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# Historical Commentary

## The National Parks in Idealism and Reality

by Alfred Runte

Writing for *Wilderness* magazine in spring 1983, novelist and historian Wallace Stegner was moved to label national parks “the best idea we ever had.” Whatever their wording, similar definitions have long been popular to underscore the idealism and uniqueness of America’s natural heritage. A recent example of the opposite point of view is *Playing God in Yellowstone* by Montana’s Alston Chase. Chase lashes out at the National Park Service itself, long considered the nation’s most respected—and responsible—land management agency. The Park Service, in his view, is guilty of no less than complicity in the destruction of Yellowstone National Park. It is small wonder, as borne out by Park Service critics, that Chase has often been accused of distorted rhetoric and research inaccuracies.

Symbolically, the disparity in emphasis between Stegner and Chase points to issues that have gripped the national parks movement for fifty years. Contrary to what many environmentalists would like to believe, America’s original incentive for establishing national parks lay not in reversing ecological damage as identified by Alston Chase, but rather in the search for national identity as celebrated by Wallace Stegner. For early nationalists, nothing in American art, architecture, or literature seemed equal to the cultural legacy of Europe. To compensate for these deficiencies, many nineteenth century writers and intellectuals heralded the distinctiveness of national landscapes as proof that the United States was predestined for a grand and glorious future apart from the cradle of Western Civilization. Well into the



Yosemite National Park, 1894

B. W. Kilbourn, photographer. MHS Photograph Archives

twentieth century, preservationists were satisfied in knowing that national parks represented supreme examples of the earth’s geological forces—forces that had blessed the United States with landscapes as remarkable as Yosemite, Yellowstone, and the Grand Canyon.

In other words, the first major compromise made that affected national parks from a biological standpoint was limiting their areas to focal scenic “wonders.” It is all well and good to blame the National Park Service for management failures, but

the fact still remains that most national parks originated as imperfect units with regard to the consistent protection of their biological resources. At the turn of the century, Americans thought in terms of scenery, not ecology. And most Americans still think that way. The annual pilgrimage of three million visitors to Yosemite National Park, for example, does not result from any preoccupation with sugar pines and peregrine falcons; Yosemite’s cliffs and waterfalls are the premier attractions.

The other compromise made affecting national parks is basically economic. Even John Muir confessed, "Nothing dollarable is safe, however guarded." Dramatic evidence of congressional commitment to realigning national parks whenever their lands proved to be of indisputable material value can be found in Yosemite, established in 1890 as a national park surrounding the 1864 Yosemite Valley grant to California. Originally, the national park included 1,512 square miles, extending from the mountain fastnesses and "wonderlands" of the High Sierra to neighboring foothills in the timber belt to the west. As early as the mid-1890s, cavalry officers assigned to patrol the park reported to the secretary of the interior that these lowland areas were crucial for sustaining wildlife populations when deep winter snows made foraging in the high country impossible. Nevertheless, a congressionally authorized commission in 1904 sided with state economic interests in recommending that such lands outside Yosemite's monumental core—especially those suited for logging, mining, and grazing—should be excluded from the national park. In 1905, Congress deleted 542 square miles from Yosemite National Park, restoring the lost acreage to surrounding national forests where it could once again be open to survey and development.

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 rather on the compatibility of this fortunate set of biases. In the nation's eagerness to seek out its boldest, most "monumental" landscapes, park enthusiasts invariably idolized those features—mountains, canyons, glaciers, volcanoes—whose potential for exploitation was doubtful in the first place. It remained for a later generation of Americans—specifically, preservationists educated about 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.

Once again, it may be argued, this awareness came too late. The enlargement of existing national parks to reflect biological boundaries

depended for success on breaking down the overriding perception that national parks should protect only representative samples of superlative scenic features. In most instances, the wildlife habitat singled out as desirable for addition to national parks consisted of foothills and lowlands, terrain traditionally considered too "commonplace" or "monotonous" for national park status. Moreover, it was there, in the shadow of mountain peaks, that economic interests, particularly loggers, settlers, and ranchers, had staked out their claims. These, then, were the two major obstacles facing biologists: first, that general topography was not recognized to be of park quality; second, 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 of Everglades National Park, Florida, in 1947 testified to the weakening of this perception. Still, it was one thing to propose national parks with enough territory to protect their biological integrity; it was yet another to effect that philosophy in perpetuity. Most recently, Redwood National Park, California, has dramatized the limitations long imposed on biological conservation. Approval of the original reserve in 1968 was achieved without protection of an entire watershed, thereby jeopardizing the tallest tree in the world to flash floods and mudslides from adjacent logging sites. Similarly, adding 48,000 acres to the park in 1978 found all but 9,000 of those acres already logged over and subject to serious erosion.

Urbanization, pollution, and a burgeoning population, all coupled with a great appetite for energy in the United States, now threaten the entire national park system. Therefore, while as an individual I may share in Wallace Stegner's exuberance, as a historian I understand what has motivated Alston Chase. But what Chase has not fully addressed is that the problem of restoring a semblance of ecological integrity to the national parks calls for far more than Park Service reforms. Granted, the National Park Service needs consistent policies of scientific research and sound resource

management, but that still will not resolve the problem—so well-grounded in historical precedent—of restricting national parks to terrain that is generally lacking in biological diversity. Even Yellowstone, the largest national park in the continental United States, is restricted by elevation to higher life zones. For the Park Service to have absolute control over Yellowstone and its future, the park as currently structured would have to be doubled in size at the very least.

The question is even more direct: Is the past of the national parks all we desire from their future as well? The argument that the parks contribute to American tourism is utilitarian and prone to the suggestion that we dare not protect what we cannot turn into a profit. Similarly, when we say national parks are threatened by a growing number of external forces, we had better look beyond air and water pollution to what historian Roderick Nash has termed mind pollution as well. For example, what do wide-screen televisions and modern bars in Yosemite Valley have to do with the purposes of the park? Why have such distractions in the midst of "the best idea we ever had"?

Again, it would appear that such rhetoric will not save the parks; only national discipline will. Further, consider the irony of a country that invents national parks yet does not extend the same aesthetic discipline to its lands as a whole. The roadways leading to America's national parks may be paved with great expectations, but those same highways are an ugly and revealing kaleidoscope of how little the United States respects what it does not put behind a fence. Ultimately, every boundary is arbitrary and artificial. Even national parks will not survive unless—to borrow from Aldo Leopold—Americans everywhere adopt a sincere and sustainable land ethic. The national park *idea* may be alive and well. It is in managing the parks and translating their idealism into our daily lives that we as Americans are still coming up short.

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