



# NATIONAL PARKS

## U.S. Parks and Protected Areas: Origins, Meanings and Management

*Lary Dilsaver and Terence Young*

This issue of *Historical Geography* focuses on the scholarship of U.S. parks and protected areas. The *American Heritage College Dictionary* defines a “park,” and by extension a variety of other protected areas, as “an area of land set aside for public use.” It lists three examples: “a piece of land with few or no buildings within or adjoining a town, maintained for recreational and ornamental purposes;” “a landscaped city square;” and “a large tract of rural land kept in its natural state and usually reserved for the enjoyment and recreation of visitors.”<sup>1</sup> Today in the United States the National Park Service maintains 391 “parks,” while state systems include more than 4,500 units. Virtually every city or town has some park space ranging from simple squares to huge urban playgrounds like New York’s Central Park. After more than 150 years some form of park is available to and expected by almost every citizen.<sup>2</sup>

An antecedent to today’s parks first was mentioned 4,000 years ago in the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, but their modern predecessors only emerged during the latter half of the eighteenth century in Europe when the wealthy began to maintain large tracts of land in a natural state to serve as private hunting grounds. On these estates they surrounded their mansions with carefully designed garden spaces ranging from the beautifully manicured to the dramatically picturesque, in the process creating the profession of landscape architecture.<sup>3</sup> In the industrializing cities, the middle classes initially retreated to cemeteries for a bit of open space, leaving most of the poor to struggle with little if any green space. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, on both sides of the Atlantic, urban activists, politicians and wealthy industrialists had come to believe that parks were politically and socially necessary. Parks provided recreational respite from an industrial-urban order that drained

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its members, but also these environments re-created members to satisfy that order's demands. At nearly the same time, Americans embraced the notion that wild country in the form of national parks preserved scenic wonders that helped define and reproduce the culture of the young country.<sup>4</sup> During the early twentieth century, these ideas matured into a cultural dogma that spawned park systems in all 50 states and led the federal government to undertake several benchmark studies of the country's recreation needs.<sup>5</sup> The rest of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first have witnessed a continued expansion of park systems and the creation of an expanding variety of protected areas at all scales. Moreover, the popularity of parks has steadily increased, prompting an appropriation of the term to boost profits for entertainment and building developers.<sup>6</sup>

Parks represent more than just recreation space to Americans. National and state parks, in particular, serve a number of important roles. They are statements of society's values in what they preserve and thus reflections of national or local culture.<sup>7</sup> Parks also are tightly regulated political space, important biological preserves, evocations of a simpler past as constructed by all or a few of the people, and venues for what is good and bad in society. Because they are so popular, parks are also battlegrounds between factions that promote different and often conflicting uses.<sup>8</sup> Public use vs. resource protection, active vs. passive recreation, motorized access vs. wilderness, as well as issues of funding, land acquisition, maintenance and resource interpretation bedevil park administrators.

The social role of parks and the issues that surround them best define most recent work in the geography of U.S. protected areas.<sup>9</sup> Like most spaces in the modern world, parks have been identified and bounded "as a spatial strategy to affect, influence or control resources and people, by controlling areas."<sup>10</sup> Generally natural or historical by definition, but always social in purpose, the creation, interpretation, and management of any park makes it an obvious site for class, ethnic and gender conflicts as well as for environmental ones. Geographers, indeed, were early contributors to the environmental justice literature through their work on parks.<sup>11</sup>

The authors in this issue of *Historical Geography* address an array of topics, including U.S. national parks, Florida state parks, a national historic trail, and California's coastline. Methodological approaches vary between pieces, but all rest on a common recognition – the spaces protected were significantly different from their everyday surroundings. Some element or combination of elements justified the protection of these areas from forces transforming the larger world. Sometimes the element is natural, Yosemite National Park's monumental scenery for instance, while at other times it is cultural, such as the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail. But in every case, a protected area provides the link between the world where the park pro-

tectors live and another where the generative forces of nature and the past, both beyond human control, prevail. Contact between the two worlds, possible in a protected area, benefits American society. Parks are centers of power to be identified, interpreted and controlled. These spaces, in turn, inform Americans about who they are, what they value and how they should behave.<sup>12</sup>

The eight articles in this themed issue bookend the range of research that constitutes the geography of U.S. parks. The first three articles explore the conditions supporting (and sometimes opposing) the creation of protected areas. Yves Figueiredo's article examines the language involved in the initial preservation of Yosemite Valley and the nearby Big Trees. He argues that popular authors had presented the valley and trees as "monuments" worth preserving well before most Americans would have a chance to see them in paintings, photographs or in person. The second article, by Langdon Smith, recounts the tangled and torpid creation of Cape Hatteras National Seashore. The first national seashore, Cape Hatteras languished for decades for the same reason all new categories of protected areas initially flounder – the connections between the idea, law, and practice are not obvious and must be worked out in place. Ron Davidson's article, the third and final in this section, argues that Los Angeles's affection for modernity has been overstated. Using the example of a state proposition to protect California's coast, he demonstrates that Angelenos were willing to vote against modernity when it threatened public use of a locally valued place – the beaches of southern California.

The next pair of articles look at the meaning of protected areas and represent scholarship in a tradition generally stronger in humanistic than in social-scientific geography. Peter Blodgett's piece examines railroad advertising during the interwar years to reveal the shifting meaning of US national parks. The imagery exposes much about tourist travel, of course, but it also discloses changes in the public's understanding of national park identity and about their use. The second offering in this section, Cindy Ott's article, considers how history has been used to articulate regional identity in Montana. With an eye on the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail, she argues that the contemporary representation of the explorers as early environmentalists contrasts with their past representations and foregrounds the failure of many of the state's traditional economic bases even as it turns toward tourism as a substitute.

The last three articles delve into the conflicts that necessarily arise when administrators attempt to manage places set apart for both preservation and use. Karl Byrand's article looks at Yellowstone National Park's Upper Geyser Basin during the early Twentieth Century to demonstrate the dynamic character of the park's cultural landscapes. He argues that careful siting and blending with the natural landscape often reduced the visual impact of com-

mercial structures. William O'Brien's article, the second of this section, initiates the exhumation of a previously unnoticed topic in the historical geography of parks – racial segregation. His examination of Florida's Little Talbot Island State Park illustrates the ultimate failure of management's attempts to maintain "separate but equal" facilities and is offered in the hope that it will end continuing discrimination elsewhere. Finally, Michael Yochim's piece inspects the mid-twentieth century conflict between Yellowstone National Park's superintendent and "business interests" over the management of Yellowstone Lake. Although the superintendent's embrace of wilderness came at a time when its value was ascendant in America, he nevertheless engaged in a losing struggle with local elites who favored policies based on motorized recreation. Historians have long studied the parks movement and historical geographers have made valuable contributions to the literature that demonstrate our expertise in researching the places and spaces that society has designated as parks. This issue of *Historical Geography* highlights eight contributions to that growing body of historical geographical literature.

## Notes

1. *The American Heritage College Dictionary*, 3rd edition. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 993.
2. National Park Service, Frequently Asked Questions, [www.nps.gov/faqs.htm](http://www.nps.gov/faqs.htm); Darren L. Smith, Penny J. Hoffman, and Dawn B. Toth. *Parks Directory of the United States*, 3rd edition. (Detroit: Omnigraphics, Inc, 2001).
3. For more on one of these early English landscape designers, see Stephen Daniels, *Humphry Repton: Landscape Gardening and the Geography of Georgian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).
4. See Lisa M. Benton, *The Presidio: From Army Post to National Park* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998); Judith L. Meyer, *The Spirit of Yellowstone: The Cultural Evolution of a National Park* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996); and Eugene J. Palka, "America's Accessible Wilderness: An Historical Geography of Denali National Park," *Historical Geography* 24(1995): 107-125.
5. For an insightful reading of one state park, see Dydia DeLyser, "Authenticity on the Ground: Engaging the Past in a California Ghost Town," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 89(1999): 602-632; For a comparison of state park systems, see Langdon Smith, "The Democratization of Nature: State Park development during the New Deal," PhD. Dissertation, University of Kansas (2002), 236.
6. We refer to the instances of amusement parks, theme parks, trailer parks and industrial parks.
7. For more on the interactions between values and protected areas, see Thomas R. Vale, *The American Wilderness: Reflections on Nature Protection in the United States* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005); and Terence Young, *Building San Francisco's Parks, 1850-1930* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).
8. For more on conflicting notions of use, see Stanford Demars, *The Tourist in Yosemite, 1955-1985* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1991); Lary Dilsaver, *Cumberland Island National Seashore: A History of Conservation Conflict* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004); and Ron Foresta, *America's National Parks and Their Keepers* (Washington, DC: Resources for the Future, 1984).
9. Some recent scholarship on US parks and social justice include Don Mitchell, "The End of Public Space? People's Park, Definitions of the Public and Democracy," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 85(1995): 108-133; Stephanie Pincetl and Elizabeth Gearin, "The Reinvention of Public Green Space," *Urban Geography* 26(2005): 365-384; and, Jennifer Wolch, John P. Wilson and Jed Fehrenbach, "Parks and Park Funding in Los Angeles: An Equity-Mapping Analysis," *Urban Geography* 26(2005): 4-35.
10. The quote is from Robert David Sack, *Human Territoriality: Its Theory and History* (New York: Cambridge

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- University Press, 1986), 1.
11. Two early examples are Jacquelin Burgess, Carolyn M. Harrison and Melanie Limb, "People, Parks and the Urban Green: A Study of Popular Meanings and Values for Open Spaces in the City," *Urban Studies* 25(1988): 455-473; and Karen Fog Olwig and Kenneth Olwig, "Underdevelopment and the Development of 'Natural' Park Ideology," *Antipode* 11(1978): 16-25.
  12. Much geographical work on sacred spaces is built upon the foundation erected by Mircea Eliade, especially his book, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1959), but a more postmodern, contested view can be found in John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow, Eds., *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage* (New York: Routledge, 1991). See also Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1977); and Chris Park, *Sacred Worlds: An Introduction to Geography and Religion* (New York: Routledge, 1994). More specific explorations of US protected areas as sacred space can be found in David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal, Eds., *American Sacred Space* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995; Thomas R. Dunlap, *Faith in Nature: Environmentalism as Religious Quest* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004); Linda Graber, *Wilderness as Sacred Space* (Washington: Association of American Geographers, 1976); and John R. Sears, *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).