

THE NATIONAL PARKS: A Forum on the "Worthless Lands" Thesis

NATIONAL PARKS: WORTHLESS LANDS OR COMPETING LAND VALUES?

by Richard W. Sellars

Editors' Note

When Richard W. Sellars submitted his critique of Alfred Runte's "worthless lands" thesis to *JFH*, we agreed to publish it with the understanding that Runte would be invited to respond in print and that both statements would be the basis for comment by three scholars well known for their study and appreciation of the national parks and their history. Hence, we present a kind of forum on Runte's "worthless lands" thesis; readers are invited to respond to any or all of the statements with succinct letters that may be considered for publication in a future issue.

Alfred Runte's book, *National Parks: The American Experience* (University of Nebraska Press, 1979), describes the evolution of the national park idea. It discusses the various influences on the early concept of public parks, the efforts to get the park system on a firm political footing, the change from preserving only monumental scenery to preserving entire ecological systems, and the more recent struggles over development versus preservation of parks or proposed park lands.

Of the several themes discussed, we are concerned here with the idea that national parks are comprised of "worthless lands"—that is, lands without economic value. The author claims that scenic lands can be set aside as parks only if they are otherwise worthless, and they continue as parks chiefly because of their worthlessness. This idea, earlier presented in article form in the *Journal of Forest History* (April 1977), appears in detail in *National Parks*, particularly in chapters 3 and 4. As early as the preface, Runte states that "today the reserves are not allowed to interfere with the material progress of the nation" (p. xii). And throughout the book he reiterates the theme:

There evolved in Congress a firm (if unwritten) policy that only "worthless" lands might be set aside as national parks (p. 48).

But although Americans as a whole admit to the "beauty" of the national parks, rarely have percep-

tions based on emotion overcome the urge to acquire wealth (p. 49).

No qualification outweighed the precedent of "useless" scenery; only where scenic nationalism did not conflict with materialism could the national park idea further expand (p. 65).

In the quest for total preservation, no less than the retention of significant natural wonders, the worthlessness of the area in question was still the only guarantee of effecting a successful outcome (p. 109).

And in the book's epilogue:

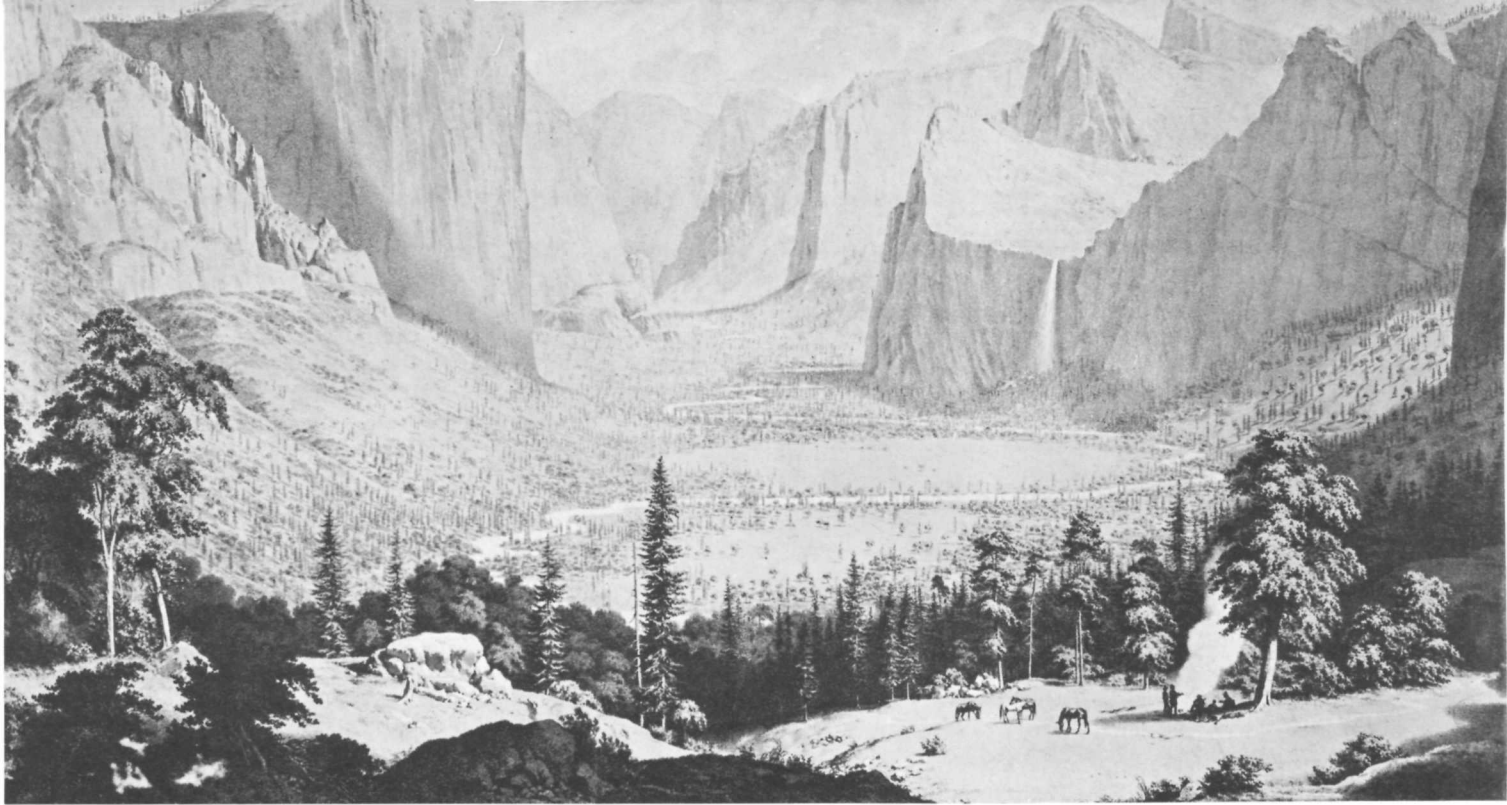
As for the United States, . . . national parks must appear worthless, and remain worthless, to survive (p. 183).

The many difficulties with this theory stem chiefly from two fundamental definitional problems: (1) Runte defines, or uses, the term *national parks* in the most narrow construction possible; and (2) he severely limits the definition of *worthless lands*. These narrow definitions exclude many park areas as well as a number of economic factors, which, when considered, directly contradict the notion of parks as worthless lands.

National Parks Narrowly Defined

The national park system is much more varied and extensive than Runte would have us believe. The author indeed limits his discussion of worthless lands to those units that had, or were eventually to have, actual national park designation. Today about 15 percent of the total number of units in the system fall under such designation; about 13 percent were so designated when Runte's book was written. This narrow focus—bound by the Park Service's confusing nomenclature—is presented as representative of the "American experience" with national parks. It ignores the broader composition and history of the system's evolution and therefore distorts the case for parks as worthless lands.

In fact, the National Park Service Act of 1916 provided that the new agency administer what had already become in effect a system of parks, which



Yosemite Valley, viewed from Inspiration Point in this 1859 lithograph, stands as one of the finest testaments to the national park idea. Although the value of this and other national park lands may seem altogether evident to today's appreciative visitors, historians still debate the motives behind the parks' establishment. Were these scenic wonders set aside because they were otherwise "worthless lands," or were they established in spite of real and potential competing economic uses?

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included 21 national monuments, the ruins at Casa Grande, and the Hot Springs Reservation, in addition to 14 national parks. Today, with a very large and complex system of more than 300 units, Park Service nomenclature consists of almost two dozen different designations—such as national parks, monuments, preserves, military parks, battlefields, historical parks, and historic sites, to name a few.

The Park Service defines national parks—one category among many within the system—as large and diverse areas with enough land or water to protect the resources adequately. Yet the national park category alone encompasses a diversity of park types and sizes. For example, Yellowstone National Park is a very large natural area, Mesa Verde National Park is a large cultural area, and Hot Springs National Park is a smaller, essentially urban recreational area. The confusion over park nomenclature is reflected in the book's only map (a U. S. Forest Service map following page 96), which confuses natural and cultural types of parks. The map identifies Mesa Verde National Park and Wupatki, Canyon de Chelly, and Bandelier national monuments as primary natural units, when without exception these parks are primary cultural areas, set aside not at all because of natural features but to preserve very important prehistoric sites and structures.

The point is that the arguments that justified preservation in virtually every one of these varied units in the system bear directly on the question of

land values and alternate economic uses. Each different kind of park area that came into the system had its own accumulated political, economic, and environmental history, but Runte ignores this. He presents his theory using incomplete evidence, basing his sweeping conclusion upon the history of only a portion of the system—those areas having national park designation. In fact, a truly conclusive argument that park land is worthless land must consider the whole system, including its natural, cultural, and recreational areas. Evidence for Runte's sweeping generalization—the "worthless lands" thesis—should not be restricted by the limitations of park nomenclature, which itself is often confusing and arbitrary.

In this regard, the potential economic value of many areas within the system (not specifically those designated national parks) is beyond dispute. Federal Hall National Memorial, a structure commemorating numerous historic events of outstanding importance (including the first inauguration of George Washington), sits on a .45-acre tract at 26 Wall Street, diagonally across from the New York Stock Exchange. Castle Clinton National Monument, an early nineteenth-century military fort, is situated at the tip of lower Manhattan. These park units occupy some of the most expensive real estate in the world. Similarly, Independence National Historical Park comprises more than 36 acres in downtown Philadelphia, and the varied and numerous national park



units comprising the National Capital Parks occupy more than 6,000 acres in the District of Columbia. Some recreational areas of the system contain extremely valuable lands, such as the variety of units included in both Golden Gate (San Francisco) and Gateway (New Jersey-New York) national recreation areas.

Nor does Runte take into account the value of the national monuments set aside for their significance in prehistory. It is important to note that many early excavations of prehistoric sites in the Southwest brought economic benefits to people involved in marketing antiquities, especially pottery. The 1906 Antiquities Act was inspired by groups seeking to preserve these sites and specifically to prevent their commercial exploitation. For all its faults and weaknesses, the act has resulted in the preservation of many areas by including them in the national park system, and has helped prevent the economic exploitation of both historic and prehistoric properties on federal land. (The Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979 provides even greater protection against economic exploitation of both historic and prehistoric properties on federal land. This act was passed after Runte had written his book.)

Runte states in his preface that it would be "impossible in the scope of one book" to consider the variety of other areas in the system that are "now often ranked with national parks proper" (p. xi). This blanket disclaimer seeks to justify a limited focus on areas that support his thesis. But certainly he offers no proof that his chosen subjects are representative, and the existing literature suggests that a broader treatment would indeed be possible in the scope of one book. In any event, the history of the national parks alone cannot be isolated so neatly or logically from the history of the national park *system's* very complex origins, evolution, and composition, most especially when presenting a theory having such wide implications.

Worthless Lands Narrowly Defined

In the opening section of the chapter titled "Worthless Lands," Runte states that "national parks, however spectacular from the standpoint of their topography, actually encompassed only those features considered valueless for lumbering, mining, grazing, or agriculture" (p. 49). Although no precise definition is given, in almost all instances the "worth" of the lands in question is judged in terms of these extractive industries. The principal exception appears to be the use of land for reservoir sites, especially the Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park. Reiteration of the "worthless lands" idea extends the concept from the beginning of the national park movement to the present day, when

"national parks must appear worthless, and remain worthless, to survive" (p. 183). Runte's failure to consider a broader variety of land values, however, leaves the argument incomplete and highly vulnerable. Not only did the parks contain valuable lands when established, but today in many park areas these values have increased enormously.

Runte himself makes it clear that national park lands were not entirely worthless. He points to various forms of enterprise—grazing in Yosemite, farming and ranching in Jackson Hole, and hunting alligators and snowy egrets in the Everglades—pre-existing in areas later established as parks. Also, according to Runte, ranchers and farmers sought to divert the waters of both Yellowstone Lake and the Bechler River (within Yellowstone Park) for irrigation, and timber operators threatened the forests of the Great Smoky Mountains and the Blue Ridge area. Runte's own evidence thus cuts squarely across his theory, though he fails to note the contradictions.

From the very beginning of the national park movement, moreover, the lands to be set aside as parks had obvious potential for tourist trade. In fact, the famous campfire discussion held in September 1870, at the Madison junction in the Yellowstone country, dealt precisely with the potential economic value of this area. Around the campfire, the Yellowstone explorers discussed plans to acquire rights to lands containing the most interesting phenomena. This, even as Runte tells it, would have in time "become a source of great profit to the owners" (p. 41). However, the proposal to seek private profits was quickly rejected in favor of the public interest, and thus the birth of the national park idea—so the story goes. In any event, according to Runte, explorer and park proponent Ferdinand V. Hayden made it very clear to Congress in 1872 "that the explorers' *determination to avoid another Niagara* was indeed a *primary incentive* for the Yellowstone Park campaign" (p. 52, italics added). The development around Niagara Falls represented excessive commercialism and profiteering in a scenic area. These very early efforts to prevent commercial exploitation of the Yellowstone flatly contradict the "worthless lands" concept.

The railroad industry very quickly understood the potential of tourism in Yellowstone and other park areas. Runte shows that the Northern Pacific Railway promoted the establishment of Yellowstone National Park and in the 1880s helped finance a number of hostels in the park. The Santa Fe Railroad constructed El Tovar Hotel on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon in 1904, four years before the area was set aside as a national monument and fifteen years before Congress designated it a national park.



The commercial value of national park lands, Richard Sellars argues, is apparent in the beginnings of "industrial tourism" in Glacier National Park, Montana. The majestic Many Glacier Hotel, pictured at right, was built by the Great Northern Railway in 1914-1915 as the "showplace of the Rockies." It provided accommodations for park visitors and, not incidentally, greater business for the railroad that monopolized tourist traffic in the area.

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The Great Northern Railway promoted the establishment of Glacier National Park, realizing that it could virtually monopolize tourist traffic in the area. Runte observes that these railroads had few if any environmental concerns in supporting parks; rather "the lines promoted tourism in their quest for greater profits" (p. 91). It is abundantly clear from the book itself that with the very establishment of the national parks came "industrial tourism," generated by public interest in these great institutionalized western landscapes.

Runte also discusses the later efforts of preservationists, especially Stephen T. Mather and Horace M. Albright, to promote the economic potential of tourism in the parks in order to secure a greater degree of political and economic stability for the park system. He states that they "invoked the profit motive," sought to "dilute the utilitarian rhetoric by playing upon the value of the national parks as an economic resource," and helped make Congress aware that "national parks were capable of paying economic as well as emotional dividends" (pp. 103-05). Runte very clearly demonstrates that these leaders recognized the economic *value* of park lands, not their worthlessness.

Although Runte repeatedly acknowledges the economic value of tourism, only in a passing, almost timid way does he allow this to qualify his otherwise very firm assertion that parks consist of worthless lands. He notes, for instance, that some parks established in the twentieth century were considered to be "economically valueless from the standpoint of their natural wealth, if not their potential for outdoor recreation" (p. 140). Yet never does he bring the obvious and significant values of tourism fully to bear on his analysis of parks as worthless lands.

The value of real estate, specifically as it pertains to development potential for commercial lodging, houses, cabins, small farms, and, especially today, condominiums, second homes, and apartments, should have been central to the discussion of parks as worthless lands, yet Runte disregards these real estate values. Though of lesser concern in the early history of most of the large western national parks, such values are a major factor in limiting the growth rate of the park system today. The notion that national parks must be "worthless to survive" must confront the obvious potential land values in such important national park areas as Jackson Hole, the Yosemite Valley, or the South Rim of the Grand Canyon. Placed on the open market, such lands could produce enough revenue virtually to pay off the national debt. In the hands of private developers, individual lots or condominium units in Jackson Hole or the Yosemite Valley, for instance, could create a real estate bonanza of the first order.

Fortunately, the American public realizes the inestimable scenic value of these and many other park areas. For decades Americans have acted directly contrary to Runte's notion that the public "rarely" lets "perceptions based on emotion overcome the urge to acquire wealth." In fact, economic values are overridden in the public interest with virtually every acre of prime real estate preserved by the federal government in the national park system.

Through a discussion of the Hetch Hetchy dam controversy, Runte shows that the value of land as reservoir sites can override scenic values in a national park. Yet what he does not discuss are the later and very significant preservationist victories over the Echo Park, Marble Canyon, and Grand Canyon dam proposals. In these instances, dam



proponents predicted that construction would bring a variety of economic benefits to large regions of the country. Nevertheless, the economic potential of these park lands (and some adjacent nonpark lands) as reservoir sites was sacrificed to preserve the great scenic and scientific values of the parks. Defeat of both the proposed jetport near the Everglades and the proposed Mineral King Basin recreational development near Sequoia National Park provides further examples in which the ecological diversity and spectacular scenery of "worthless" lands were ultimately valued over material progress. With the exception of Mineral King Basin, Runte mentions all of these proposals in the book, but he fails to acknowledge the manner in which they contradict his "worthless lands" theory.

Origins and Implications of the "Worthless Lands" Thesis

Ultimately, the historical significance of the idea of parks as worthless lands derives from its use as a rhetorical ploy, rather than from the reality of the park lands situation. The rhetoric of park proponents frequently contained references to the limited economic value of lands, and the argument has had no small effect on park establishment. But because the term has been used rhetorically does not in any way make it an actual fact. This is a cardinal distinction, and it deserves discriminating analysis, which the book does not provide. Instead, Runte bought the rhetoric at face value.

Essentially, the "worthless lands" theory gauges American public values at rock bottom. Bluntly stated, Runte's theory implies that only if there are no economic values at stake will the American public support park establishment. Yet the American experience with national parks plainly shows the public's determination to preserve park lands in the face of sometimes immense economic values. Furthermore, this great and impressive commitment has deep historical roots and remains at the heart of the broader preservation movement in the United States. Much of Yellowstone, for example, remains essentially unchanged since the park's establishment more than a century ago, and its establishment and ongoing preservation have achieved international importance historically and symbolically. And to whatever degree the concept of parks as worthless lands applies to the national park system, it must surely apply also to preservation actions in general and to the setting aside of other federal, state, or local lands for a variety of public uses. For instance, the "worthless lands" thesis ignores the implications of hundreds of nonfederally owned parks in valuable land areas, two striking examples being Central Park in New York and the Boston Common.



Yellowstone, established in 1872 as America's first national park, demonstrates the historical continuity of the nation's preservation effort. Despite immense numbers of visitors, most of the park retains its essential wilderness character.

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Worthless is an absolute term meaning flatly that something has no value. It leaves no room for exception or nuance. Other than for its importance as rhetoric, the term has limited application in the history of a movement that from the beginning has involved competing land values. The resulting compromise and sacrifice of these competing values has been worked out in the public forum and is endured by both sides—those who would develop and those who would preserve. □