

CIVILIZING NATURE: NATIONAL PARKS IN TRANSNATIONAL HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Conference at the GHI, June 12–14, 2008. Conveners: Bernhard Gissibl (University of Mannheim), Sabine Höhler (GHI), Patrick Kupper (ETH Zurich). Participants: Etienne Benson (MIT), Marcus A. Burtner (University of Arizona), Indra Candanedo (University of Essex), Jane Carruthers (University of South Africa), Matthew Chrulew (Monash University), Carolin Firouzeh Roeder (University of Kent), Caroline Ford (UCLA), Melissa Harper (University of Queensland), Jeyamalar Kathirithamby-Wells (Cambridge University), Michael Lewis (Salisbury University), Brad Martin (Northwestern University), Christof Mauch (University of Munich), John McNeill (Georgetown University), Judith Meyer (Missouri State University), Max Pfeffer (Cornell University), John Schelhas (Tuskegee University), Henny van der Windt (University of Groningen), Emily Wakild (Wake Forest University), Richard White (University of Sydney), Anna-Katharina Wöbse (University of Bielefeld).

The national park is the most successful idea yet conceived for nature protection. Nearly every nation on the planet has a park as part of its national identity, along with a flag, an anthem, and an Olympic team. Yellowstone National Park in the United States is the granddaddy of them all. This icon was created in 1872 as a tourist destination and natural attraction, and was placed under strict protection. The global implementation of the Yellowstone model during the twentieth century lends itself perfectly to transnational historical study. The GHI conference “Civilizing Nature: National Parks in Transnational Historical Perspective” aimed to explore the global spread of the concept of the national park, from its original Western principles to its local adaptations under varying historical, political, social, and economic conditions. In five interdisciplinary and internationally oriented panels, fifteen presenters introduced current research on the issue of the national park as an international phenomenon. The appropriately ambiguous title of the conference—“Civilizing Nature”—hints at the shifting ambiguity of the national park. The word “park” connotes a tamed, tolerated wilderness. At the same time, the program title hints at national parks’ role as yardsticks for assessing the degree of civilization and progress of modern nations.

The first panel, “What’s in a Park? Unpacking Yellowstone, Repackaging Yellowstone,” examined the original model of the national park. Cul-

tural geographer Judith Meyer used examples from the history of Yellowstone Park to illustrate the influences of contemporary social needs and attitudes on the protection policies there. Swimming in the world-famous geysers? Long allowed, then forbidden. Intentional feeding of the bears in order to give visitors intimate contact with “wild” creatures and to increase the draw of the park? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Cell phone towers? Long forbidden in order to preserve a last vestige of wilderness feel, now camouflaged with green paint. Nature itself did not adhere to the boundaries of the preserve as established by the politicians. Meyer also made it clear that there is no static model of Yellowstone; indeed, protection policies remain dynamic today. The presentation by Melissa Harper and Richard White showed that in the nineteenth century, the national park model had already caught on in New Zealand, Canada, and Australia. These settler communities drew on Yellowstone as a model for using nature, rather than cultural legacies, to create national identity. The national parks near the city of Sydney reflected the Australian emphasis on recreation and the experience of nature through hiking. In this case, Yellowstone’s contribution was limited to providing the name “national park.” It did not provide a comprehensive protection strategy, since the first Australian parks much more closely resembled the city parks of London.

The second part of the conference was devoted to the international spread of the national park idea. At the beginning of the twentieth century, nature protection had established itself as part of the Western civilizing mission. Especially the overseas colonies, with their supposedly “empty” territories, seemed favorable for the establishment of spaces dedicated to nature protection, which would hardly have been possible in densely populated Europe. Nature protection became part of the colonial process of appropriation, as well as an accepted strategy of legitimization. France attempted to position itself at the forefront of the international movement for the protection of nature. Caroline Ford examined France’s nature protection policy in its Algerian colony. Her presentation made clear the extent to which an identity-forming narrative found concrete territorial expression: The French motherland made special efforts to protect forested areas in Algeria, linking itself to the classical tales of the supposed exploitation and destruction of the endangered granaries of Rome by Arab Muslims. Imperial forest protection in national parks thus came to stand for sustainable land use in the tradition of Roman civilization. Jeyamalar Kathirithamby-Wells traced the British influences on nature protection policies in Malaysia using the example of King George V National Park, founded in 1939. After independence in 1957, the park was rededicated as the Taman Negara National Park. Though

created in the context of empire under the leadership of small networks of nature protection advocates interested in the hunt, the national park as a public and common space played a democratizing role for Malaysian society over the long term. Thus a colonial icon became both object and motor of a developing civil society. In contrast to the usual expulsion from national parks, an indigenous people could survive here. Essentially classified as flora and fauna, they would otherwise have fallen victim to civilizing projects and cultural assimilation.

Ecologist Henny van der Windt analyzed the creation of Dutch national parks between the two poles of native and colonial nature. According to his interpretation, Dutch protection strategies differed from the North American ones: the projects were privately initiated, without national impetus, and transcended the dogma of untouched wilderness. The specifically Dutch interpretation concentrated on the interaction between man and nature. The question of whether the creation of large-scale preserves based on the American model promoted by individual scientists and colonial officials truly had no national meaning was a point of some debate in the discussion. In the Netherlands themselves, a push for park designations occurred only with the international institutionalization of the national park discourse in the 1960s. Anna-Katharina Wöbse examined the meaning of international organizations such as the League of Nations and the United Nations for the internationalization of protection parameters. In spite of an astonishing diversity of concepts for protection, the League of Nations during the 1920s promoted the national park as an ideal with global applicability for the development of a common world heritage—a concept that UNESCO was able to implement with the cooperation of a small network of white, Western male scientists and lobbyists. This approach was revived with the creation of the World Heritage Convention in 1972, which emphasized the policy of separate spheres of culture and nature. Today, this separation is viewed increasingly critically, as evidenced by the new emphasis on the integration of cultural landscapes in the United Nations program.

In his presentation “Local Adaptations: Parks From Below,” environmental historian Brad Martin portrayed the lasting conflicts of American and Canadian planners with the indigenous peoples in the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions in the wake of the wave of expulsions from national parklands in the 1960s and 1970s. While ecological issues were taken into consideration, cultural concerns were not. The native Inuit population resisted the establishment of borders and restrictions, and gained increasing influence over the shaping and use of the territory. Thus the original model of the national park, which would have excluded human inhabitants, was jettisoned, and was opened up to participatory forms of na-

tional park management. John Schelhas and Max Pfeffer's presentation addressed the conflict between native peoples and park institutions. The two anthropologists showed that the success of the policy of the reservation—globally recognized and promoted—resulted in the forced establishment of national parks that had to be tolerated and respected by locals, although from their perspective they were not necessarily sensible nor desirable. In a research project that surveyed the inhabitants of the national parks in Costa Rica (which followed a strict policy of protection) and Honduras (where a policy of integration was pursued), it became clear that the acceptance of a national park depended on the degree to which the overriding concern of nature protection was balanced with local necessities of life.

The panel "Nations and Natures: Parks and Political Regimes" discussed the implications of political power relations for views of nature protection. Emily Wakild provided an exciting new take on the typical interpretation of Mexican environmental history as a narrative of exploitation and overuse. Mexico's revolutionary phase not only saw the development of new economic plans that took their toll on natural resources; it also saw the creation of many new national parks in the second half of the 1930s. Wakild showed how interest groups attempted to combine revolutionary identity formation, recreation, economics, and scientific forestry in the preserves. She also noted the broad international spectrum of influences Mexico drew upon, as it integrated ideas from the United States, Europe, and Japan. Carolin Firouzeh Roeder used the example of the Slovenian Triglav Berge to depict how three picturesque peaks were continually reinterpreted and repossessed by the nation across various political systems. The alpine region, today a Slovenian national park, served both as a "mental habitat" for the new national identity and as proof of Slovenia's location within Europe as opposed to the Balkans. Indra Candanedo used the example of the trans-border national park La Amistad to show how the different political systems in Costa Rica and Panama had an immediate impact on the management of a joint natural region. The project, which began in the early 1970s, was massively influenced by the nature protection paradigms of the United States, which sought to exert economic and political influence during the Cold War, while the Panamanian military government used the national park to secure its control over land and resources.

The last four presentations at the conference were devoted to the scientific and cultural construction of national parks in a panel called "Creating the Pristine: The Science and Technology of National Parks." Marcus A. Burtner addressed the visual representation and the intercontinental transmission of nature in the photographs of the American botanist Homer le Roy. His pictures of panoramic landscapes of South Africa

taken in the 1920s served as a visual archive for the reconstruction of rare cactus forests done in the 1930s in Arizona. In the wake of the transfer of nature as something to be protected to the American Southwest, the view of the observer also became Americanized, shifting from the idealized photographic image to something seen through the windshield of the new automobiles belonging to the middle class. Etienne Benson examined another form of technological control and construction of wilderness. He studied the tracking of large carnivores in national parks—grizzlies in the USA and tigers in Nepal—through the use of remote-sensing technologies developed during the Cold War. Thanks to a small network of wildlife biologists, this technology came from the United States to Nepal, and with the technology came particular ideas about nature. The remote-sensing technology was often hailed by wildlife biologists because it enabled them to study the territorial requirements of the animals and thereby helped extend the political boundaries of the park. Other interest groups, however, found the visual intrusiveness of the technology unacceptable—the early transmitters were visible from a great distance, resembling huge necklaces. They also objected to the fact that the animals would be subject to total control through radar, and that they faced possible destruction if they “misbehaved.” Benson’s presentation also illuminated the transition of the national park from a tourist’s ideal of a wilderness with clear boundaries to an ecosystem whose boundaries were determined by the functional relationships of their component parts.

Michael Lewis argued that the biosphere preserves of the 1970s stemmed from an international initiative, and that they followed a new epistemology of nature protection that selected representative units of the global ecosystem on a scientific basis. In his examination of the creation of the Indian tiger protection plan implemented in many national parks, Lewis analyzed the interplay of national interests and international impulses. The Indian policy of nature protection attempted to cast the tiger as a national icon. While the Indian authorities cooperated fully with international institutions such as the WWF, they simultaneously attempted to resist an “Americanization” policy. This resistance led to the fact that the Man and the Biosphere Program of UNESCO was not particularly effective in India because it was viewed by the Indian nature protection bureaucracy as a concept imposed from the outside. In the final presentation, Matthew Chrulew presented the controversial plans for a “Pleistocene Park” in northern Siberia. A 160-square-kilometer park is being set up, where an open grassland will be created by reintroducing large herbivores such as elk, wild horses, reindeer, and bison, once widespread there. As the crowning achievement of the ecological reconstruction, plans call for using genetic technology to resurrect the mammoths.

Thus high technology will be used to simulate a pre-human condition. This spectacular example condenses a number of historical debates: Which nature should be preserved, in what condition should it be preserved, with what degree of human assistance, and for which political and social purposes?

After the presentation of these detailed case studies, the advantages of a transnational perspective for the historiography of nature protection and national parks were assessed by a roundtable composed of: Jane Carruthers, who has made a significant contribution to the historiography of national parks with her studies of the South African preserves; Christof Mauch, a recognized expert on transatlantic environmental history; and John McNeill, a representative of a new global history of the environment. Carruthers compared the spread of the idea of the national park with the game of "Telephone": An idea whispered around a table is altered by every speaker and listener to the point that the original idea is hardly recognizable in the end. The spatial, institutional, and political diversity encapsulated in the label "national park" reveals how easily it lent itself to different uses according to different needs. As Carruthers put it, "'National Park' is a mantra used for political and other purposes, more often looking outward not inward for validation." She concluded that Yellowstone Park, which for virtually all the case studies played the role of historical yardstick, itself is a myth—more an imaginary realm than an actually existing place. Mauch, too, emphasized that the expression "national park" is more of a metaphor than a static quantity. After all of the success stories are examined, analyzing failed projects can reveal fractures in the transnational transmission of the idea of the national park. A meta-narrative of the national park is still lacking. Both Mauch and McNeill were interested in the thoroughly religious subtext of the material. The creation of nature preserves should be understood as the expression of a secular religion that attempted to define new borders between the sacred and the profane. At the same time, the spatial as well as the temporal contingencies of a delineation of nature should be considered, which sought to fix both geographical and chronological borders. McNeill addressed the proximity of nature protection to concepts of environmental security as the protection of natural resources, which would bring national parks into the context of military interests and national security. Carruthers advocated a more precise use of terms such as "national," "wilderness," "conservation," and "Western." Commentators also formulated a decentralization of historical perspective: It seems to be possible to understand how Western concepts were brought into the world and spread. But what about their echo? What comes back from the East, South, and North?

It is impossible to overlook the potential contributions of a transnational historical assessment of the national park to a global environmental history. As the Washington conference demonstrated, the diversity of interpretations and implementations of the concept of the national park can help to understand—and challenge—paradigms of nature protection that still prevail today. After all, while these “separate sphere” paradigms have preserved smaller spaces, they have not guaranteed a sustainable relationship between humans and nature.

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