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### The National Park Idea: Historical Misconceptions and Ecological Realities

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THE NATIONAL PARK IDEA:  
HISTORICAL MISCONCEPTIONS AND ECOLOGICAL REALITIES

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External Development Affecting the National Parks:  
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## I. Introduction

Historians of the national parks traditionally have described the parks as one of the highest expressions of American culture. As recently as 1983 the historian Wallace Stegner, writing in Wilderness magazine, called the national park idea "the best idea we ever had." Other professional historians, perhaps equally seduced by the knowledge that the national park idea has evolved into a remarkable institution, have also fallen victim to this uncritical point of view. John Ise, for example, opened his renowned study, Our National Park Policy: A Critical History (1961), by instead abandoning the standards set by his own subtitle to trace the significance of Yellowstone National Park in glowing terms. "The reservation of this large tract of over 2 million acres of land--larger than a couple of the smallest eastern states--with its wealth of timber, game, grass, water power, and possible minerals barred from all private use, was so dramatic a departure from the general public land policy of Congress that it seems almost a miracle" (p. 17). Similarly, the historian William Everhart, formerly with the National Park Service, has written: "In fact, the whole idea of setting aside Yellowstone as the world's first national park seems today almost to smack of the miraculous." Indeed "there is only one uncontested conclusion," Everhart has most recently observed, that "this was a surprising, if not miraculous, act of statesmanship by Congress in 1872."

The merits of this interpretation aside, the issue is no longer the quality of the national park idea, but whether Americans are in fact committed to the protection of the national parks in perpetuity. Mounting threats to the national parks, both external

and internal, have finally confronted the United States with its moment of truth. Regrettably, national park history, despite the ebullient interpretations of Stegner, Ise, Everhart, and many others, leaves little room for optimism. The term "national park" still brings to mind an almost universal image of a landscape distinguished by its sheer physical grandeur or natural phenomena. Most of the reserves are therefore best described as artifacts rather than as integral ecological units; because they have focused on unique terrain, few have provided adequate protection for the subtleties of wilderness, including wildlife and plant life. Historically, precedent has supported those interest groups which maintain that the national parks should include only the "museum pieces" of nature. For this reason, the future of the national park system still rests on an elusive if not impossible goal--that America will in fact reconcile its national park traditions with ecological realities.

## II. The National Parks in American Culture

Contrary to what environmentalists today would like to believe, during the nineteenth century America's incentive for the national park idea lay not in ecological concerns, but in the persistence of a painfully felt desire for time-honored traditions in the United States. For early nationalists, nothing in American art, architecture, or literature seemed equal to the cultural legacy of Europe. To compensate for these deficiencies, a growing number of American writers and intellectuals turned to the distinctiveness of national

landscapes. In this vein Thomas Jefferson, for example, hailed the picturesque surroundings of Harpers Ferry, Virginia, at the junction of the Shenandoah and Potomac rivers, as proof that the environment of the United States would inspire great cultural achievements in the future. In fact, he claimed in 1784, "The passage of the Patowmac through the Blue ridge is perhaps one of the most stupendous scenes in nature. . . . This scene is worth a voyage across the Atlantic."

But as nationalists were to realize, wishful thinking could not disguise the fact that Eastern landscapes were no more distinctive than the storied countryside of Europe. Meanwhile, the commercialization of Niagara Falls during the 1830s and 1840s cost the United States the validity of Jefferson's argument that the greatest of American scenery was "worth a voyage across the Atlantic." Thus James Fenimore Cooper still conceded in 1851, "As a whole, it must be admitted that Europe offers to the senses sublimer views and certainly grander, than are to be found within our own borders, unless we resort to the Rocky Mountains, and the ranges in California and New Mexico."

With the opening in particular of Yosemite Valley, California, and the nearby Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias, Americans had their first real incentive since the popularization of Niagara Falls to consider the necessity of scenic protection. Beginning with the publication of James Mason Hutchings's California Magazine in 1856, a stream of newspaper accounts, magazine articles, paintings, woodcuts, and photographs celebrated these two phenomena of the Sierra Nevada. Neither captivated the American mind simply because it was

"beautiful," although correspondents obviously relied upon that adjective repeatedly. What brought each description to an emotional climax was the realization that Yosemite Valley and the Big Trees were unique among the wonders of the world. Thus William H. Brewer, a member of the California Geological Survey, proclaimed Bridalveil Falls in Yosemite as "vastly finer than any waterfall in Switzerland, in fact finer than any in Europe." Similarly, Samuel Bowles, editor and publisher of the Springfield (Mass.) Republican, noted the resemblance of Cathedral Spires and Cathedral Rocks in Yosemite Valley to "the Gothic architecture. From their shape and color alike," he concluded, "it is easy to imagine, in looking upon them, that you are under the ruins of an old Gothic Cathedral, to which those of Cologne and Milan are but baby-houses."

Scores of similar descriptions heralding the emergence of the "romantic" West, coupled with the attempts among thinking Americans to compensate for the the limitations of their culture, help explain why the United States bridged the gap between simply appreciating nature and actually advocating its protection. Steeped in the concerns of their time, knowledgeable Americans reacted strongly to reports that the nation's newfound wonderlands in the West, like Niagara Falls and similar landmarks already lost to commercialization in the East, were jeopardized by souvenir hunters and homesteaders desiring to control access to these areas for private gain. Preservationists appealing to Congress for the protection of Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias won their first victory on June 30, 1864, when President Abraham Lincoln signed the

Yosemite Park Act into law.

The purpose of the park, as indicated by the placement of its boundaries, was strictly scenic. Only Yosemite Valley and its encircling peaks one mile back from the valley rim, an area of approximately fifty-six square miles, comprised the northern unit. A similar restriction applied to the southern section of the park, the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias, where a maximum of four square miles of the public domain might be protected. Obviously such limitations ignored the ecological framework of the region, especially its watersheds; indeed, the term ecology was not even known. Monumentalism, not environmentalism, was the driving impetus behind the 1864 Yosemite Park Act.

### III. Worthless Lands

With the establishment of Yellowstone National Park in 1872, Congress underscored its reluctance to protect an area greater than that required for the care of Yellowstone's "wonders." Fortunately, Yellowstone's explorers, most notably Dr. Ferdinand V. Hayden, prevailed upon Congress to protect the backcountry, where, they maintained, further investigation would reveal additional "freaks," "curiosities," and "decorations" of nature. Nonetheless, not until both the House and Senate were convinced of the region's worthlessness did such a large park win the blessing of Congress. In this vein the comments of Representative Henry L. Dawes of Massachusetts were typical. The entire region, he noted, was

"rocky, mountainous, and full of gorges"; obviously "there is frost every month of the year, and nobody can dwell upon it for the purpose of agriculture." Why even "the Indians," he concluded, driving his point home, "can no more live there than they can upon the precipitous sides of the Yosemite Valley."

In a similar spirit of accommodation, Senator Lyman Trumbull of Illinois promised that "at some future time, if we desire to do so, we can repeal this law if it is in anybody's way, but now I think it a very appropriate bill to pass." Again it remained for Representative Dawes to make the promise unmistakably clear. "This bill reserves the control over Yellowstone," he informed the House, "and preserves the control over it to the United States, so that at any time when it shall appear that it will be better to devote it to any other purpose it will be perfectly within the control of the United States to do it." And still his qualification continued. "If upon a more minute survey it shall be found that Yellowstone can be made useful for settlers, and not deprecators, it will be perfectly proper this bill should pass (be repealed). We part with no control," he reemphasized in conclusion, "we put no obstacle in the way of any other disposition of it; we but interfere with. . . those who are attracted by the wonderful descriptions of it. . . and who are going there to plunder this wonderful manifestation of nature."

That Yellowstone National Park has not been measurably reduced in size has absolutely no bearing on the significance of these statements. The point is that Congress in 1872 left the

option open for developing the park for purposes other than tourism, if and when such development seemed practical or desirable. Secure in the knowledge that serious invasions of Yellowstone have not taken place, John Ise, William Everhart, Wallace Stegner, and other historians of their persuasion have enjoyed the luxury of confusing this crucial distinction between history and hindsight. John Ise, for example, simply excised most of the passages in contradiction with his thesis from his own quotations of the Yellowstone debates.

That Congress was in fact committed to realigning the national parks whenever their lands proved to be of indisputable economic value was borne out dramatically in the case of Yosemite, established in 1890 as a national park surrounding the earlier grant to California of 1864. Originally the national park included 1512 square miles, extending from the mountain fastnesses and "wonderlands" of the High Sierra down to the neighboring foothills. As early as the mid-1890s cavalry officers patrolling the park reported that these lowland areas were crucial for sustaining wildlife populations when deep winter snows in the Sierra made foraging in the high country impossible. As a result, several of the commandants assigned every summer to protect the park recommended to Congress through the Secretary of the Interior that conflicting private uses of these lands, including logging, mining, and grazing, be abolished through purchase of the more than 60,000 acres of private property held within the reserve.

Instead, Congress in 1904 appointed a special commission, headed by Major Hiram Martin Chittenden, to recommend its own

solution to the problem of private lands within the park. Not surprisingly, the commission sided with state economic interests in recommending that all of the private lands, in addition to the other timber, mineral, and grazing districts in the lowlands deemed desirable for development, be excluded for the national park rather than purchased or retained. Congress agreed and, as a result, in 1905 deleted 542 square miles from Yosemite National Park, restoring the lost acreage to the surrounding national forests where it would once again be open to economic development.

The reduction of Yosemite National Park by one third crippled its effectiveness as an ecological unit. Nor were these biological needs unknown, unpublicized, or unappreciated in 1905, as some historians have argued in trying to discount any ecological interpretation of the deletions as "presentistic." Simply stated, the United States Congress was unwilling to trade off immediate economic rewards for a long term commitment to Yosemite's native wildlife and plant life.

The reduction of Yosemite National Park was quickly overshadowed by congressional approval of the Hetch Hetchy Valley reservoir, desired by the city of San Francisco for its municipal water supply. Like Yosemite Valley, Hetch Hetchy lay well within the boundaries of the national park. Congress nonetheless allowed the transfer of the valley to San Francisco in 1913, thereby establishing both a precedent and a rallying point for preservation groups seeking to prevent the erosion of national park standards in the face of rising economic pressures. "Nothing dollarable is

safe," John Muir wrote, bitterly summing up his own assessment of the Hetch Hetchy controversy, "however guarded."

As John Muir confessed, America's commitment to scenic preservation at the turn of the century had in no way diluted the nation's preoccupation with extracting every possible resource from the public domain. In this regard, the size of any national park is no real measure of its economic importance to the nation. Granted, Yellowstone National Park was nearly 3500 square miles from the date of its establishment, as David Mastbaum writes, "larger than Rhode Island and Delaware combined." However, it does not necessarily follow, as he claims, that Yellowstone therefore possessed "enormous natural resources potential." Quite the contrary seemed to be the case in 1872, and Congress was well aware of this fact, having turned to the geologist, Ferdinand V. Hayden, for a detailed assessment of the region and its economic potential. "The entire area comprised within the limits of the reservation contemplated in this bill is not susceptible of cultivation with any degree of certainty," he began his report to the House Committee on the Public Lands, "and the winters would be too severe for stock-raising." In other words, ranching and farming were not practical. Then what about mining, Congress asked? Even this seemed a remote possibility, Hayden remarked, given Yellowstone's "volcanic origins." Indeed it was "not probable that any mines or minerals of value will ever be found there." Senator Cornelius Cole of California put to rest the question of timber

resources, apparently having drawn on information supplied by the explorers of 1870 and 1871 regarding the nearly impenetrable jungle of lodgepole pines south of Yellowstone Lake. Fully 75 percent of the Yellowstone forest is composed of this shallow-rooted, stunted, toothpick-like species. Based on this information, Senator Cole conceded: "I suppose there is very little timber on this tract of land, certainly no more than is necessary for the use and convenience of persons going upon it." If the chief spokesman for the opposition was convinced that Yellowstone contained few commercial stands of timber, it seems only logical to conclude that timber was not recognized in 1872 as a reason to object to the park.

That left water power; fortunately, knowledge of potential dam sites in Yellowstone was sketchy at best in 1872. The high dams of the West were at least thirty years in the future. In the instance of water power and irrigation (Yellowstone Lake was seriously eyed for storage purposes around 1920) public outcries later did protect Yellowstone from defacement. The point is that this was well after 1872. Within the limits of its knowledge in 1872, Congress set aside a "worthless" expanse of territory, however large or magnificent from a scenic point of view.

The true test of the nation's sincerity to protect its parks "inalienable for all time" came not in 1872, but in 1905 and 1913, when Yosemite National Park suffered double blows to its ecological integrity through the elimination of 542 square miles of territory and loss of the Hetch Hetchy Valley. Although 112 square miles of

mountainous terrain were added to the park along its northern perimeter, all of this land was above 5,000 feet in elevation and, accordingly, did not compensate the park for critical losses in its wildlife habitat.

Well into the twentieth century, both the survival and expansion of the national park system rested not on any "miracles" or "dramatic" instances of statesmanship, but on the compatibility of a fortunate set of biases. In the nation's eagerness to seek out its boldest, most "monumental" landscapes, park enthusiasts invariably idolized precisely those features-- mountains, canyons, glaciers, volcanoes--whose potential for exploitation was highly doubtful in the first place. It took a later generation of Americans, specifically, preservationists educated about such concepts as "ecological interdependence" and "biological integrity," to demand that the national park system protect all elements of the natural world, including endangered species of flora and fauna.

Credit for this reappraisal must in large part be given to the scientific community. During the 1920s a growing number of biologists and zoologists called upon the American public to consider that the national parks should protect more than scenic "wonders." Finally, in 1933, the National Park Service itself formally recognized the biological limitations of the parks with publication of a precedent-breaking report, Fauna of the National Parks of the United States. Its authors, George M. Wright, Joseph S. Dixon, and Ben H. Thompson, were experts in the fields

of wildlife management, economic mammalogy, and natural history, respectively. "The preponderance of unfavorable wildlife conditions confronting superintendents," they wrote, setting the theme of their study, "is traceable to the insufficiency of park areas as self-contained biological units. . . . At present, not one park is large enough to provide year-round sanctuary for adequate populations of all resident species."

#### IV. Sanctuary on Trial

The solution Wright, Dixon, and Thompson proposed--the enlargement of existing national parks to reflect ecological boundaries--depended for success on breaking down the overriding perception that national parks should protect only representative examples of superlative scenic features. In most instances, the wildlife habitat they singled out as desirable for addition to the national parks consisted of foothills and lowlands, terrain traditionally considered too "commonplace" or "monotonous" for national park status. Moreover, it was here, in the shadow of mountain peaks, that economic interests, particularly loggers, miners, and ranchers, had staked out their claims. These, then, were the two major hurdles working against the recommendations of Wright, Dixon, and Thompson; first, that general topography was not of national park calibre, and secondly, that economic necessity preempted any consideration of adding so-called "productive" lands to the reserves.

The enlargement of Grand Teton National Park in 1950 to include farms and ranches in Jackson Hole, coupled with the dedication in 1947 of Everglades National Park, Florida, testified to the weakening of this perception. Still, it was one thing to propose national parks with enough territory to protect their biological integrity, yet another to effect that philosophy in perpetuity. Most recently, Redwood National Park has dramatized the limitations long imposed on biological conservation. Approval of the original reserve in 1968 was achieved without the protection of an entire watershed, thereby jeopardizing the tallest tree in the world itself to flashfloods and mudslides from adjacent logging sites. Similarly, expansion of the park in 1978 by 48,000 acres found all but 9,000 of those acres already logged over and subject to additional erosion.

Increasing urbanization, pollution, and a burgeoning population, all coupled with a great appetite for energy in the United States, now threaten literally the entire national park system. Restoring a semblance of ecological integrity to the national parks is therefore more a social problem than a technical one. Scientists know what the great majority of national parks need--more land, with boundaries drawn to reflect biological realities rather than economic and political demands. Where government lands managed by other federal agencies encircle the parks, as in the case of Yellowstone, there is still a remote possibility that a more secure biological unit could be established, either through outright additions to the park or through more unified management. In other instances, such as

Everglades National Park, the condemnation of vast acreages of private land for environmental purposes is simply not supported by precedent. Accordingly, the Everglades may never be safe from the urban and agricultural pressures that characterize the territory between the park and Lake Okeechobee. This leaves Alaska, where environmentalists are still hopeful that parks truly sympathetic to the ecology of the state ultimately will prevail. Yet even in Alaska, the tendency to see national parks as "wonders" has been very influential in determining which areas and geographical features are suitable for "protection," and which would best be left open to "development," including native land selections.

#### V. Conclusions

As an individual I can share in Wallace Stegner's exuberance; as an historian I cannot. The history of the national parks is indeed filled with many examples of statesmanship and philanthropy; it is also filled with just as many examples of compromise and retreat from park principles. Security for the national parks will not be achieved until the United States decides, once and for all, that its parks are more important for what they provide the nation rather than for what they might deny to the national economy. The argument that the parks contribute to American tourism is itself utilitarian and prone to the suggestion that we dare not protect what we cannot turn into a profit. The national parks were no "miracle;" God made the land but Americans made the parks. Especially in the nineteenth century, the parks

filled an important national need, one every bit as compelling as building railroads, settling the prairies, and filling up the continent. By setting aside Yellowstone Congress did not deny these other goals; it simply made sure their welfare was not materially affected. Had this been the case, the Yellowstone National Park we know today would have been far different, like Yosemite, readjusted to accommodate substantive economic demands.

The question now is simple: Is the past of the national parks all we desire from them in the future as well? If not, national priorities will clearly have to change, and change very dramatically. In other words, when we say the national parks are threatened by growing numbers of external forces, we had better look beyond air pollution and water pollution to what Roderick Nash has termed mind pollution as well. For example, what do wide screen color televisions and modern bars in Yosemite Valley have to do with enjoyment of the park? Why does the National Park Service tolerate such development in the midst of "the best idea we ever had?" The Park Service argues that the American people have come to expect such development, indeed that visitors demand it. If so, it is doubly apparent that rhetoric will not save the parks, but only national discipline. The national park idea is alive and well. It is in the translation of that idea from idealism into reality that Americans are still coming up short.

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