any definition of “solitude” or “primitive and unconfined.”²⁴

Seeking the bragging rights of summiting Half Dome, hundreds believed the hike to be easy and set out unprepared for its strenuousness and technical difficulty. Making his way to the top of Half Dome, *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter Peter Fimrite watched as two women panicked on the cables and needed help to get down, and a young man wearing Converse All Stars sneaker stepped outside the cables to get around clumps of slower climbers. “I can’t wear boots,” he replied when asked by another hiker about his ill-chosen footwear. “I get all clumsy in boots.” The young hiker was not alone. Hundreds attempted the hike wearing flip-flop sandals and carrying nothing more than a single water bottle. “There are almost always people at the top who have run out of water, are too exhausted to continue, lack the proper footwear or are simply paralyzed by fear,” wrote Fimrite on the circus Half Dome had become.²⁵

Such bedlam understandably led to a rash of accidents. All told, five climbers fell to their deaths between 2003 and 2011, three in 2007 alone. Two falls were due to climbers slipping on wet granite, but the third was more troubling. After waiting for more than forty minutes to get on the cables, Japanese hiker Hirofumi Nohara had been enjoying the climb up the cables and looked forward to spectacular views from the top. But as the thirty-seven-year-old was talking and laughing with his friends, he suddenly slipped. Following directly behind, Brian Mott watched in horror as Nohara fell off the side of mountain to his death. “Nobody could reach out for him,” a bereft Mott told reporters. “If they could have, I know they would have.”²⁶

Nohara’s death underscored the very real consequences of overcrowding on Half Dome, leading to calls to rein in the madness. The question over Half Dome reflected the reality that visitors themselves had become the primary obstruction to the contemplation of natural scenes Frederick Law Olmsted had spoken of a century and half before. In response, NPS issued an emergency interim permit system, limiting the number of hikers on the cables during the busiest days of the summer. Two years later, the agency extended the system to seven days a week and began work on setting rules on how best to manage the popular climb.²⁷ Comments ranged from “I realize that we cannot administer IQ tests when making a reservation, but this hike is not the right hike for groups of ... overweight, dehydrated, ill-equipped, out of breath, day hikers” to “I agree that some limits must be placed on the number of visitors, and of the choices still on the table, I would choose the 400 limit, but I think 500 is more reasonable.” Several compared the atmosphere at the base of the cables to Disneyland rather than a wilderness hike in a national park.²⁸

The crux was how to preserve such moments of solitude while allowing access to one of the park’s most popular hikes. NPS settled on restricting the number of hikers to 300 per day through a permit system. Half would be issued to those holding wilderness permits and half would be allocated through a lottery system. Two rangers would be stationed in the Little Yosemite Valley administration camp for enforcement and compliance.²⁹ But casting the struggle over Half Dome as an example of the tension between preservation and use masked the more complicated issue of how to manage traditional expectations of access with growing legal and ecological limitations. The designation of Half Dome as wilderness in 1984 meant it must retain its “primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements.”³⁰ Such requirements seemed to necessitate the removal of the cables. However, the establishment of the route 45 years prior to the passage of the Wilderness Act makes the cables a historic, and traditional, route up Half Dome. Opinions on how best to manage the growing crowds at the base of the final climb depended upon the answer to the question of whether Yosemite is a playground or a preserve.

It remains a difficult question to answer. As Robert Keiter notes, according to the courts the Organic Act obligates the Park Service to prioritize protection of natural and historic resources above recreational use. Furthermore, laws such as Endangered Species Act and Wilderness Act many restrict any recreational activity deemed harmful.³¹ Still, such arguments are academic to visitors seeking to snowmobile to Tuolumne Meadows, climb Half

Dome, or base jump off Taft Point. Yosemite's allure as a recreational playground remains as powerful today as ever. As recreation's popularity, and diversity, continue to grow, solutions to conflicts over what constitutes appropriateness within Yosemite will continue. Perhaps then, the answer is not how to best protect Yosemite's resources, but rather how to manage its visitors' expectations.

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Michael Childers, Department of History and Public Lands History Center, Colorado State University, Clark 356, Campus Delivery 1776, Fort Collins, CO 80524; michael.childers@colostate.edu