

Chapter 41

The Role of History in Managing NPS Areas

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If mountains are good for the soul, then the Guadalupe Mountains are good for my soul. Having grown up here, they have been part of my existence for as long as I can remember; they were magical and mystical and very seductive for me as a boy scout. I went camping and hiking in and around them during the 1950s. I knew men who had hiked to the top of the Guadalupe Peak and I held them in awe. I could imagine that, but I never did it until about five years ago. I am sure it was a lot easier when I did than when they did. My first excursion into the Guadalupe wasn't until 1963 as a laborer at Carlsbad Caverns when Dick Stansbury, who then was chief of maintenance for the park, and I went out to McKittrick Canyon to the Wallace Pratt Lodge, the first Pratt cabin. (Just for the record I picked up trash the first season and cleaned toilets the second season.) I think we got a refrigerator out of there and took it to the dormitory at Carlsbad Caverns. That was my first entry into the heart of the Guadalupe Mountains. I was of course quite taken by that. I remember that when I was returning from Vietnam in 1966, I had shipped back and spent a month in San Diego and then got a leave of absence, or whatever you call it, furlough. I remember getting on the bus in El Paso and getting a left hand seat so I would be sure and see the Guadalupe as they loomed ahead. And it wasn't until I went through Guadalupe Pass I knew that I was home and everything was going to be okay. I have a painting of the Guadalupe Mountains in my dining room so that I get a good dose of the Guadalupe every day, and I plan on a long engagement with the Guadalupe, getting to know more of it over a long period of time. My will stipulates that after my demise and cremation, I am to be sprinkled in the

Guadalupe Mountains. I can't say I'm looking forward to that, but it's there nonetheless.

Let's talk some history. One hundred years ago, William James wrote of being in the mountains of North Carolina and seeing what he perceived as pure squalor. "The forest had been destroyed," James wrote. Settlers had killed all the trees, planted their crops around the stumps, and built crude cabins and crude fences. The result was hideous, a sort of ulcer, without a single element of artificial grace to make up for the loss of nature's beauty. Ugly indeed seemed the life of the squatter. But as he became better acquainted with the region and its inhabitants, James began to view the landscape through their eyes. "When they looked on the hideous stumps," he wrote, "what they thought of was personal victory. The chips, the girdled trees, the vile split rails spoke of honest sweat, persistent toil, and final reward. The cabin was a warrant of safety for self, wife and babes. In short, the clearing which to me was an ugly picture on the retina was to them a symbol redolent with moral memories and sang a very paean of duty, struggle and success" ("On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" in William James: Writings, 1878-1899).

Perceptions shape the way we look at things: the natural world, history, other cultures, our own culture, the federal government. Perceptions are based on our own experiences, knowledge, ethnicity, social circles, economic status, political outlook, and geographical roots. Even as we thought we understood the concept of nature, William Cronon, Richard White, and others are challenging us to think about it in new

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and different ways, even suggesting that wilderness is a cultural construct and not an environmental abstract. Bill Cronon in particular has opened our minds to the idea that the American landscape of 1492 and after had been shaped and molded by Native Americans for generations, and the concept of virgin forests was, in reality, not so real.

Historians regularly deal with the wonderfully interesting intersection of history, myth, and culture. Many of our most cherished cultural traditions are built not on solid historical documentation but on cultural traditions that help us make sense of a sometimes confusing and dissonant past: Washington praying in the snow at Valley Forge, Betsy Ross sewing the first flag. I'll not mention Washington chopping down the cherry tree.

The National Park Service harbors its own cultural traditions. For decades the Washburn expedition of 1870 through Yellowstone served as the genesis of the national park idea. It is now more completely understood as the origin of a happy partnership linking first the Northern Pacific and later other railroads with tourism and national parks. (For years the diorama of the expedition in the Department of the Interior museum carried the mythic tradition. A second label put up in recent years adds an additional layer of understanding to that event.)

But we don't like to have our perceptions of truth challenged, our contemporary perceptions or our perceptions of the past. We get comfortable with the worlds we create, and yet we know instinctively that our truths are not universal, that others have perceptions that are different from ours, and that the open discussion of those differences can be intellectually and emotionally stimulating and—gasp—may even prompt us to modify our previously assumed truths. Historians in particular see their work as evolutionary. What is a useful history to one generation does not work for the next, thus prompting a reconsideration or reassessment or to use the other “R” word, revision, of the past. Indeed, his-

tory has a way of bringing us up short. Just as we think we have it all figured out: everyone in their place, events all in order, someone, usually a historian or writer of some vision comes along and stirs the pot, reorders the past, adds new players to the game, gives us a different perspective on the past, encourages us to think differently about what we thought we knew, adds a new and different voice to preconceived notions about “the olden days.”

That is as it should be, the way it has been since written history began. We know this in our personal lives. We know that our perceptions of events change as we age, as we mature, as we move from place to place, as we learn more through reading and thinking about events we witnessed earlier. (Those who have experienced war certainly know that firsthand accounts of battles differ depending on whether the author was an officer or enlisted, whether the account was written immediately after or decades later.) It is, I think, those evolving perceptions about the past that imbue the profession of history with the excitement that currently characterizes its conferences, journals, and stimulating discussions over breakfast and beer. A sense of anticipation: what will Bill Cronon or Donald Worster or Patty Limerick do to us next?

Interesting then—isn't it?—that as a society we have trouble accepting different interpretations of the past. We tend to want a seamless unchanging past; one that reaffirms assumed truths; one that minimizes conflict and embraces a dominant narrative of progress, upward mobility, and success all leading to happy endings—sort of an Ozzie and Harriet version of history. The western writer Wallace Stegner thought the formation of a mythic past, personal and collective, cuts us off from not only our past but from ourselves, and thus hinders our ability to know how to adapt wisely and responsibly to our environment and to changing contemporary conditions. Our understanding of the past is not a monolith, rigid and static, but dynamic and fluid, and we search for truths knowing that ultimate truth will

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always elude us. Historians also understand now that our understanding of history comes not just from the written record but from various remnants from our past. Perhaps Stegner said it best (I am a Wallace Stegner fan) when he wrote, “The past becomes a thing made palpable in the monuments, buildings, historic sites, museums, attics, old trunks, relics of a hundred kinds; and in the legends of grandfathers and great-grandfathers; and in the incised marble and granite and weathered wood of graveyards; and in the murmuring of ghosts” (from *Wolf Willow* 1962).

It is the historian’s responsibility to listen to those murmurings and legends, visit monuments and graveyards alike, examine “relics of a hundred kinds.” Historians look for and interpret stories. Historians in the National Park Service look for stories that connect us with specific places. They link relics—those physical, tangible reminders of our collective past—to us in the present and give them purpose and meaning. Historians approach natural parks no differently than they do cultural parks; indeed, over the past decade or so, we have seen the lines blur between our artificially imposed labels of “natural” and “cultural.” Is Saratoga National Historical Park with its forests and fields and creeks a natural park or a cultural park? The blending of professional sensibilities at such places is a healthy development for the [National Park] Service, as I will note later.

Because we now recognize the impact of human occupation on all of your parks, we recognize increasingly that historical information provides the beginnings of a framework for understanding the natural processes of place. To know that indigenous people used fire on a regular basis to renew vegetation, clear land, or herd wildlife gives us insights regarding nature of the landscapes we have been charged with preserving.

It is not surprising, then, to remember that one of the first studies commissioned by the National Park Service at Guadalupe Mountains National Park was a historical overview of human occupation and use of this park. That was

quickly followed by a structural and archeological survey. The latter was accomplished under contract with Texas Tech University during the 1970s where I was then a graduate student in history. (I missed out on that contract, but a year later drove Tech’s 1953 surplus Air Force ambulance, all 7,000 pounds of it—you can talk to Paul and Susana [Katz] about their driving it earlier—to the Arkansas Ozarks where I constructed the same sort of structural survey along the Buffalo River.) Baseline information from historians and archeologists enable us to chart a clearer course in all our management activities.

The second area where historians play a major role in managing natural areas is through the preparation of administrative histories. These studies do not focus as much on the resources of the park, but on how the National Park Service as an agency has managed those resources over time. They provide an introspective look at a federal agency that historically has not been very introspective. If they are worth doing (and they are) they are worth doing right, and that means producing an unvarnished analysis of the failures as well as the successes of park management. These histories should not be laudatory, although praise when deserved is always appreciated. Instead, they should provide us a clear sense of where we have been so we can increase the chances that the decisions we make in the future will stand a better chance of being right (or at least more right). Administrative histories are done individually (involving one park) or collectively (involving multiple parks or processes). Had Hal Rothman stayed around, I would have said something about his work, but since he chose to leave before I talked, I will not mention Hal Rothman and his contribution to our understanding of us and our agency.

I would be remiss in my comments if I didn’t mention three recent administrative histories that are shaping the future of natural resource management throughout the National Park Service. Linda Flint McClellan’s *Building the National Parks: Historic Landscape Design and Construction* published by John

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Hawkins University Press provides a historical perspective on how the National Park Service conceived and constructed its own brand of cultural landscapes. Ethan Carr's *Wilderness by Design: Landscape Architecture and the National Park Service* just out by the University of Nebraska Press is a parallel work that looks closely at the design of complex built landscapes such as historic districts in several national parks. And finally, I must make mention of a book I trust all of you have read or will shortly read: *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History* by Richard West Sellars represents the critical analysis of National Park Service management practices at its finest. (They didn't pay me to give this plug, but I notice there are a stack of books out there that I'm sure the purveyors would just as soon not take back to their office. So if you don't have a copy, please get one.) Sellars has provided us an unblinking assessment of how this agency has done during its first 80 years of managing natural resources in the parks. It is critical and fair and it prompted the director to initiate an overhaul of the natural resource management program, an overhaul being discussed and refined this week during the National Leadership Council meeting in Washington. It was not without a little trepidation that Sellars offered his book to the National Park Service. An earlier generation of managers would not have received [it] so acceptingly. I think it is an encouraging sign of the maturation of the National Park Service that *Preserving Nature in the National Parks* has been embraced by the bureaucracy and is being used to alter the course of the agency. We should all be thankful that Richard Sellers had the experience within the agency and the training and perspective of an environmental historian to craft this marvelous book. We should also be thankful that Regional Director John Cook had the vision to support—without hesitation—what turned into an almost decade-long labor of love for both men.

Finally, I should mention the work of other historians whose vision at the global scale help us understand the natural world in historical perspective and the

role of human occupation within it. Bill Cronon, Don Worster, and Richard White, among others, have prompted us to think differently, to conceptualize our work more broadly, to examine and question our purpose and goals more thoroughly. Their work constantly reminds us of the seamless interconnections between nature and history, between natural processes and human activities through time.

Managing the national parks into the 21st century will require greater attention to balancing visitor use with preservation of natural and cultural resources. How do we manage wilderness areas that reflect 18th and 19th century human occupation? How do we effectively preserve historic places that contain rare and endangered species? How do we deal with historic places threatened by natural processes?

These are not easy questions, and they do not engender easy answers. Today the National Park Service has not one mandate, but many mandates. We are the creation of congress, and while we take our lead largely from the Organic Act, we also are bound by subsequent directions from congress: the 1935 Historic Sites Act, the 1964 Wilderness Act, the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act, the 1969 National Environmental Protection Act, and many others. Our job is to balance these various charges in such a manner that respects the integrity and significance of all the resources within our care. During the 1960s the National Park Service divided our resources—your resources—into three categories: natural, historical and recreational. Today the value of hindsight has taught us that a more holistic approach to resource management not only makes more sense, but also matches the reality of our circumstance. Many of our parks reflect an intertwining of the natural and cultural, and yes, the recreational. My personal view is that it is unfortunate that the discipline of cultural geography was not embraced by the National Park Service when it began to be developed during the 1920s. Instead of looking at individual resources, we could have been looking at systems of resources and

appreciated how the natural historically affected the cultural and how the cultural naturally affected the natural. We now know that almost every place we manage was altered in some fashion by human hands prior to our coming on the scene. There are no vignettes of a primitive America. New England was practically denuded of trees by the middle of the 19th century and had been altered extensively prior to 1620. Yosemite was manipulated by fire prior to European exploration.

Our management policies now are, I think, (I hope, since we are revising them this year) less combative between the resources than in the past. Our battlefields and other cultural landscapes are places where the various disciplines come together for common purpose, and that model is being implemented elsewhere, even here in the Guadalupe Mountains. The Vail Agenda suggests that the National Park Service is being looked at as an international model of “conservation and preservation management—a model that can teach valuable lessons to a world increasingly concerned with environmental degradation, threats to wilderness values, and rapid cultural and historical change.” To meet that challenge, we must acknowledge the connections between the natural and cultural spheres and manage them as wholes, not parts.

I would like to conclude with three thoughts—all borrowed. The first comes from William Cronon in his introduction to *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. Cronon writes, “A cultural tenant of modern humanistic scholarship is that everything we humans do, our speech, our work, our play, our social life, our ideas of ourselves and the natural world, exist in a context that is historically, geographically and culturally particular and cannot be understood apart from that context.” The National Park Service is a political entity created by congress 82 years ago. It continues to be shaped by that legislative body. To be effective, we must understand the context of the time

in which we were created and understand the context of the times in which we work.

Part of what makes our work so challenging and exciting is that we all don’t come to the table with the same set of perceptions, knowledge, and sensibilities. We manage our parks and our resources between and around differing interpretations of the past, different sensibilities of our policies, and differing understandings of our missions. It is those places where disparate points of view rub together—the spaces between—that I and others find so interesting and enlightening. Barbara Kingsolver, author of *High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now or Never* and many other books, enjoys those conflicting belief systems—those spaces between—between men and women, North and South, white and non-white, communal and individual, and I would add, natural and cultural. It is through our better understanding of, and respect for, the spaces between that we will be able to manage our lands for the benefit of America in the 21st century. It is within this broader social and intellectual framework that the National Park Service reflects the “land, the cultures, and the experiences that have defined and sustained the people of the nation in the past and upon which we must continue to depend in the future.”

Finally, I will turn to Joseph Sax, who in his superb analysis of the origin of the national park idea concluded, “To speak of man as the measure of all things is not only a cliché but to describe a world in which the rhythm of life is tuned only to the pace of human enterprise. It is not that we are necessarily going too fast but that we risk losing contact with any external standards that help us to decide how fast we want to go. It is the function of culture to preserve a link to forces and experiences outside of the daily routine of life. Such experiences provide a perspective—in time and space—against which we can test the value, as well as the immediate efficacy, of what we are doing.” Historians function at the intersection of the natural rhythm of life and the cultural context of human enter-

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prise. They bring the historical perspective of our natural and cultural worlds to the National Park Service's management table. That table, we now understand, is large enough to accommodate a wide range of perspectives and professions. And we are better managers because of it.