



The roads that traverse the national parks not only bring tourists to these sites but also shape the ways in which visitors experience the landscape. For many, the parks are appreciated only from the well-established scenic viewing spots adjacent to the roads.

*Roger Minick (b. 1944). Yosemite National Park, California, from *Sightsaer Series*. Ektacolor print, 1980. © Roger Minick 1980. Courtesy of the photographer.*

horse and stage to a large hotel capable of catering to their every need. Park hotels had urban amenities and were at best rustic—not “wild”—in their appurtenances. Given the need for destinations that could attract the well-heeled crowds that such hotels required, it made sense for the railroad companies to spend large sums on advertising and other promotional packages to educate Americans about the wonders of the western landscape. Such familiar places as Yellowstone, Yosemite, the Grand Canyon, and most other western parks were introduced to the public in just this way.

By the early decades of the twentieth century, as automobiles became more common and travelers began to consider them as alternatives to the railroads, new forms of western tourism started to emerge. Westerners, and Californians in particular, were prominent among supporters of the “good roads” movement, encouraging state and federal governments to invest significant sums in rural highway improvement. With the passage of the 1916 Federal Aid Road Act, states were given federal money to build and improve a system of “U.S. highways,” many of which were soon being designated as preferred tourist routes. As Americans took to the roads in greater numbers, the national parks were among their favorite destinations. In 1916, Congress created the National Park Service to oversee the growing number of parks and monuments. Under the leadership of its first two superintendents, Stephen T. Mather and Horace M. Albright, the Park

Service constructed roads, built tourist facilities, designed brochures, and did everything possible to promote the success of the parks.

By the 1920s, the Forest Service, fearing that the national parks might overtake the national forests in popular affection, was also beginning to promote recreational opportunities on its lands, designating a growing number of sites as "Primitive Areas," with wilder amenities than the parks typically sought to offer. Both bureaucracies increasingly catered to the auto-based tourist, so that small motor campgrounds started to appear as alternatives to the immense railroad hotels. On the outskirts of the parks and elsewhere, "motels"—motor hotels—and other tourist facilities became more common. By the 1930s, the earliest western ski resorts were appearing as winter destinations for western travelers. Averell Harriman persuaded the Union Pacific Railroad to construct a large ski slope at Sun Valley, Idaho, in 1936 as a way of increasing passenger traffic at a time of year that had not previously attracted much of a tourist market. Aspen, Colorado, acquired its first ski lodge the same year. Throughout the West, tourism helped reorient a growing number of local economies, providing important employment alternatives for locals and outsiders alike. One striking example of a traditional western institution shifting from a rural to urban orientation was the dude ranch; throughout the West, marginal grazing operations increasingly turned to wealthy tourists as their chief source of income. Although such ranches billed themselves as places where urban visitors could get back to the basics and experience rustic living firsthand, what they marketed was less a genuine rural way of life than a carefully crafted fantasy for leisure-class consumers. Whatever value such experiences may have had for those who purchased them—and many testified to the considerable benefits for young and old alike—dude ranching was hardly "traditional" life on the land.

With the postwar era came an explosion in tourist travel throughout the West, fueled in part by baby-boom parents seeking to take their offspring to national parks, ski resorts, and even newer destinations like Disneyland, which opened in Anaheim, California, in 1955. In 1956, the popular demand for recreational travel helped secure passage of the Interstate and Defense Highway Act, which provided 90 percent of the funds for an extraordinary new network of divided highways, the largest public works project in American history. The new interstate highways, largely completed during the 1960s and 1970s, reinforced the existing urban system by linking major metropolitan centers and encouraging further growth at these key transportation nodes. At the same time, they made it easier for urban residents to escape the city for the country. The predictable result can be seen in National Park usage. In 1920, total visits to all national parks had only just reached 1 million. By 1950, this number had risen to 33 million; by 1970, it stood at 172 million. Other tourist destinations experienced comparable increases during the same period. The growth in recreational travel far exceeded national population increase.

Not coincidentally, the growing American love affair with western travel fostered new political pressure for the protection of wilderness lands. The United States had been setting aside parks in the West and elsewhere since Yosemite in 1864 and Yellowstone in 1872 but not specifically as "wilderness." Indeed, the act establishing Yellowstone described it as a "public park or pleasuring ground," suggesting the extent to which recreation was intended as its chief use. Only gradually did Americans begin to speak of

the “wildness” of parks as one of their special values. Among those who led the preservationist struggle to protect wildlands, John Muir undoubtedly deserves special mention, since his writings about Yosemite, the Sierra Nevada, and the national parks in general were among the principal nineteenth-century texts convincing Americans—many of them elite inhabitants of eastern cities—of the need to set aside wild areas in the West.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, Muir and the San Francisco-based Sierra Club, which he helped found, conducted a nationwide publicity campaign to prevent the construction of the Hetch Hetchy reservoir in Yosemite National Park. Although Muir and his allies were ultimately defeated and the dam was built, Hetch Hetchy would become a battle cry in all subsequent struggles to protect western wilderness areas. More interesting, it also symbolized the growing contradictions between the material and the moral foundations of western American life. On the one hand, the people who sought to defend Hetch Hetchy were principally well-to-do inhabitants of cities—San Francisco chief among them—who viewed Yosemite National Park as a sacred icon of the western landscape as it had appeared before the coming of urban civilization. On the other hand, the people who sought to dam Hetch Hetchy were trying to defend San Francisco from a repetition of the terrible fires that followed the 1906 earthquake, while simultaneously guaranteeing that residents would continue to have water as their city grew. In the decades to come, many of those who would be most committed to saving western wilderness areas would also be drinkers of Hetch Hetchy water.

By mid-century, public enthusiasm for wildland recreation had grown to the point that the Sierra Club’s next major battle against a dam would have a very different outcome. When the Bureau of Reclamation proposed building a dam in Echo Park, located within the borders of Dinosaur National Monument, preservationists mounted a major national campaign to lobby against it. This time, they won. Although part of the appropriations bill that protected Dinosaur National Monument also included funds to build a high dam in Glen Canyon—later lamented by preservationists as “the place no one knew”—it was a serious defeat for the bureau, putting it on notice that a significant portion of the American public no longer viewed dams as an unmitigated good. When plans were unveiled in the 1960s for a major reclamation project within the boundaries of Grand Canyon National Park, public outcry swelled to unprecedented levels and once again prevented the dams from being built. Never before had earlier conservation goals and emerging environmentalist values been more starkly contrasted.

The preservationist movement to protect wild areas had its greatest triumph in 1964, with the passage of the Wilderness Act. Under its terms, large tracts of land (most of them initially located in the national forests) were designated as roadless areas in a national system of wilderness preserves. Motorized traffic was not permitted, and—in the absence of new mineral discoveries—any development that might undermine the wild status was forbidden. The vast majority of these new wilderness areas were west of the Mississippi River, though a new law in 1975 mandated the reestablishment of wilderness—restored “virgin land,” as it were—on eastern sites that had once been lumbered or pastured. By 1979, roughly twenty million acres had received wilderness protection, and that same year the size of the system quadrupled with the addition of new

wilderness preserves in Alaska. Although the administration of President Ronald Reagan sought to cut back on the wilderness system, the resulting public outcry suggested how clearly the wilderness areas embodied environmental values that many Americans held dear.

And yet wilderness also represents one of the deepest paradoxes of the western environment. Standing in a kind of love-hate counterpoint to the urban West, it is quintessentially an urban cultural space if measured by the majority of people who visit it, defend it, and hold it dear. If one plots periods of peak visitation for western parks and wilderness areas, they coincide perfectly with weekends and major holidays as defined by urban workplaces. By the 1960s, Yosemite had acquired smog (and crime) problems that on a smaller, more symbolic scale paralleled those of Los Angeles. Crowding in most parks and backcountry areas had become so severe by the 1980s that permits and reservations—often made months in advance—were necessary if one wanted to experience the “freedom” of the hills. When a major coal-fired power plant was constructed in the Four Corners region to provide electricity to Los Angeles without compounding its pollution problems, the resulting haze would become a perennial problem at the Grand Canyon. Increasingly, those who sought escape from the city by fleeing to the wilderness found the city harder to leave than they thought, for they carried its baggage with them.

Among the most striking examples of the contradictions of wilderness occurred in the country’s oldest national park, Yellowstone. Following a policy laid down in the early 1960s, rangers tried to manage the park as if it were a completely natural system, with as little human intervention as possible. As the critic Alston Chase has argued, not all of the results turned out as intended. Bear populations, which may have been kept artificially high by garbage dumps and intentional human feeding dating from at least the 1930s, plummeted disastrously when “natural”-style management was instituted. Even more striking, a decision to reverse the decades-old practice of preventing forest fires and to allow “natural” ones to burn led in 1988 to the largest and most devastating fires in the park’s history. In such cases, it was not at all clear that one could just “let wilderness be” so that nature could “take care of itself.” The modification of park ecosystems by intense visitor pressure, by fragmentation of habitats, by loss of native species, and by global environmental change suggested that active intervention would be necessary if wilderness was to survive.

In 1977, the Forest Service published a textbook whose title said it all: *Wilderness Management*. A quarter century before, when lobbying for a national wilderness act was still in its early stages, the notion that one could “manage” wilderness would probably have seemed antithetical to the whole concept. Americans in general, and westerners in particular, had sought to preserve wilderness because it stood for natural beauty and frontier freedom, both of which seemed seriously at risk in the modern world. Men and women who no longer earned their livings on the land, whose homes and workplaces were located in immense metropolitan districts, saw in the western wilderness a much-loved alternative to the complicated lives of quiet desperation that they both cherished and maligned. The irony was that those complicated lives—supported by dams and highways and energy resources that had made the desert bloom and had conjured cities in an arid waste to fulfill the reclamation dream—those same lives were themselves the

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principal challenge to wilderness in the modern world, calling its future into question. Furthermore, the alienated way of thinking about nature embodied in the very concept of wilderness—as a special place where nature could be experienced “pure,” isolated from the “artificial” human world that surrounded it—was itself an artifact of American cultural attitudes toward the western frontier. In a very real sense, the wilderness was as much an urban cultural invention as were the dry hillsides of the Owens Valley, the flooded canyons of the Colorado River, or the suburban tracts of Los Angeles.

Furthermore, wilderness was also the ultimate symbol of abundance giving way to scarcity in the modern West. In the nineteenth century, the frontier had stood in the minds of many Americans for the unworked abundance of a savage or prehuman landscape awaiting the touch of human hands to become the site of prosperous farms, mines, factories, and cities. (Indians, of course, were shamelessly ignored or patronized by such thinking.) The progress of the nation was measured by its success in transforming wilderness into fertile countryside. The reclamation dream had extended this vision of frontier plenty even into the drylands of the arid West, making it possible to discover abundance even in the face of seemingly irrefutable scarcity. The growth of modern Los Angeles and other western cities suggests just how triumphant these nineteenth-century dreams eventually proved to be. But in the course of their fulfillment, they also undermined their original promise. The material resources of the West were *not* endless—far from it. The growth of one city could all too easily mean the stagnation of another. The damming of each new canyon left one less source of water and power to be tapped in the future. Perceived abundance gradually gave way to perceived scarcity, and nothing better represented this transition than the well-bounded, carefully managed, fragile western landscapes designated as “wilderness.” By the late twentieth century, the wilderness, which had once stood as America’s most potent icon of limitless abundance, seemed, in the eyes of many, to be its scarcest resource. Rarely has the reversal of a cultural symbol been more complete.

The “wilderness management” practiced by the U.S. Forest Service and the National Park Service suggests the complexity of contemporary American attitudes toward the land. Once valued for the limitless wildness that seemed to set them beyond the reach of civilization, wilderness lands are now viewed as dwindling resources to be shaped and controlled by human agency.

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Service.

And that was why the oil that poured from the ruptured hull of the *Exxon Valdez*, coating the Alaskan coastline with black tar and devastating its marine life, was such a compelling source of outrage even for Americans who had never seen Prince William Sound or visited the far north. By the 1970s, Alaska had come to seem a near-perfect embodiment of America's frontier traditions. Its immense reserves of petroleum had fostered a boom to rival anything one could have found in the nineteenth-century West, creating a smaller, wetter, more northern version of Los Angeles in the city of Anchorage, whose supply lines reached around the world to feed a large urban population that could never have sustained itself with local agricultural resources alone. At the same time, Americans who now cherished "wilderness" as a cultural icon viewed Alaska as the last opportunity to preserve natural areas in their pristine state. Despite its immensity and harshness, the northern environment could thus seem all too small and fragile a remnant of the wonder that had once been North America. In the post-1968 struggles over whether and how to construct the Alaskan pipeline, over whether and how much to protect the Alaskan wilderness, Americans had tried once again to resolve the long-standing tension between abundance and scarcity, between the seductive dream of progress and the sublime icon of wilderness, between American national myth and material life.

Remote as it may have seemed from the day-to-day lives of most Americans, the wrecked Exxon supertanker could not have been more intimately entangled with these central questions of western environmental history. Before running aground, its ultimate destination had been Long Beach, California, where its cargo would have been refined into gasoline to help keep the wheels of Los Angeles turning. The great ship had been sent on its mission by the demands of this and other urban markets and would not have wreaked its havoc without their impetus. The connections were not always easy to trace, but the oily pollution on the shores of Prince William Sound had more than a little in common with the smoggy haze that obscured the waterfalls of Yosemite, the mesas of the Grand Canyon, and the basin of Los Angeles itself. Public outrage may have been directed against the corporations and governmental agencies that failed to prevent the spill, but in a deeper sense its ultimate causes were far too close to home for comfort. In much the same way, public anger in the wake of the spill expressed not just a legitimate outrage about serious ecological damage but an older American resentment about the fading of a pristine dream. Not even Alaska was safe, not even Alaska was far enough away to remain an unsullied landscape of frontier freedom and wilderness escape. Even there, abundance could give way to scarcity, forcing those who had counted on the promise of plenty to confront the consequences of its loss. It was not the first such failed promise in western history, and would surely not be the last.

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THE OXFORD HISTORY OF
The
American
West

Edited by
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NEW YORK • OXFORD
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS • 1994

*Frontispiece: Maynard Dixon (1875–1946). Open Range. Oil on canvas, 1942.
Courtesy of the Museum of Western Art, Denver, Colorado.*

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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc., 200 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

*The Oxford history of the American West / edited by Clyde A. Milner II, Carol A. O'Connor, and Martha A. Sandweiss.
p. cm.*

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-19-505968-9

*I. West (U.S.)—History. I. Milner, Clyde A., 1948- . II. O'Connor, Carol A., 1946- . III. Sandweiss, Martha
A.F591.095 1994 93-38829
978—dc20 CIP*

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper