



Creating Tradition

The Roots of National Park Management

by Richard West Sellars

Author's introduction *In this era of heightened environmental concern, it is essential that scientific knowledge form the foundation for any meaningful effort to preserve ecological resources. If the National Park Service is to successfully shoulder this complex, challenging responsibility at last, it must conduct scientifically informed management that insists on ecological preservation as the highest of many worthy priorities. To understand why the National Park Service has never achieved this goal, one must consider the history of natural resource management in the National Park System. —RWS*

The central dilemma of national park management has long been the question of exactly what in a park should be preserved. Is it the scenery—the resplendent landscapes of forests, streams, wildflowers, and majestic mammals? Or is it the integrity of each park's entire natural system, including not just the biological and scenic superstars, but also the vast array of less compelling species, such as grasses, lichens, and mice? The incredible beauty of the national parks has always given the impression that the scenery alone is what makes them worthwhile and deserving of protection. Scenery has provided the primary inspiration for national parks and, through tourism, their primary justification. Thus, a kind of “facade” management became the accepted practice in parks: protecting and enhancing the scenic facade of nature for the public's enjoyment, but with scant scientific knowledge and little concern for biological consequences.

Criticism of this approach began in the 1930s, increased during the environmental era of the 1960s and 1970s, and is commonly voiced today. Nevertheless, facade management based largely on aesthetic considerations remains quite acceptable to many. Far easier to undertake,

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and aimed at ensuring public enjoyment of the parks, facade management has long held more appeal for the public, for Congress, and for the National Park Service than has the concept of exacting scientific management.

Yet aesthetics and ecological awareness are not unrelated. Whatever benefit and enjoyment the national parks have contributed to American life, they have undoubtedly intensified the aesthetic response of millions of people to the beauty and the natural history of this continent—a response that could then be pleasurably honored in more ordinary surroundings closer to home. Beyond the sheer enjoyment of scenery, a heightened aes-

thetic sensibility may have inspired in many a deeper understanding of, and concern for, the natural environment. This benefit defies quantification, but surely it has had consequences of immense value, both for individuals and for the nation.

The persistent tension between national park management for aesthetic purposes and management for ecological purposes underlies much of the history of the National Parks.

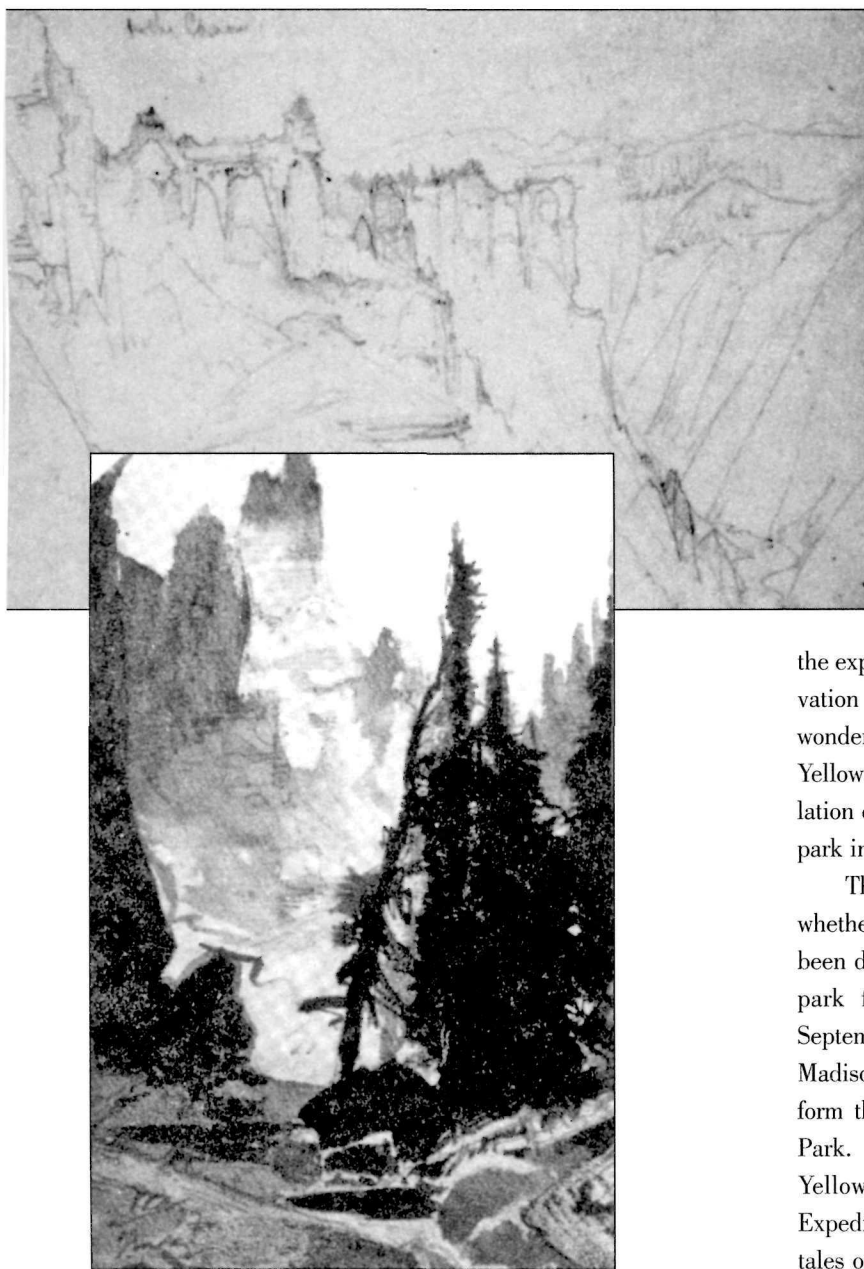
ON MARCH 1, 1872, CONGRESS ESTABLISHED YELLOWSTONE National Park—the world's first “national park,” more than two million acres located mostly in the northwest corner of present-day Wyoming—to be preserved and managed by the federal

government for the enjoyment and benefit of the people. In the midst of the Gilded Age's rampant exploitation of public lands, the concept of federally managed parks protected from the extractive uses typical of the late-nineteenth-century American West abruptly gained congressional sanction. Yellowstone's awesome natural phenomena had inspired a political phenomenon.

Despite its eventual worldwide implications, the Yellowstone Park Act attracted minimal public attention; Congress only briefly debated the bill, giving little indication of what it intended for the park. The act came during an era when the federal government was aggressively divesting itself of the public domain through huge railroad land grants and, among others, homestead, mining, and timber acts. Although a few Americans were voicing concern about the preservation of nature and decrying

the exploitation of natural resources, no broad, cohesive conservation movement existed in 1872. Yet the proposal to save the wonders of Yellowstone (principally the great falls of the Yellowstone River and the spectacular geysers) triggered legislation creating what was until very recently the largest national park in the contiguous forty-eight states.

The origin of the national park idea—who conceived it, and whether it was inspired by altruism or by profit motives—has been disputed. One account became a revered part of national park folklore and tradition: that the idea originated in September 1870 during a discussion around a campfire near the Madison Junction, where the Firehole and Gibbon rivers join to form the Madison River in present-day Yellowstone National Park. Nearing the conclusion of their exploration of the Yellowstone country, members of the Washburn-Doane Expedition (a largely amateur party organized to investigate tales of scenic wonders in the area) had encamped at Madison



Junction on the evening of September 19. As they relaxed and mused around their wilderness campfire, the explorers recalled the spectacular sights they had seen. Then, after considering the possible uses of the area and the profits they might make from tourism, they rejected the idea of private exploitation. Instead, in a moment of high altruism, the explorers agreed that Yellowstone's awe-inspiring geysers, waterfalls, and canyons should be preserved as a public park. This proposal was soon relayed to high political circles, and within a year and a half Congress established Yellowstone Park.

Through the decades, as the national park concept gained strength and other nations followed the American example, the Madison Junction campfire emerged as the legendary birthplace not just of Yellowstone but of all the world's national parks. Although the Yosemite Valley had been established as a California state park from federally donated lands in 1864 and the term "national park" had been occasionally used in the past, the belief that the national park idea truly began around a wilderness campfire at the Madison Junction evolved into a kind of creation myth: that from a gathering of explorers on a late summer evening in the northern Rocky Mountains came the inspiration for Yellowstone National Park, the prototype for hundreds of similar parks and reserves around the world. In the wilderness setting and with a backdrop of the vast, dramatic landscape of the western frontier, the origin of the national park idea seemed fitting and noble. Surely the national park concept deserved a "virgin birth"—under a night sky in the pristine American West, on a riverbank, and around a flaming campfire, as if an evergreen cone had fallen near the fire, then heated and expanded and dropped its seeds to spread around the planet.

THE CAMPFIRE STORY MAY BE SEEN IN ANOTHER LIGHT, however. Romantic imagery aside, the element of monopolistic business enterprise is notably absent from the traditional campfire story—the profit motive obscured by the altruistic proposal for a public park. In fact, corporate involvement with America's national parks has its roots in that same Washburn-Doane Expedition and campfire discussion. Amid the great rush to settle the West after the Civil War, the Northern Pacific Railroad Company was by 1870 planning to extend its tracks from the Dakota Territory across the Montana Territory. With easiest access to Yellowstone being from the north, through Montana, the company believed that once it extended its tracks west it could monopolize tourist traffic into the area.

Alert to this potential, Northern Pacific financier Jay Cooke took special interest in the scenic Yellowstone country. In June 1870 he met in Philadelphia with Nathaniel P. Langford, politi-

cian and entrepreneur, who subsequently proceeded to Montana and, with Northern Pacific backing, successfully promoted the Washburn-Doane Expedition. This exploration of Yellowstone began in August, with Langford as a participant. Still supported by the Northern Pacific, Langford followed up the expedition with lectures to audiences in Montana and in East Coast cities, extolling the wonders of Yellowstone, while local boosters in Montana began promoting the park idea. The following year, the railroad company subsidized artist Thomas Moran's participation in the expedition into Yellowstone led by geologist Ferdinand V. Hayden. Moran's sketches from the Hayden expedition (his impressive paintings were not yet completed) were displayed in the Capitol in Washington as part of the campaign to enact the Yellowstone legislation.

Ever advancing Northern Pacific interests, Jay Cooke sought to ensure that the Yellowstone country did not fall into private hands, but rather remained a federally controlled area. He observed in October 1871, just before the legislation to create a park was introduced, that a government "reservation" (or park) would prevent "squatters and claimants" from gaining control to the area's most scenic features. Government control would be easier to deal with; thus, it was "important to do something speedily" through legislation.

Subsequent to the Hayden Expedition, the Northern Pacific lobbied for the park with swift success: the Yellowstone bill was introduced on December 18, 1871, and enacted the following March. Like most future national parks, Yellowstone remained under the jurisdiction of the Department of the Interior, which managed the public lands of the West. The park's immense size came not because of an effort to preserve vast tracts of undisturbed wilderness, but largely as a result of recommendations by Ferdinand Hayden, who sought to include the lands most likely to contain spectacular thermal features.

From the first, then, the national parks served corporate profit motives, the Northern Pacific having imposed continuous influence on the Yellowstone park proposal, beginning even before the 1870 expedition that gave birth to the campfire tradition. With their land grants stretching across the continent, American railroads were already seeking to establish monopolistic trade corridors. By preventing private land claims and limiting competition for tourism in Yellowstone, the federal reservation of the area served, in effect, as a huge appendage to the Northern Pacific's anticipated monopoly across southern Montana Territory.

Indeed, in historical perspective, the 1872 Yellowstone legislation stands as a resounding declaration that tourism was to be important in the economy of the American West. A mat-

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ter of considerable consequence in the Yellowstone story, the collaboration between private business and the federal government fostered a new kind of public land use in the drive to open the West.

Growth of the National Park Concept

Characteristically, the national parks featured outstanding natural phenomena: Yellowstone's geysers, Sequoia's and General Grant's gigantic trees, and Hot Spring's thermal waters. Such features greatly enhanced the potential of the parks as pleasuring grounds that would attract an increasingly mobile American public interested in the outdoors. Writing about Yellowstone in 1905, more than three decades after its establishment as a park, President Theodore Roosevelt observed that the preservation of nature was "essentially a democratic movement," benefiting rich and poor alike. Even with the prospect of monopolistic control of tourist facilities, the national park idea was a remarkably democratic concept. The parks would be open to all—the undivided, majestic landscapes to be shared and enjoyed by the American people.

Moreover, in preventing exploitation of scenic areas in the rapacious manner typical for western lands in the late nineteenth century, the Yellowstone Park Act marked a truly historic step in nature preservation. The act forbade "wanton destruction of the fish and game" within the park, and provided for the

preservation, from injury or spoilation, of all timber, mineral deposits, natural curiosities, or wonders within said park, and their retention in their natural condition (emphasis added).

Natural resources in Yellowstone and subsequent national parks were to be protected—by implication, the sharing would extend beyond the human species to the flora and fauna of the area. Indeed, this broad sharing of unique segments of the American landscape came to form the vital core of the national park idea, endowing it with high idealism and moral purpose as it spread to other areas of the country and ultimately around the world.

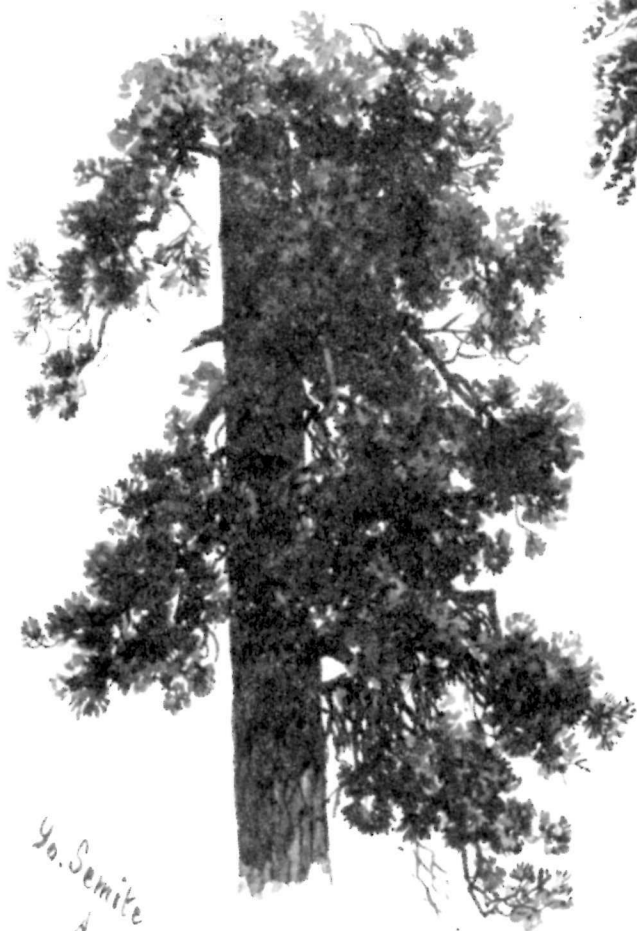
Toward the end of the nineteenth century, an emerging interest in protecting wilderness was apparent in national park

affairs. In the mid-1880s, the congressional defeat of proposals by railroad and mining interests to build a railroad through northern Yellowstone and reduce the park in size underscored the importance of both the park's wildlife and its wild lands—thus moving beyond the original, limited concern for specific scenic wonders of Yellowstone. Interest in more general preservation within the parks also was evident with the creation of Yosemite National Park in 1890, which included extensive and largely remote lands surrounding the Yosemite Valley. John Muir, a leading spokesman for wilderness, sought to preserve the High Sierra in as natural a state as possible and was especially active in promoting the Yosemite legislation. For the new park, Muir envisioned accommodating tourism in the Merced River drainage (which encompasses the Yosemite Valley), while leaving the Tuolumne River drainage to the north (including the Hetch Hetchy Valley) as wilderness, largely inaccessible except on foot or by horseback.

With the early national park movement so heavily influenced by corporate tourism interests such as the railroad companies, Muir's thinking regarding Yosemite and other parks stands out as the most prominent juncture between the park movement and intellectual concerns for nature's intrinsic values and meanings, as typified by the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Moreover, except perhaps for Muir's efforts to understand the natural history of California's High Sierra, the advances in ecological knowledge taking place by the late nineteenth century had little to do with the national park movement. Busy with development, the parks played no role in leading scientific efforts such as the studies of plant succession by Frederic Clements in Nebraska's grasslands, or by Henry C. Cowles along Indiana's Lake Michigan shoreline. Once national parks became more numerous and more accessible, an ever-increasing number of scientists would conduct research in them. But within national park management circles, awareness of ecological matters lay in the distant future, and genuine concern in the far-distant future.

In many ways, the national park movement pitted one utilitarian urge—tourism and public recreation—against another—the consumptive use of natural resources, such as logging, mining, and reservoir development. In the early decades of

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This relationship Muir recognized; he had already come to accept tourism and limited development as necessary, and far preferable to uses such as dams and reservoirs. Yet the extensive, unregulated use of the state-controlled Yosemite Valley alerted Muir and his friends in the newly formed Sierra Club to the dangers of too much tourism development (and provided impetus for adding the valley to the surrounding national park in 1906). Still, the nation-

al park idea survived and ultimately flourished because it was fundamentally utilitarian. From Yellowstone on, tourism and public enjoyment provided a politically viable rationale for the national park movement; concurrently, development for public use was intended from the very first. Becoming more evident over time, the concept that development for public use and enjoyment could foster nature preservation on large tracts of public lands would form an enduring, paradoxical theme in national park history.

The Management of Nature

With park development simulating resort development elsewhere in the country, perhaps the most distinguishing characteristic of the parks was their extensive, protected backcountry. The location of roads, trails, hotels, and other recreational tourism facilities only in selected areas meant that much of the vast park terrain escaped the impact of intensive development and use. Offering the only real possibility for preservation of some semblance of natural conditions, these relatively remote areas would constitute the best hope of later generations seeking to preserve national park ecological systems and biological diversity.

In contrast to tourism development, no precedent existed for intentionally and perpetually maintaining large tracts of land in their "natural condition," as stipulated in the legislation creating Yellowstone and numerous subsequent parks. (The 1916

national park history, the most notable illustration of this conflict came with the controversy over the proposed dam and reservoir on the Tuolumne River in Yosemite's Hetch Hetchy Valley. The vulnerability of this national park backcountry, which John Muir wanted preserved in its wild condition, was made clear when Congress voted in December 1913 to dam the Tuolumne in order to supply water to San Francisco. Even though located in a national park, the Hetch Hetchy Valley was vulnerable to such a proposal in part because it was indeed wilderness, undeveloped for public use and enjoyment. The absence of significant utilitarian recreational use exposed the

act creating the National Park Service would require that the parks be left “unimpaired”—essentially synonymous with maintaining “natural conditions.”) Moreover, the early mandates for individual parks were not so much the ideas of biologists and other natural scientists, but of politicians and park promoters. There seems to have been no serious attempt to define what it meant to maintain natural conditions. The key mandate for national park management began (and long remained) an ambiguous concept related to protecting natural scenery and the more desirable flora and fauna.

Management of the parks under the mandate to preserve natural conditions took two basic approaches: to ignore, or to manipulate. Many inconspicuous species (for example, small mammals) were either little known or of little concern. Not intentionally manipulated, they carried on their struggle for existence without intentional managerial interference. The second approach, however, involved extensive interference. Managers sought to enhance the parks’ appeal by manipulating the more conspicuous resources that contributed to public enjoyment, such as large mammals, entire forests, and fish populations. Although this manipulation sometimes brought about considerable alteration of nature (impacting even those species of little concern), park proponents did not see it that way. Instead, they seem to have taken for granted that manipulative management did not seriously modify natural conditions—in effect, they defined natural conditions to include the changes in nature that they deemed appropriate. Thus, the proponents habitually assumed (and claimed) that the parks were fully preserved.

THE TREATMENT OF NATURE IN THE EARLY NATIONAL parks set precedents that would influence management for decades. Later referred to as “protection” work, activities such as combating poaching and grazing, fighting forest fires, killing predators, and manipulating fish and ungulate populations constituted the backbone of natural resource management. These duties fell to army personnel in parks where the military was present and ultimately, in all parks, to the field employees who were becoming known as “park rangers.” As their efforts to curtail poaching and livestock grazing required armed patrol, the rangers rather naturally assumed additional law-enforcement responsibilities. In addition, they assisted the park superintendents by performing myriad other tasks necessary for daily operation of national parks, such as dealing with park visitors and with concessionaires. Deeply involved in such activities, the park rangers were destined to play a central role in the evolution of national park management.

THAT THE NATIONAL PARK IDEA EMBRACED THE CONCEPT of mostly nonconsumptive land use did not mean that the parks were nonutilitarian. On the contrary, the history of the early national park era suggests that a practical interest in recreational tourism in America’s grand scenic areas triggered the park movement and perpetuated it. With Northern Pacific and other corporate influence so pervasive, it is clear that the early parks were not intended to be giant nature preserves with little or no development for tourism. Products of their times, the 1872 Yellowstone Act and subsequent legislation establishing national parks could not be expected to be so radical. Only with the 1964 Wilderness Act would Congress truly authorize such preserves—three-quarters of a century after John Muir had advocated a similar, but not statutory, designation for portions of Yosemite.

Still, it is important to recognize that, although extensive manipulation and intrusion took place in the parks, fundamentally the national park idea embraced the concept of nurturing and protecting nature—a remarkable reversal from the treatment of natural resources typical of the times. Yet with the parks viewed mainly as scenic pleasuring grounds, the treatment of fish, large mammals, forests, and other natural resources reflected the urge to ensure public enjoyment of the national parks by protecting scenery and making nature pleasing and appealing; and it was development that made the parks accessible and usable. Even with legislation calling for preservation of natural conditions, park management was highly manipulative and invasive. “Preservation” amounted mainly to protection work, backed by little, if any, scientific inquiry.

The National Park Service would inherit a system of parks operated under policies already in place and designed to enhance public enjoyment. The commitment to accommodating the public through resort-style development would mean increasing involvement with the tourism industry, a persistently influential force in national park affairs as the twentieth century progressed. Management of the parks in the decades before the advent of the National Park Service had created a momentum that the fledgling bureau would not—and could not—withstand. ☾

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