

## Conservation in California's National Parks

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### I. Introduction

Since its establishment in 1890, Yosemite National Park has been a beacon of natural wonder and the subject of ongoing discourse. At the heart of this discourse is the challenge of preserving the park's raw beauty while managing the high volume of visitors it draws each year. The most difficult aspect of conservation lies in walking the fine line between making Yosemite accessible to the public and protecting it from overdevelopment, keeping it as close to its original state as possible. John Muir, one of Yosemite's most influential advocates, articulated the sanctity of the park's grandeur in his 1899 essay *Yosemite National Park* when he wrote, "To defrauded town toilers, parks in magazine articles are like pictures of bread to the hungry. I can write only hints to incite good wanderers to come to the feast" (Muir, 1899). Here, Muir laments the limitations of language and imagery, suggesting that true appreciation of Yosemite requires direct experience—to see, feel, and be immersed in the park's presence. Another key figure in Yosemite's conservation is Ansel Adams, whose photographs and advocacy brought national attention to the park. While Muir argued that neither words nor images could do Yosemite justice, if any photographer came close, it was Adams. He once wrote that "Yosemite Valley itself is one of the great shrines of the world and—belonging to all our people—must be both protected and administered for all time as a great museum of the natural sciences, open to the public without commercialism" (Adams, 1971). Adams not only gave Yosemite a visual voice, but also inspired generations of environmental advocates. His work has been a personal inspiration in my journey as a photographer, encouraging me to explore and experience places

like Yosemite with deeper intention. What sets people like Muir and Adams apart, in my view, is their profound emotional connection to nature. They didn't merely observe it, they immersed themselves in it, seeking to understand and preserve its essence.

While those two figures were monumental in spreading awareness and recognition of Yosemite's outstanding qualities, it would be ill advised to ignore other important perspectives regarding the nature of the national parks in the United States, how they came about, and what was sacrificed in order to arrive at the current state the parks system is in. The figure that primarily brings valuable insight to this topic is William Cronon, and his essay, *The Trouble with Wilderness or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature*. Cronon writes a powerful antithesis to the much more awestruck speculation Muir and Adams document. Cronon reveals a much more thorough analysis of the origins of the "wilderness" that we have come to know today. He splits our understanding of the wilderness into two origins, the sublime, and the frontier. The sublime relates more to what Muir and Adams described the national parks as, monuments to Godly experiences and otherworldly beauty. An important distinction that Cronon makes is that our romanticized perspective of the national parks is ignorant of the reality that the wilderness we are enjoying was not, in fact, untouched. Cronon summarizes this perfectly by writing "The myth of the wilderness as 'virgin', uninhabited land had always been especially cruel when seen from the perspective of the Indians who had once called that land home" (Cronon, 1995) Cronon emphasizes the ludicrous notion that this wilderness we see is untouched, when in reality, it has been almost desecrated by the removal of those who called that land home originally. Cronon references injustices like "The Blackfeet continue to be accused of 'poaching' on the lands of Glacier National Park that originally belonged to them and that were ceded by treaty only with the proviso that they be permitted to hunt there." (Cronon, 1995) Cronon's perspective is crucial

to the understanding of the history of the parks, because it is one that is often left out when discussing them. The notion of untouched wilderness is superbly unjust towards Native Americans.

This essay explores how that kind of deep engagement with the natural world has shaped conservation efforts in Yosemite and Kings Canyon National Parks, as well as what it means to experience these places while understanding some of their true roots . It compares historical and contemporary conservation strategies, policies, and looks toward the future. Furthermore, I reflect on my own experiences and attempts to capture some of the parks' current state. I will also consider what it means to truly appreciate a natural place, and whether there is a way to do so that is truly appreciative.

## **II. Historical Foundations of Conservation**

The idea of setting aside land solely for preservation and public enjoyment was a radical concept in the 19th century, but it laid the foundation for what would become the national park system. Fueled by a mix of Romantic ideals, early environmentalism, and a growing appreciation for the American wilderness, figures like John Muir and later President Theodore Roosevelt helped bring national attention to the value of protecting places like Yosemite. Muir, inspired by the spiritual and aesthetic power of wild landscapes, viewed places like Yosemite as sacred and inherently worthy of preservation. Roosevelt was a hunter and a utilitarian, but he supported the creation and expansion of national parks as a means of conserving resources and promoting national pride. Their combined influence helped catalyze the national park movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when ideas of conservation began to take institutional form. The first form of official protection the park received was in 1964 when the Yosemite Grant was

signed by Abraham Lincoln, protecting the Mariposa Grove and Yosemite Valley to be untouchable, but provided by the state for recreational use to the public. It was later on that John Muir led a movement to protect surrounding mountains and forests, effectively growing the protected land a great deal. Due to these efforts, the land was later designated as a national park in 1890. (National Park Service, 2016) Similarly, Sequoia National Park was founded in 1890 and became recognized as a national park. Later on, in 1940, its counterpart Kings Canyon was established as a National Park. (National Park Service, 2016) There were a few more crucial pieces of legislation that worked to set aside land from private use. Of course, this is after this land had already been taken from any Native American possession, which is an important aspect to remember. The national parks service was officially created in 1916 with the implementation of the National Park Service Organic Act, which, according to the National Park Service took responsibility “to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” (National Park Service). The next important piece of legislation was the Wilderness Act of 1964 which allowed congress to designate large pieces of land for preservation from development. Again, however, it is important to note that the actual legislation defines wilderness as “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain..” (U.S Fish & Wildlife Service) Again, we can see the observable bias and injustice done to Native Americans that called this land home long before there were debates over its preservation.

As mentioned before, there is a difficult balance of allowing people to experience these national parks versus preserving the nature within them. This has been a topic of discourse and

disagreement amongst park leaders and officials for a long time. The reality is that the parks do not truly contain pristine wilderness, as Cronon mentioned, but there were also impacts to the natural environment that supported this idea that untouched, pristine wilderness is a fantasy created by foreign settlers. An example of this comes from a wildlife division biologist named Ben Thompson in the 1930's. During this time, there was an increase in the utilization and implementation of wildlife biologists within the national parks. Although their roles were not very powerful, they provided input based on scientific findings. Thompson had written a memorandum that directly opposed a national park higher up's sentiment that the majority of space in a national park remain unaffected by any sort of human development. Thompson emphasized decreasing animal populations, including the bighorn sheep, grizzly, and cougar populations in Yosemite National Park. (Sellars, 2009) Thompson declared that this reality was due to the National Park's limited size relative to what was needed for specific species to thrive. Aside from the impacts on wildlife, this displays the sort of disconnect that persists even today between what is understood to be wilderness versus what wilderness really is. Another key moment in the development of the National Parks was Mission 66.

### **III. Shifts in Conservation: Mid-20th Century to Present**

During World War two, the United States had put the National Parks system on the back burner in terms of priority. The parks suffered during the war years from low visitation and poor maintenance. However, when the war ended, there was a national increase in tourism and park visitation spiked. According to the National Park Service, the number of visitors in 1945 was roughly 11.7 million, and in 1954, that number jumped up to 47.8 million. (National Park Service) Due to this sudden increase, there was public backlash on park conditions, as the infrastructure had deteriorated to a deplorable state in many of the parks. Eventually, this resulted

in the conception and campaigning for an ambitious 10 year program titled Mission 66 in which the goal was to obtain a billion dollars for funding from the government. Mission 66 marks an important milestone for the National Parks system, because it meant that the parks were going to be developed for further human use. An example of Mission 66's impact in relation to Yosemite is the famous Tioga Road. This road was a result of Mission 66, and it was the topic of much debate amongst conservationists and park officials. The original plan for the Tioga Road was to break new ground over previously undeveloped land. This was met with much resistance, and ultimately, it was decided that the road be implemented along the already existing Great Sierra Wagon road. This decision however, was unsupported by conservationists and Adams himself, distraught at the impact it would have on million year old glacial formations. The Tioga Road was an important contributor to the passing of the Wilderness Act in 1965. According to the National Park Service, the Tioga Road's conception was one of if not the most discussed and meticulously planned projects in all of the parks. As discussed previously, the Wilderness Act prohibits the further development of undeveloped land in protected areas. The National Park Service reiterates the significance of the Tioga Road perfectly: "Today, Tioga Road is a physical representation of the tensions between preservation and use." (National Park Service) The passing of the Wilderness Act marked a shift toward preserving the ecological integrity of national parks. This ethos was reinforced in the following decades by additional legislation such as the National Environmental Policy Act of 1970 and the Endangered Species Act of 1973, which further restricted development and expanded the mission of the National Park Service to include habitat protection and biodiversity conservation.

#### **IV. Contemporary Conservation Practices**

Conservation in places like Yosemite and Kings Canyon has shifted from just preserving

nature to actively managing it. One of the biggest changes is bringing fire back into the ecosystem. For most of the 20th century, fire was seen as a threat, and park officials tried to prevent it. But research by Keeley and Fotheringham shows that fire plays a key role in helping native plants grow, especially in Southern California. Controlled burns and fuel management are now common tools the Park Service uses to restore natural cycles (van Wagtendonk, 2007). It reflects a bigger change in how we think about nature, like Cronon's idea that wilderness isn't untouched, but shaped by both nature and people. This newer view also includes Indigenous perspectives. Many Native groups see nature as a lived space, not something separate from people. In Yosemite, tribes like the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation are helping bring back practices like controlled burns, native planting, and sustainable gathering. (Veltman, 2023) These efforts push back against the early park idea that real nature has to be free of humans. Cronon (1995) calls that idea "the erasure of native peoples in the name of pristine wilderness." One example of this shift is the Merced River Plan. It was created to protect the river while dealing with high visitor numbers. The purpose of the plan was to eliminate non-essential areas originally created for human use in order to cultivate and protect river land. There was some resistance, but it just shows that some more priority was being placed on the preservation of natural areas over human recreation. (Plevin, 2013) This kind of decision fits Cronon's point about the tension between enjoying nature and preserving it.

## **V. Future of National Park Conservation**

Climate change is making it harder to protect places like Yosemite and Kings Canyon. Hotter temperatures, less snow, and longer droughts are putting more pressure on plants, animals, and the land. These changes call for more than just preserving what's there. Restoration and adaptation have to become core parts of conservation. One way parks are adapting is through

citizen science. Programs that let people help track wildlife, test water, or map plants give them a direct role in protecting nature. These projects also build stronger personal connections to the land. As Milstein (2011) explains, environmental messages work best when people have real experiences in a place. Still, there are challenges. One is commercialization. High-end hotels and luxury tours make parks feel less public and more like businesses. There's also political risk. The National Parks Conservation Association said the Trump administration's early policies hurt conservation through budget cuts and rollbacks ("Trump's Disastrous First 100 Days," NPCA, 2017). This shows that strong protections can be undone and need to be defended. The future of park conservation depends on seeing parks as changing, living places.

## **VI. Personal Reflection & Experience in the Parks**

Over the course of the last seven years, I have been fortunate enough to live relatively close to several national parks in the United States. Being a photographer, I was immediately drawn to these locations and their natural beauty. Earlier on, I don't think I was especially cognizant of the meaning behind these parks. I doubt that I really appreciated what I was seeing, because I do believe it takes a certain level of maturity to fully respect the nature and rarity of these locations. This past year gave me the opportunity to explore two of California's most stunning national parks; Yosemite and Kings Canyon. Yosemite was an especially special experience because I had time to spend admiring the park on my own terms. I was not restricted by time or plans, and I felt like I was able to do what John Muir and Ansel Adams wanted for park goers; immerse and connect with the park's magnificent nature. One of the aspects that I found most inspiring about the work of Ansel Adams was his ability to communicate beauty through the use of photography. His art captures the sort of reverence he was adamant we show to the outdoors and the beauty in national parks. The stoic black and white contrast of his images

carry a weight to them other photographers fail to capture in my opinion. Adams was the primary reason I began using a camera, and so he played a large part in inspiring the work I have done for this project artistically. My methods differ greatly in some senses to the methods used to compose and capture an image. The process is different due to the differences in large format film photography, what Adams was doing, and digital photography, what I am doing. My goal was to capture the grandeur of the two parks I visited, something that I think Adams excelled at in his photography. While I think most of the images I captured do that, I also love the more intimate, smaller moments that one might encounter in the park, and so I felt obligated to include moments like wildlife, flowing water, or just sitting by a river enjoying the scene.

After reading the Cronon essay, my perspective did change quite a bit. While it is a bit difficult to accept that there isn't really any wilderness in the sense we think about it in today's society, it is a valuable realization because it allows one to understand the injustices of what has happened in the past, and how there is a massive lack of perspective from the people who are visiting national parks. I would include myself in that category also, but learning about the true origins of national park land is an important step in the right direction. I feel that once the correct knowledge is obtained, and there is an understanding of the history of injustice, there becomes a space to appreciate the natural world. One thing that does bother me, and it bothers me in a different understanding after researching and learning, are the tourists who simply experience the park at its face value. What I mean by this is visitors who simply drive through the park, walk around, and then leave without actually giving more thought to what they are seeing. I understand everyone enjoys things differently, but going somewhere just to say you went somewhere feels almost dishonorable to the actual place and its history.

## **VII. Conclusion**

The national parks have a long and interesting history regarding their creation, conservation, and impact on human society. Like lots of things in America today, the parks are not perfect, and the romanticized idea of them is inaccurate to the reality of their history. Understanding that, and that there is still a long way to go, is an important step to being able to appreciate these spaces more and in the right way. Authors like Cronon shine a light on a lot of hidden aspects of what is too commonly referred to as the wilderness. His perspectives counter more commonly known romantic author John Muir's opinions and input that often leave out what Cronon emphasizes is essential. My own experiences have shaped my understanding and experiences in national parks in the United States, primarily the two of which I am discussing in this paper; Yosemite and Kings Canyon. Through my own lens I am inspired by artists like Ansel Adams, and for me, appreciating parks to the fullest happens when I have a camera in my hands. I have attempted to capture meaningful images of the park's beauty.

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