

Origin of the Nation's Park Idea

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Introduction

The genesis of a nation's park is not as simple to track or understand by only agreeing which was the "first national park" in the world. The origin of national parks and hence natural protected areas is one filled with political correctness and the creation of altruistic myths. Natural protected areas have become in recent years one of the main strategies for the conservation of the natural environment. The question to answer is to know if the creation of the first natural protected areas had the same reasons and values as the ones advocated nowadays by governments, international organisations and non-governmental organisations regarding the already established and the new natural protected areas.

The following essay has the objective of answering such a puzzlement. To be able to do this it is important firstly to review the history of the concept of "park". Secondly, to know the historical unfolding to the creation of the first official national parks in the world, being that Yosemite or Yellowstone. Authors can debate on which was the first national park, but for the purpose of the present essay it is important to know the creation of natural protected areas whether national or state protected. To review the chronological sequence of events to the creation of Yosemite and Yellowstone will help underpin the values, reasons and interests behind their creation. Finally, with all the arguments presented a conclusion will be reached to answer our main concern, why were natural protected areas created.

The Evolution of the Nation's Park Idea

The word "park" comes originally from the Old French and Middle English "parc" a term that designated "an enclosed piece of ground stocked with beasts of the chase, held by prescription or by the king's grant" (Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary as cited in Runte, 1997, p. 2). This concept of park as an enclosed area for the practice of hunting can be traced back to the Assyrian noblemen of 700 B.C.; the royal hunting enclosures of the Persian Empire between 550 and 350 B.C. up to the hunting lands of the ruling classes in the middle ages (Runte, 1997). It can be assumed by these ancient practices that nature enclosures were preserved for the elites of various civilisations to recreate themselves through the practice of hunting. It can be implied

that hunting was practiced only by the men, a practice that goes back to the times of humans living as hunter-gatherers. What can also be concluded is that the reasons for “preservation” were not the same as the ones promoting the “first” national parks in the United States and very different from the preservation values advocated nowadays. What could be argued is that the access and enjoyment of this “natural enclosures” remains being for a certain elite, that is able to access this far away natural settings.

The evolution of the Western civilisation takes us to the times of the Industrial Revolution in the 18th and the 19th centuries. From its origins in Great Britain, its evolution in continental Europe and its transfer to the newly born United States the Industrial Revolution brought several sociological, political and economical consequences. One of them was the increase of urban populations around the industry and the trading posts. Such an increase of population was never seen before in Europe and then in the United States. More population brought the vices and social dislocations of crime, uncleanliness and others. The search for natural areas as an “avenue of escape” (Runte, 1997, p. 2) was central to the Romantic Movement of the end of the 19th century. Nature was praised for its strangeness and mystery, it was idealized as long as the landscape suggested human interference (Runte, 1997). Although the “progress” values of the industrial revolution called for the conquest and use of such a nature. Open spaces started to be created in cities to permit the recreation and enjoyment of its citizens. Ironically the first open spaces created near cities were cemeteries as the one created in the outskirts of Boston in 1831 known as Mount Auburn (Runte, 1997). Other areas for the dead were enjoyed by the living in Brooklyn and Philadelphia in 1836 (Runte, 1997). In France and London royal lands were turned public for the enjoyment of every citizen. In 1853 a huge square near New York City which had been rundown farms, pig sties and garbage dumps was purchased to create a reserve now called “Central Park” (Runte, 1997). Obviously it was not natural beauty nor scenic value the reasons behind the creation of such a park, it was its closeness for the city dwellers to recreate. Landscape architects afterwards converted it into a “beautiful” natural setting. Through the years such a constructed natural ideal as Central Park has resulted nowadays in a mysterious and dangerous setting, where mugging, rape and assassinations occur. The evolution of the idea of parks also rests then on the origins of urban parks, landscaped representations of wild and beautiful nature.

Through this short review of historical events around the idea of parks we have arrived to the United States, the official setting for the creation of “National Parks”. The debate whether it was Yosemite or Yellowstone does not interest us, but what does are the interests, reasons and values behind the creation of both parks. It will be proved that the values mentioned by the National Wilderness Preservation System as the originators of the parks’ idea are far from true.

Such values portrayed nowadays are: reservoirs of biological diversity, scientific value, watersheds, life support systems, historic and cultural value, spiritual value, aesthetic value, recreation, refuge and educational value (NWPS).

In 1832 George Catlin an artist with the goal describing and painting Indians beyond the Mississippi came up with an idea which was totally ignored “a *nation's Park* containing man and beast, in all wild and freshness of their nature's beauty” (Miles, 1995, p. 4). Miles implies that “Catlin was ahead of his time with this suggestion, but he planted the seed of the national park idea in the American mind” (1995, p. 4). Catlin did not plant anything because he was never mentioned by any congressman or conservation lobbyist, he was just another romantic, affluent artist that viewed nature's beauty, Indians included not whites, as worth keeping for their scenic value. This latter value was relevant for the establishment of Yosemite as it will be later discussed, but not because Catlin mentioned it. It was the prevalent notion of nature with scenic value through out the 19th century only expressed early in the century what made it relevant.

To understand the creation of Yosemite Park it is important to divide the process in three components: promotion, tourism development, and political debate. Those three components divide in a clear way the different processes occurring before the Yosemite Park Act of 1864. These components do not unfold independently they are closely interrelated.

The first component of promotion helped construct a natural wonder into an American icon. One of the main actors of the promotion process is James Mason Hutchings, young Englishman, frustrated miner and keen observer of California's scenery (Runte, 1990). In 1855 Hutchings enters Yosemite on a five-day excursion with artist Thomas A. Ayres. In 1856, Hutchings publishes the first issue of “Hutchings' California Magazine” where he intended to “picture California and California life” (Runte, 1990, p. 14). In 1859 the New York Tribune editor Horace Greeley visited Yosemite commenting afterwards on the majesty and uniqueness of the area (Runte, 1990). In 1860 Reverend Thomas Starr King visited the area and compared its “greatness” with the natural icons of Europe. The promotional climax of Yosemite was reached with the visit of artist Albert Bierstadt on 1863 to Yosemite, producing his iconic “Valley of the Yosemite” painting. These events, among others, underline the importance of the promotional component to recreate in the minds of the Eastern the monumentalism of the “American” natural heritage. Monumentalism is the grandeur of natural settings, it implies majestic, big, natural formation or phenomena. Cultural nationalism as the search of their own identity as a new Nation driven by the comparisons of monumental landmarks of the far West with European historical buildings and landmarks proves the idea of cultural anxiety mentioned by Runte (1997). Not only did cultural nationalists compare American landmarks with Europe and other countries, but also

depreciated them as Reverend Thomas Starr King did “nowhere among the Alps, in no pass of the Andes, and in no Canyon of the mighty Oregon range is there such stupendous rock scenery” when talking about Yosemite (Runte, 1997, p. 20). The promotional process proves the need of America to construct its heritage as a nation, and it did through its natural wonders found in the “undisturbed West”. The participation of artists to create the icon of Yosemite was of key importance. Not only through paintings, but also through written accounts published in newspapers and magazines with great circulation. It is important to bear in mind that photography was just in its beginnings.

The second process which also helped promote Yosemite was tourism. Tourism was present many years before the park was created. Tourism gave value to a worthless perceived piece of land. Since 1855 Yosemite saw its first share of tourists and from then on with tourists came entrepreneurs ready to provide the proper services. James C. Lamon and Hutchings were the first tourism entrepreneurs in the area, supplying basic accommodation, food and guiding services. The progressive capitalistic pioneer mentality of the 19th century made its presence in the unsurveyed territories of the United States through tourism. Nature was to be exploited. Natural resources were there to be used by civilisation and personal profit. The property claims of the mentioned entrepreneurs were through the years to come contested by the state of California, the Federal government and the claimers.

Economic interest in a possible park was not expressed by the tourism entrepreneurs; it was expressed by the growing railroad companies. We link this argument to the third process related to the creation of Yosemite, political debate. The link between economic interest and politics is not something new. On the 20th of February 1864 Israel Ward Raymond, California state representative of the Central American Steamship Transit Company of New York, sent a letter to John Conness, junior senator from California. “It important to obtain the proprietorship soon, to prevent occupation and especially to preserve the trees in the valley from destruction” wrote Raymond in his letter to Conness together with “the above granted for public use, resort, and recreation and are inalienable forever but leases may be granted for portions not to exceed ten years” (Runte, 1990, p.19). On May 17th, 1864 the Senate Committee favoured Conness’s Bill to create a park in Yosemite Valley and Mariposa Grove. The debate of the bill in the senate shows the arguments used and hence the values permeating the passage of the bill. Conness expressed the patriotic duty to preserve “inalienable forever” after the experience at Niagara Falls (Runte, 1997). The size of the preserved area shows the mere scenic value of the area, so it was monumentalism not environmentalism what promoted the bill’s passage (Runte, 1997). The argument of worthlessness was also expressed by Conness “this bill proposes to make a grant of certain premises located in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, in the State of California, that are for all

public purposes worthless, but which constitute, perhaps, some of the greatest wonders of the world” (Runte, 1990, p. 20). Several points have been made regarding the political debate over Yosemite, the area was worthless, maybe just valuable for tourism, it was a patriotic duty to preserve the area taking into account what happened in Niagara Falls, and monumentalism was the main driver not the supposed environmentalism.

Yellowstone was officially the first “national park”, but the values behind the creation of the park were the same as the ones present in 1864. It can also be said that the components underlined before of promotion, tourism and politics were also present in the creation of Yellowstone, although how the events occurred were very different. The politics, economic interests of tourism and promotion were present in two main events: the Washburn – Doane expedition of 1870 and the Hayden’s expedition of 1871. The main difference between the genesis of Yosemite and Yellowstone is the active participation and monetary investment of the railroad corporation, Northern Pacific. Yellowstone is important also because it became the setting for the myth creation of national parks in the United States.

On June 4, 1870 Jay Cooke met with Nathaniel Langford resulting on the preparation of the first official expedition to Yellowstone. Jay Cooke had the task of promoting development of the land and resources lying along the projected route of the Northern Pacific Railroad (Sellars, 1997). Nathaniel Langford was a mason and internal revenue collector for the Montana Territory (Magoc, 1999). Jay Cooke had the interest of creating destinations for the railroad users to go to. Nathaniel Langford was looking for means to secure his economic and political future. After the meeting Langford was in charge of preparing the expedition of 1870. “The stage was set for quite possibly the most famous creation story in the American West” (Barringer, 2002, p. 13). Yellowstone became the setting for the mythology creation as presented by Barringer (2002):

In 1870 a group of fifteen prominent Montanans set out to investigate the reports coming out of the Yellowstone plateau area. These men, noble, public-spirited citizens all, initiated a series of events that culminated in Yellowstone being declared a national park. Accompanied by a military escort from Fort Ellis, this well-provisioned party established the truth behind the tall tales of Bridger and the rest. In August it followed the Yellowstone River south and confirmed the wonders of this isolated corner of the West. On September 19, 1870, after an extensive tour of the area, the men camped in a lush, well-watered meadow. Then, around the nightly campfire, one of the men, Cornelius Hedges, proposed a novel idea. He suggested that the area’s uniqueness deserved protection from private ownership and

exploitation so that others could experience it. The group supported his idea and promised to work toward making it a reality. This conversation occurred in what would later be known as National Park Meadows, at the junction of the Gibbon and Firehole Rivers, in the future Yellowstone National Park.

According to the journals of the expedition members there is no account of the suggestion made by Hedges. "Langford himself only brought it to light in 1905 - by which time the national parks idea had become a movement" (Magoc, 1999, p. 13). Magoc mentions in his notes that "other explorers in the 1860s with less influence had previously suggested some type of a park" (1999, p. 197). What was key then was Langford's influence and financial backing from Jay Cooke that permitted him to lecture about the expedition in Helena, Minneapolis, New York and Washington (Barringer, 2002). Among his audience was Dr. Ferdinand V. Hayden, head of the United States Geological and Geographical Survey of the Territories.

"Hayden wanted to reinforce his own rising stature and the political position of the Survey office through a Yellowstone expedition" (Magoc, 1999, p. 15). With very influential members of the Congress, Representative James G. Blaine, and Henry M. Dawes, also key supporters of Northern Pacific Railroad, Hayden was able to get financial backing for the second official expedition to Yellowstone in 1871. The importance of this second expedition and its consequences is clearly expressed by Magoc (1999, p. 15):

Yellowstone's legendary and inscrutable landscape begged for the scientific confirmation the Survey office would bring to it. The potential results seemed as vast as the wilderness itself: once verified, classified, and ranked, these geological wonders could serve the prosperity of the West, cultivate the aesthetic taste and scientific knowledge of urbane Americans, and culturally reinforce the new sense of nationhood in the post-war era.

The values present at the creation of Yellowstone start to become clear through this two expeditions and its debate in Congress to become law. The region was worthless for utilitarian purposes and its only possible value could be through tourism. This worthlessness of the region was supported by Hayden's Survey report from the expedition on 1871. Although worthless for extractive reasons, economic promise still prevailed in the form of tourism and that was the greatest bet for the railroad corporation. Scientific rationalism of the nineteenth century also secured the creation of Yellowstone thanks to the political interests of the time, but it was cultural nationalism and patriotism, which gave the final touches (Magoc, 1999). Cultural anxiety was again present in the legislative debate, compared to Yosemite Park Act debate of 1864, and it

was now Hayden's advice which touched the sensible fibres of the American pride; "Hayden's outspoken reminder about the nation's failure to prevent the disfigurement of Niagara Falls was highly effective" (Runte, 1997, p. 45). On March 1, 1872, President Ulysses S. Grant signed the bill setting Yellowstone "apart as a public park or pleasuring-ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people" (Magoc, 1999, p. 19).

Conclusion

If our culture has decided to set aside nature to protect it from the progressive consumerism has this ideal of natural protected areas been always the same? Yes and no, can only be the answer. The idea of natural protected areas has evolved, together with the natural values of our culture, which refers to the Western perspective (although the term Western is not entirely satisfactory). One could say that what has evolved in those values is the perception more than the relation towards nature. From the history presented in this paper it can be concluded that the perspectives about nature have changed creating a new environmentalism.

On the other hand, it seems that history has moved on but also repeated itself maintaining certain characteristics between the "first" protected areas and the present ones. First, the political weight, correctness and interest on the issue is still relevant in all the world. Second, the economic use of those protected areas through tourism. Capitalism since the creation of Yosemite and Yellowstone has been able to insert what before was considered worthless into the marketplace through tourism. Economic interest was present in the end of the nineteenth century and again it blossomed in the end of the twentieth century through ecotourism. Conservation has always had a low budget because it is considered of secondary importance for national governments. Looking for other financial funds has made agencies in charge of natural protected areas insert those areas into the market. Third, the idea of preserving natural protected areas from humans, but at the same time preserving them for our future generations still continues. Finally, the notion that the only way to preserve wild nature is by separating humans from nature is still the main solution.

The present paper has been able to prove that the values advocated in the origins of national parks are very different from the values promoted nowadays with regard to nature, but other remain. The values that have survived the passing of time are the ideas of separating nature from humans, and the drive to make a profit from an unexploited land. The origins of national parks in the United States, as generally agreed, responded more to a need of a new nation to find greatness in its natural surroundings, than to the environmentalism advocated nowadays. Other

reasons for the creation of national parks are monumentalism, cultural anxiety, profit generation and political correctness as discussed through this essay.

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