Reconceptualizing the Wilderness Native American Landscapes and Euro-American Control in America's National Parks

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The history of national parks in the United States can be traced back to the initial westward expansion by Euro-American settlers. These men and women fanned across the continent in search of land and resources that they could claim as their own. Based on their own ideals the landscapes, though alien, were full of possibilities. Euro-Americans saw the future as farms and houses, or even towns with stores and churches. The United States government described lands in the West as "public domain" despite the Native peoples living on the land.[1] By the late 1800s when the first national park, Yellowstone, was established, the U.S. government defined the land designated for the park as a wilderness area that should be preserved, and as unsuitable for settlement. With no great manmade monuments to nationhood like Buckingham Palace or the Louvre, the United States would use the natural wonders of Yellowstone to symbolize their greatness and power. But Native Americans did not see the same things when they looked at the lands of Yellowstone; they saw a homeland - a place that possessed a long history and connectedness to Native American people. These landscapes were not wildernesses to be gazed upon and 'preserved' but the places where every aspect of life, from hunting to praying, were lived. Native Americans and Euro-Americans conceptualized the land in fundamentally different ways. In many cases, these conceptions of place contributed to the dispossession of Native Americans from their homelands in order to establish national parks, monuments, and protected areas. Euro-Americans had the power to control land use according to their own values and ideas, and they often failed to allow or even acknowledge traditional Native American uses of land. Native Americans lacked the power to control how parks were managed even though they had been living in those places for millennia. America's national parks illustrate how power and contrasting conceptions of place are expressed in both historical and modern conflicts between Native Americans and Euro-Americans. While progress has been made in adapting federal policy to accommodate Native land use, misunderstandings and contention in national parks persist.

Long before the establishment of any American national parks, their ideological foundation was laid out across the continent. Ideology is an integral part of culture, and it is important to make it clear that at a societal level, many of the tropes and ideologies of American colonial culture were based on a belief in Euro-American superiority. Settlers, on individual levels, had grown up in a world that taught them how to think about Native Americans and the American landscape. The 'logic' of their beliefs was reified by their churches, their government, their families, friends, and neighbors. This is not to say that these beliefs are justified, but that the construction of their culture determined, in large part, how individuals thought and acted. When settlers encountered Native Americans they often approached them with attitudes of superiority and fear. Stereotypes and misinformation produced a vision of the

Native American in the minds of the settlers; they were seen, sometimes contradictorily, as backward savages, as a vanishing race, as drunks, as murderers, as witches and heathens, and as preventing Euro-Americans' pursuit of "manifest destiny".[2] This ideology, in which Euro-Americans believed in their divine right to develop and settle America from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, was partly based on the conception of a harsh and wild landscape that must be tamed and controlled. Frederick Turner's immensely influential 1893 essay, The Significance of the Frontier in American History, shaped how Americans thought about their own history and about western landscapes. He wrote that "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explains American development."[3] Turner's writing supported the notion of manifest destiny and helped explain why western colonization of Indian lands was justified and necessary. Stereotypes about Native Americans worked to separate them from these landscapes, as Alvin M. Josephy writes: "[T]hese comfortable images defamed and dehumanized Indians, reducing them in the non-Indians' mind to something faceless, akin to trees and wild animals that the builders of the American nation felt compelled to clear from the land."[4] Euro-Americans used a number of mechanisms to dispossess Natives from their lands, including the sale of lands under pressure and economic hardship, the signing of land treaties and their subsequent abrogation, outright theft of lands, reduction of Native American populations through disease, aggressive assimilation policies, and the relocation of Native Americans to reservations.

While the landscapes of America came to symbolize the conquering of a harsh wilderness by an industrial people for Euro-Americans, this same landscape now symbolized a bitter history of dispossession and marginalization for Native Americans - a landscape that for them had always had a historical and spiritual significance.[5] The Native American worldview could not separate the land from the people; they saw lands that became national parks as places that had been and always would be a part of their collective identity. Gordon writes, "In Indian belief, the place where an event occurred, rather than the event itself, assumes special spiritual significance. As a result, Indian worship focuses not so much on revelatory events, but spiritual renewal through ceremonious and individual relationships with holy places."[6] Euro-Americans, whose religious beliefs were typically Christian and whose holy lands were on a different continent and not determinate of their ability to worship, could not understand the Native American relationship to landscape features. Euro-Americans sought to define these landscapes according to their own sensibilities. The idea of national parks was a way to take dramatic landscapes unsuited to farming and turn them into monuments to the young but powerful American nation. Burnham writes, "Conceived at a time when the frontier was being claimed by settlers and ranchers, parks were established as a permanent way to preserve the grandeur of the American experience."[7] Of course, this concept of the "grandeur of the American experience" was not designed to preserve the reality of these landscapes as places where Native Americans lived, but as simulacrums of an idealistic fantasy. It was this fantasy that guided the United States government in deciding where parks should be, how they should be managed, and how they should be used. The Native Americans, who lived in lands that became parks or used park lands for hunting and gathering, were powerless to control the fates of these landscapes. Yellowstone National Park, Devil's Tower National Monument, and Death Valley National Park are three such places that exemplify how the seemingly innocuous concept of a park worked to disrupt Native Americans' ability to live in their ancestral homelands, seek resources, and worship in

their holy places. Today Native Americans continue to struggle with the United States for their rights to these landscapes.

National parks all over the world can often source their founding philosophies to what is called the "Yellowstone model for 'the preservation of "wilderness" areas of outstanding natural beauty and/or scientific interest. . .'"[8] When Yellowstone National Park was founded, the advent of modern transport and the industrialization and urbanization of America framed the lifestyles of Euro-Americans in that they now had disposable income, access to time-space reducing train travel, and a culture that cultivated a very distinct separation between work and leisure.[9] People could easily travel by train to visit the newly-defined monuments to American greatness. In 1872 Yellowstone was "dedicated and set apart as a public park or pleasuring-ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people"[10] by the legislature. However, Native Americans like the Nez Perce and the Sheepeater Shoshone were removed or chased through that land in order to create the 'pleasuring ground' for Euro-American tourists. Euro-Americans saw the landscape as a pristine wilderness, and Native Americans were conceived as a threat to that image and to the safety of tourists who wanted to visit the park. In 1877, the U.S. Army hunted the Nez Perce through Yellowstone because they refused to settle on a nearby reservation, and in 1879 the Army removed the Sheepeaters from the park area because they were seen as a threat to park development. In 1880 the park superintendent "negotiated a banishment of Native Americans from most of Yellowstone proper."[11] For over 8,000 years Native Americans had been hunting, gathering, worshipping, and mining in the Yellowstone area before the United States removed them from this 'wilderness.' Ironically, the buffalo that had been hunted to near extinction by Euro-Americans as a means of clearing the plains for the railroad and to rid the area of buffalo-hunting Native Americans became subjects for conservation in the park. Buffalo were "husbanded in the park as a symbol of wilderness" while traditional Native American buffalo hunters were demonized by people who adhered to the new "preservationist ethic" sweeping through America.[12]

The case of Yellowstone illustrates the foundational and fundamental differences in how Euro-Americans and Native Americans conceptualize landscapes. To Native Americans, Yellowstone was a place where they could "fulfill their way of life as a part of the land on a level of coexistence which is not separate from these areas."[13] The land, animals, and people were all part of a greater whole, and the Native American worldview did not have a conception of 'tourism' or 'wilderness.' The Euro-American worldview was obviously quite different, and they had the means to control how the landscape of Yellowstone was used. The myth of the pristine landscape was powerful in white culture. Euro-Americans sought out landscapes that they could define as such even when they had to forcefully eject Native Americans. 'Wilderness' was seen as a place separate from humans—where people could go to escape from real life for recreation and then return to their urban homes. The integral whole of the Native American world—the people, places, and animals—were separate in the minds of Euro-Americans, and thus were separated spatially when particular areas were designated as national parkland.

Through the establishment of many of America's national parks, Native American uses and meanings played little part in how boundaries were set and areas were managed. The ideologies of Euro-American society provided the philosophies that national parks were built upon, and even today ninety percent of park visitors are of European descent even though Euro-Americans account for less than seventy percent of the total U.S. population.[14] For over one hundred years, conflict between Euro-Americans and Native Americans in parks has been significant, especially in places where Native Americans have a particularly intense spiritual

connection to a place that Euro-Americans view as a source of recreation. Devils Tower National Monument is one such site that has been the subject of recent conflict. The 860-foot tower of rock is known to Lakota people as Mato Tipila, or Bear Lodge, but is known by a variety of other names by more than twenty Plains Indian cultures that consider it a sacred site. Native Americans come to Bear Lodge to worship, conduct vision quests, and pray. On the other hand, Euro-Americans usually come to Devils Tower for recreational reasons. Climbing in particular is very popular and is considered by many Native Americans to be a desecration of the tower. Native Americans often cite climbing the tower to be like someone climbing a cathedral for sport.[15] During the month of June when the Sun Dance brings many Native Americans to Bear Lodge to worship, tension and conflict between climbers and worshippers is especially marked. Climbers have been known to take pictures of Native Americans worshipping, steal prayer bundles, and disrupt ceremonies.[16] In 1995, the National Park Service instituted a policy asking climbers to participate in a voluntary ban on climbing during the month of June. Some climbers and climbing guide outfits took the NPS to court, claiming the voluntary ban threatened their economic well-being and violated the First Amendment, which declares that "Congress shall make no law . . . respecting an establishment of religion."[17] Climbers adopted the language of Native Americans' arguments, claiming that climbing Devils Tower offered them similar religious experiences, and that they should have equal rights to the park regardless of how Native Americans viewed their activities. The case was eventually turned out by the Supreme Court, and the voluntary ban stands today. Climbing during June is significantly reduced, although the number of people adhering to the ban has been waning. In 2004, the number of climbers in June was about 69 percent of the pre-ban rate.[18]

While this case illustrates how conflict can arise when different cultures both see and use the same place differently, it also calls attention to how national parks thwart Native Americans' ability to use and manage their spiritual places as they see fit. While the National Park Service (NPS) acknowledges the cultural significance of the site for Native Americans, the ban is voluntary because the park is on 'public land' managed by the federal government. The park supposedly belongs to all Americans and is based on the constitutional ideals of equal-access, but in practice it ignores the reality that the land belonged to and was used by Native Americans long before a white man set foot in Wyoming. We must ask - is it truly every American's right to be present at Bear Lodge during religious ceremonies? Most Euro-Americans have trouble understanding the fact that Bear Lodge for Native Americans can be roughly compared to a Christian church or Jewish temple. Churches and temples are generally private buildings that allow their congregations to worship freely, discreetly, and without tourists disrupting ceremonies. The equal-access ideal of national parks manipulates the responsibility that the United States has to Native American cultures. Devils Tower National Monument defines Native Americans' rights as equal to everyone else's. It acknowledges their right to practice their religion freely, but it cannot guarantee their privacy or that their sacred places not be desecrated by climbers. This is not to argue that climbers and Americans do not have a personal connection to this place, for they obviously do. It is asserting that Native Americans' long cultural history at this place, combined with the fact that Bear Lodge never truly was the American government's land to begin with, make federal management of this place a farce. Until autonomy is in Native American hands, the federal government will have control over Native Americans' ability to worship at Bear Lodge.

The NPS is highly resistant to giving up their authority over park lands, but there are a few cases in which the federal government returned park lands to Native Americans or

now shares management with tribes. Death Valley National Park is one such place. The Timbisha Shoshone now live on three hundred acres of land in trust within park boundaries and co-manage a portion of the park with the National Park Service.[19] It is the first reservation to be established within a national park. However, the park service only came to the negotiating table after the Timbisha Shoshone fought for years to get them there. Finally, the NPS was forced by law to negotiate a Native American land base within park boundaries in 1994. The Timbisha Shoshone's marginalization by the NPS on their ancestral homelands started as soon as the area became designated a national monument by Franklin D. Roosevelt. The federal government banned hunting even though Native Americans relied on bighorn sheep for food; fires were prohibited outside of designated areas; water access was restricted; the establishment of summer camps for gathering pinyon nuts was prohibited, and the public was permitted to visit the Shoshone's sacred areas.[20] In the 1930s, the government relocated the Shoshone's entire village to another location within the park because it conflicted with what tourists were expecting to see.[21] It is remarkable that given the attitude of the park service and the forced relocation of Native Americans from other national parks that the Timbisha Shoshone were not forcibly ejected from their lands in the first place. But they did remain, and their struggle to regain control over their lands has set an important precedent that can be turned to in the future by other tribes seeking to regain control of their ancestral lands.

Poirier and Ostergren wrote, "To some, the very idea of a 'wilderness' without the indigenous peoples associated with that landscape is dehumanizing that population."[22] This distinctly Euro-American conception of place has played a major role in the dispossession of Native Americans from their homelands. Additionally, many Americans believe in their right to equal, unencumbered access to Native Americans' sacred places, citing the United States Constitution. These conflicts in how Native Americans and Euro-Americans think about and use place make mutual understanding difficult. The tourism industry and the myth of a pristine wilderness continue to determine how most national parks are managed, and Native Americans often lack the power to exact change. However, progress toward more Indigenous management of parks is being made, as the case of the Timbisha Shoshone illustrates. Co-management is probably the best-case scenario (at least in the foreseeable future) for many of America's national parks even though Native Americans' claims are more legitimate. Poirier and Ostergren argue that "[j]oint management is not simply a conservation agreement, it is part of the wider issue of social justice, community development, and the preservation of cultural identity. . ."[23] Native Americans did not vanish as the United States expected them to, and they continue to see their landscapes as part of the whole that is the Native American identity. The reintroduction of people into Euro-Americans' conceptualizations of wilderness landscapes is an important step toward understanding the Native American worldview, and thus understanding why co-management of national parks is essential to achieving an ethically just co-existence of the United States and Native American nations.

Footnotes

[1] Philip Burnham, Indian Country, God's Country: Native Americans and the National Parks (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2000), 16.

[2] Alvin M. Josephy, Now That the Buffalo's Gone: A Study of Today's American Indians (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984), 31.

[3] Frederick Jackson Turner, The Significance of the Frontier in American History, (read at The World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, Illinois 1893), quoted in John Mack Faragher, ed., Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner (New York, NY: Henry Holt, 1994), 1.

[4] Ibid, 31.

[5] Myron F. Floyd, "Managing National Parks in a Multicultural Society: Searching for Common Ground," Managing Recreational Use 18, no. 3 (2001): 44.

[6] Sarah B. Gordon, "Indian Religious Freedom and Governmental Development of Public Lands," The Yale Law Journal 94, no. 6 (1985): 1449.

[7] Philip Burnham, Indian Country, God's Country: Native Americans and the National Parks (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2000), 19.

[8] Robert Poirier and David Ostergren, "Evicting People from Nature: Indigenous Land Rights and National Parks in Australia, Russia, and the United States," Natural Resources Journal 42 (2002): 334.

[9] Andrew Holden, Tourism Studies and the Social Sciences, Oxon: Routledge, 2005.

[10] Annual Report of the Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park, 1880, House Executive Document 1, 46th Congress, 3rd Session, 789, quoted in Philip Burnham, Indian Country, God's Country: Native Americans and the National Parks (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2000), 24.

[11] Philip Burnham, Indian Country, God's Country: Native Americans and the National Parks (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2000), 22-23.

[12] Philip Burnham, Indian Country, God's Country: Native Americans and the National Parks (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2000), 25.

[13] Leo McAvoy, "American Indians, Place Meanings and the Old/New West," Journal of Leisure Research 34, no. 4 (2002): 389.

[14] Myron F. Floyd, "Managing National Parks in a Multicultural Society: Searching for Common Ground," Managing Recreational Use 18, no. 3 (2001): 41-42.

[15] Joe Edward Watkins, Contemporary Native American Issues: Sacred Sites and Repatriation (New York: Chelsea House, 2006), 96.

[16] Eric Freedman, "Protecting Sacred Sites on Public Land: Religion and Alliances in the Mato Tapila-Devils Tower Litigation," The American Native American Quarterly 31, no. 1 (2007): 14.

[17] Ibid, 1.

[18] Ibid, 2.

[19] Robert Poirier and David Ostergren, "Evicting People from Nature: Indigenous Land Rights and National Parks in Australia, Russia, and the United States," Natural Resources Journal 42 (2002): 345.

[20] Philip Burnham, Indian Country, God's Country: Native Americans and the National Parks (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2000), 4.

[21] Philip Burnham, Indian Country, God's Country: Native Americans and the National Parks (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2000), 5.

[22] Robert Poirier and David Ostergren, "Evicting People from Nature: Indigenous Land Rights and National Parks in Australia, Russia, and the United States," Natural Resources Journal 42 (2002): 338.

[23] Ibid, 351.

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