

Ecological *Civitas*:  
Realizing a Proper Human Experience of a National Park

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Old Faithful Geyser in Yellowstone National Park erupts predictably, approximately once every twenty minutes. At each daytime eruption, a large crowd gathers in the amphitheater constructed around the geyser, literally a mass of rock with a hole in the middle. At one eruption which I had the fortune to witness, there were people of a wide variety of ages and races. Children of myriad backgrounds were rapt with anticipation, expressing their wonder and excitement in many tongues. When a shoot of water hundreds of feet high finally emerged from the small cavity in the rock, everyone was silent, eyes fixed on this natural wonder found nowhere else on earth. Nothing summarizes the reason why national parks exist quite like that moment. Unlike national wildlife refuges, wilderness areas, and other federal lands, national parks exist to preserve unique natural areas while encouraging human visitation to facilitate the immediate experience of these grand places.

Joseph Sax describes the value of national parks in terms of providing places where people can undertake “contemplative recreation,” places that have “something capable of engaging, rather than merely occupying, the individual--a stimulus for intensity of experience, for the full involvement of the senses and the mind.”<sup>1</sup> He goes further to state that the kinds of qualities that are strengthened by such experiences are those that make people into good citizens in a democracy, who exercise their freedoms while recognizing and working for the good of the community. A compromise is needed between people who wish to visit national parks in different way in order to secure the future viability of the national park ideal. Sax calls on the National Park Service to permit only those activities that allow the individual to interact with the park’s natural features at his/her own pace, thereby providing space for contemplation, which

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<sup>1</sup> Sax, Joseph L. *Mountains Without Handrails: Reflections on the National Parks*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1980: 29.

involves introspective consideration of one's place in the world. In an era where humans are in control of so many aspects of our lives, the chance to let nature take control and to see oneself as a part of a greater whole is increasingly invaluable. Sax's preferred activities are those that do not harm the park ecosystem and, at the same time, encourage intimate personal relations between humans and their surroundings. Such activities promote in the visitor a certain kind of ethic, which is here called ecological *civitas*. This paper will take a look at how a policy promoting "contemplative recreation" can be applied to two publicly-owned places, Yellowstone National Park (YNP) and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), which are faced with two detrimental forms of human activity, snowmobiling and oil drilling. In the course of examining these case studies, it is hoped that the path to the compromise that Sax calls for will become clearer.

What about Yellowstone and ANWR is unique? Yellowstone National Park comprises 2.2 million acres of land in the northwestern corner of Wyoming that is relatively unaltered by human activity.<sup>2</sup> The park contains the largest concentration of geological features, such as geysers and thermal springs, on Earth, including the world's tallest and most predictable geyser, Old Faithful. The park is also home to many species of wild animals that now inhabit only a tiny fraction of their former ranges, including the United States' only remaining herd of free-roaming American bison. The park's primary qualities, its unique ecosystem and the headwaters of both the Missouri and Columbia Rivers, are important for ecological reasons. The qualities of Yellowstone that are more relevant to this paper, however, are secondary: its aesthetic beauty, and the sense of awe and wonder in nature with which visitors come away.

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<sup>2</sup> Layzer, Judith A. *The Environmental Case: Translating Values into Policy*. Washington: CQ Press, 2006: 226.

Since 1963, wintertime visitors have been allowed into Yellowstone Park on personal motorized vehicles known as snowmobiles.<sup>3</sup> Until recently, these vehicles contained noisy and inefficient two-stroke engines. For the first twenty years of snowmobiles' permittance, the amount of snowmobilers in the park was not large enough to garner the attention of the Park Service or the non-snowmobiling public. But since 1990, park visitors have complained about the cacophony of engine noise audible almost constantly at the park's premiere attractions and abuse of fragile terrain and harassment of wildlife, including America's last herd of free-roaming bison, by snowmobilers.<sup>4</sup> An entire localized industry has arisen to cater to snowmobilers, which touts the vehicles as the only way for individuals to get the most out of the park during the winter. Opposition to their use has come from outside the Yellowstone area, primarily from the East Coast and California. The motives of snowmobiling proponents have been primarily economic, while opponents are driven by ecological concerns, a sense of aesthetic injustice, and a vision of higher purpose for the national parks.<sup>5</sup>

Making money on one hand and enjoying and protecting a unique natural place on the other do not have to be at odds with each other. Take, for example, the case of Scott Carsley,<sup>6</sup> a resident of West Yellowstone, Montana, who provides tours of the park by bus and van in the summer and by snowcoach (a more capacious version of a snowmobile with a more efficient four-stroke engine) in the winter. He recognizes the damage that snowmobiles do to the park ecosystem, yet is also concerned for the livelihoods of himself and his local friends who depend

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid: 223.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid: 230.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid: 231-232.

<sup>6</sup> One of the companies that Carsley does tours for is American Orient Express, and he guided the Yellowstone tour that Mom and I took. I did not take notes; this is based purely on memory, so it may be slightly inaccurate.

on the tourism industry. The most sensible park administration policy would give plenty of opportunity for entrepreneurs like Carsley to make money from tourism, as long as it is done in a way that does not disturb others or the fragile environment. Having winter tour groups taken in quiet snowcoaches over designated “roads” and outfitting them with snowshoes and other protective gear to reach more remote places in the park would be a viable way for visitors to experience the park in the winter. Already, tour agencies must be licensed by the Park Service and can therefore be regulated to ensure compliance with noise, emissions, and safety standards.

The same cannot be said for individual snowmobilers, however. Even if the vehicles made no noise and generated no pollution, they could still be used to imperil fragile terrain and harass wildlife. Not only that, but snowmobiling in Yellowstone provides the same sort of exhilarating, fast-paced experience that can be easily had elsewhere. National parks are different from any other venue because the recreational opportunities they offer are only available in such unique and vibrant natural settings. Furthermore, these are opportunities that can best be realized at an unhurried pace with a frame of mind that is open and does not expect absolute comfort and control over one’s surroundings. Snowmobiling is therefore inconsistent with the purpose of national parks, and should not be allowed within their borders.

There are many creative ways for the Park Service to achieve a compromise with those who have built their livelihoods around snowmobiling in Yellowstone and with those who currently prefer zooming through the park on a snowmobile to skiing or riding a snowcoach. In other words, a compromise can be made with snowmobilers that does not involve allowing snowmobiles into the park.

National parks are, as President William Howard Taft put it, places “so startling and so beautiful that everyone recognizes the obligation of the government to preserve them for the edification and recreation of the people.”<sup>7</sup> There are many types of recreation, such as individual or group sightseeing, hiking, mountaineering and camping, that serve the purpose for which national parks exist and are therefore appropriate to allow within their borders. These activities also provide ample opportunities for sustaining a tourist-centered economy in the towns surrounding national parks. There are other types, such as sport hunting, resort living, motorcycling, dune buggy riding, swampmobiling and snowmobiling, that tend to be faster paced and environmentally detrimental, for which the park is simply a pretty backdrop, and for which abundant opportunities are provided outside of national parks. For the sake of ecological sensibility and democratic values, the latter forms of recreation should be prohibited in America’s national parks.

#### Works Cited

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<sup>7</sup> Layzer: 227.