

# The Yellowstone Landscape

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**D**uring its long history, Yellowstone has been through a broad range of management policies. Visitors were once permitted to climb the delicate travertine terraces of Mammoth Hot Springs and place their handkerchiefs at the mercy of Handkerchief Pool, retrieving them as silicified souvenirs after an underground trip. Until the 1960s, preserving the park meant protecting trees from “damage” by fire and insects, and manipulating wildlife populations to favor certain species and maintain certain desired conditions. Some people still believe that such interventions are needed in order to keep the park the way it “should” look and to prevent long-term changes to both public and private land.

## *Preserving and Restoring the Natural Regime*

Experience has shown that visitor activities can forever alter thermal features and other park resources. We have also found that park management activities intended to help the resources have sometimes played havoc with the natural functioning of the system, sometimes doing more harm than good. Changing views about the role of national parks have led to a consensus that profound intrusions by either visitors or park managers are inappropriate.

Yellowstone is now a place where the goal is to subject the landscape and its native plants and animals to minimal manipulation. Changes over time as a result of natural processes are not only inevitable, they are an integral part of the Yellowstone experience, to be discovered by visitors, documented by historians, and studied by scientists. The primary emphasis in natural resource management has shifted from protecting individual species to preserving complete ecological communities. The preponderance of research results during the last 30 years supports the validity of this approach. However, permitting all “natural” processes to occur within the park represents an ideal that cannot be fully attained. A hands-off policy is not suitable in all situations, especially when action is necessary to protect human life or property. National Park Service policy and federal legislation permit or encourage intervention in certain circumstances; for example, to control exotic plants and animals, to fight fire in specific situations, and to restore water quality and native species that have declined in the park because of human activities.

Additionally, it is important to preserve Yellowstone National Park for its cultural values. From the infancy of a preservation idea that took hold and has spread to most nations of the world, to the continuing evolution in conservation policies and trends, the history of the national park movement is represented here. From the prehistoric obsidian quarry to the current administration buildings, the park bears the marks of how different American peoples have used this environment. Researchers and other curious visitors who seek to learn more about past and present cultures and their relationships to greater Yellowstone count on the preservation of valuable remnants of the cultural landscape along with natural features and processes.

