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THE DARK SIDE OF AMERICAN ENVIRONMENTALISM

Benjamin Heber Johnson

Mark David Spence. Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. vii + 190 pp. Pictures, notes, and index. $35.00 (cloth); $14.95 (paper).

Environmental history has from its inception born the mark of the environmental movement, drawing much of its inspiration and many of its questions from contemporary ecological issues. Nowhere is this clearer than in studies of the creation and management of nature parks and wilderness areas. Environmental historians generally present these places as self-evidently "natural" or "wilderness" areas, unaffected by humans and appealing precisely because of their distance from the forces and institutions of modern life. Most historical treatments of such areas are triumphalist tales in which environmentalists or their conservationist predecessors struggle to "preserve" nature in the face of materialist efforts to exploit natural resources.

Mark Spence's study of the connections between wilderness ideology and Indian removal takes square aim at this tradition. American travelers may have thought places remote from major population centers to be empty, but in fact even the most seemingly wild areas had long histories of use and habitation. Spence shows how the federal government removed Indian peoples from three flagship national parks—Yellowstone, Yosemite, and Glacier—and later obscured the history of their occupancy. "Uninhabited wilderness," he proclaims, "had to be created before it existed, and this type of landscape became reified in the first national parks" (p. 4). The expulsions, he argues, "became precedents for the exclusion of native peoples from other holdings within the national park system...[and] as the grand symbols of American wilderness, the uninhabited landscapes preserved in these parks have served as models for preservationist efforts, and native dispossession, the world over" (p. 5). Where tourists saw iconographic scenery and reflections of national character, Indian peoples experienced the state's creation and management of "natural" areas as another aspect of their conquest and subordination.

The human use of what became national parks left abundant archeological and ecological signs. In the Yellowstone valley, dispersed bands hunted large
game, birds, and fish, and harvested seeds, roots, and berries since the end of last ice age. Different peoples mined the region’s large obsidian deposits, trading the rock (useful for making blades and tools) across the Rocky Mountains and beyond. The abundant hot springs and geysers seemed to intrigue past residents as much as later tourists, for their immediate environs contain numerous archeological sites. Seasonal burning may have kept large areas of savannah free of trees and stimulated the growth of particular berries, tubers, and game habitat. The people now called Shoshone moved into the Yellowstone area by the end of the fifteenth century. When American settlers and armed forces expanded into the Northern Rockies and Great Plains in the middle of the nineteenth century, the Shoshone, Bannock, Crow, Blackfeet, and other peoples would seek to maintain access to Yellowstone’s backcountry. Similarly, groups of Salish-Kootenai, Kalispel, Crow, Atsina, Nakota, Cree, and Assiniboine frequented the backcountry of what became Glacier Park. Yosemite Indians lived in the valley that bore their name for more than six hundred years, and possibly as long as three thousand, relying on trout, game, sweet clover, roots, acorns, pine nuts, fruits and berries for their sustenance.

The presence of Indians was more than a matter of history for early park managers. How they confronted and ultimately eliminated most Indian occupancy and use from the areas under their charge forms the bulk of Spence’s book. Although Bannock and Shoshone hunters were initially able to avoid tourists in Yellowstone, by the 1880s the Army officers in charge of the park concluded that they had to go. “[E]fforts . . . to protect the remnant of the large game of this country and the growing timber in the National Park and adjacent regions,” as park superintendent Captain Moses A. Harris wrote in 1889, could not be implemented as long as the park “afford[ed] summer amusement and winter sustenance to a band of savage Indians” (p. 63). Harris enlisted the support of the Indian Service and major conservation leaders such as Theodore Roosevelt and George Bird Grinnell to bolster park and reservation law enforcement efforts. As agents and posses continued to arrest Bannock hunters, a federal court upheld the treaty provisions guaranteeing native hunting rights in Yellowstone. The Supreme Court, however, overturned the ruling in 1896, concluding that state game laws took precedence over treaty rights (p. 68). Game wardens, local law enforcement officers, and park officials resumed their arrests. Yellowstone soon “became the non-Indian wilderness it was always intended to be—both in fact and in the historical imaginings of tourists and park officials” (p. 69).

The Blackfeet proved to be more durable opponents of the park service, pressing their claims on Glacier National Park from its founding in 1910 to the present. The park’s eastern half was carved out of land ceded by the Blackfeet to the federal government in an 1895 treaty. Tribal negotiator White Calf
succeeded in adding language to the treaty that preserved "the right to go upon any portion of the lands . . . to cut and remove timber . . . to hunt upon said lands and to fish in the streams thereof, so long as . . . they remain public lands of the United States" (p. 80). While Blackfeet leaders believed that the language protected their usufruct rights in perpetuity, park managers argued that Glacier's establishment removed the land from public domain, thereby rendering the clause moot. Around a third of the tribe, Spence estimates, continued to depend on the resources of the adjacent park in its first several decades of existence. Even as the park management hired Blackfeet to greet visitors at the main entrance and entertain them with dances and teepees at the park's hotels, it struggled to eliminate Indian use of the backcountry, going so far as to propose extending the park boundary several miles eastward into the reservation.

By the 1930s, writes Spence, "a near state of war existed on the eastern side of the park, with Blackfeet and rangers prepared to shoot and be shot upon at any given time" (p. 94). Although fewer hunters risked the harsh penalties that accompanied trespass, the exclusion from the park became a more important political issue on the reservation. The Blackfeet continued to insist on rights of access, often invoking the specific language of the 1895 treaty to buttress their claims. They became one of the first native groups to form a tribal government under the provisions of the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act. Restored access to Glacier became a principal goal of this new government, which sought support for its position within the Indian Service and through several federal lawsuits. "[N]egative opinions of the park service," Spence concludes, "had become a central aspect of tribal policy and a fundamental expression of Blackfeet national identity" (p. 98).

Indians remained in Yosemite Park as actual residents for most of this century, though eventually they, too, were expelled. They owe the length of their residency to their usefulness as a labor force and an alluring tourist attraction from the park's inception. Men "found work chopping wood and putting up hay, labored about the hotels, served as guides, drove sight-seeing wagons, and often provided large private parties with fish and game," while women worked in concessionaires' private homes and as maids in hotels (p. 104). Visitors not only relied on their labor, but also found natives to be one of the park's most interesting attractions. While some tourists complained about the Indians' presence, many others flocked to their "sweat house" and by the 1890s were regularly buying their basketry. The Yosemite adapted to their economic niche, putting on special shows and displays that exaggerated their exotic features—in exchange for money.

Living in the park, rather than only using its resources, made these Indians all the more dependent on its managers. As state authorities ceded the Yosemite backcountry to the federal government in the 1890s, the U.S.
Cavalry enforced prohibitions against hunting and gathering. Park officials (civilians after the 1916 creation of the National Park Service) controlled nearly every aspect of the Yosemite's lives—including whether or not they would be permitted to live in the Valley. They often punished theft and drunkenness with expulsion and tried to shield Indian residences from the view of campers and hotel customers. In the late 1920s Superintendent Washington Lewis decided to build another village, designed to be more traditionally "Indian" looking, farther from the most heavily-visited portions of the Valley. The park service took this opportunity to inform the Indians that their continued presence was a "privilege dependent upon proper deportment" and that anybody who "did not want to work reasonably steady, cannot get along with his neighbors, or in any way prove to be a poor member of the Village... would have to go away and give up his house" (p. 122). The service allowed some fifty people, including the most popular craftsmen and cooperative workers, to move into the new village, but pointedly excluded some ordinary laborers and those who had clashed with park managers in the past. After World War II the park service restricted housing to permanent government employees and their immediate families. As they retired or were dismissed, they were forced to pack up their belongings and leave the valley. The last resident, Jay Johnson, retired from the National Park Service and moved to Mariposa, California, in December 1996.

While the expulsions that Spence recounts are not familiar to very many Americans, Indian peoples remember them all too well. Indeed, their determination to regain lost access has influenced more recent public lands policies. In the 1970s, the Blackfeet tribe, though unsuccessful in advancing its larger claims on Glacier National Park, gained the waiver of entrance and camping fees for its members. Yosemite pressure resulted in a similar arrangement and in the creation of an Indian cultural museum in the valley that bears their name. The park service struck a remarkable deal with the Oglala Sioux in 1978, in which the Badlands National Park was doubled in size but the Sioux "retained ownership of all reservation land within the new park boundaries" (p. 135). The Havasupai benefited from a similar arrangement with Grand Canyon National Park, securing "traditional usage" rights and an outright expansion in the size of their reservation as the park and its portion under wilderness protections grew. Today dozens of tribes are pressing for more generous rights to access and use national parks—in some cases, even for joint management. The struggle between the park service and native groups will continue for the foreseeable future.

The interaction of wilderness thought and Indian policy, Spence argues, accounts for Indian removal from national parks. In the earlier parts of the nineteenth century, the idealization of wilderness not only left room for Indians but at times even seemed to require their presence. In the 1830s the
artist George Catlin advocated the protection of areas of the “fairy land” of the Great Plains as national parks. In sharp contrast with later policy-makers, for Catlin “the native Indian in his classic attire, galloping his horse . . . amid the fleeting herds of elk and buffaloes” (p. 10) was an essential part of the glorious but threatened world he wanted future generations to witness. For a time, environmental thinkers continued to conflate their appreciation of wilderness with a Romantic admiration of native virtues. In 1858 Henry David Thoreau rhetorically asked, “Why should not we . . . have our national preserves . . . in which the bear and panther, and some even of the hunter race, may still exist, and not be ‘civilized off the face of the earth’” (p. 22)?

Shortly after the Civil War, however, just as the nation’s first large wilderness parks were created, the “earlier appreciation for an Indian wilderness split into separate movements for the preservation of scenic areas and the confinement of Indians to reservations” (p. 37). The authors and thinkers who wielded the most influence on early conservation feared that human actions could destroy parts of the environment beyond hope of repair. Entirely uninhabited nature thus became both their aesthetic ideal and, as George Perkins Marsh put it, a model for “the restoration of disturbed harmonies and the material improvement of wasted and exhausted regions.” (p. 36). At the same time, the federal government turned to the reservation system as the solution to continued Indian resistance to American expansion. By the late nineteenth century, environmental thinkers and policy-makers had divided wilderness and Indian affairs into what Spence calls “separate islands of the mind” (p. 37). The idea that a true wilderness should contain no long-term inhabitants and minimal human impact thus gave the first park managers the rationale for Indian removal.

This explanation is much less satisfying than is Spence’s account of the actual process of removal. It does have the virtue of calling attention to the contingent and changing meanings of the term “wilderness,” thereby historicizing the environmental thought so important to the management of early parks. At the same time, though, this argument is unfortunately narrow. It overlooks other aspects of environmental thought that justified the exclusion of Indians from parks, and the diverse groups supporting such exclusion.

The book’s focus on wilderness ideology gives the impression that parks were actually managed as “wildernesses.” This is, at best, a gross oversimplification. True, unlike national and state forests, parks were off-limits to commercial logging and mineral development. Indeed, the 1916 act establishing the National Park Service directed it “to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and wildlife . . . by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” Nevertheless, the parks were also sites of potentially lucrative tourist development. Early park rangers therefore actively sought to increase visitation, building roads and
campgrounds and contracting with private entrepreneurs for the construction of hotels, restaurants, and other amenities. Increases in park service appropriations depended on continually rising visitation. By 1940 environmental organizations and many of its own biologists charged the park service with neglecting its preservationist mandate.

Perhaps the aspects of conservation most important to Indian removal had nothing to do with Indians or wilderness per se. Spence would have deepened his analysis, for example, by exploring how terminating native occupancy and subsistence practices served the broader goals of park service bureaucrats and the influential conservationists like Gifford Pinchot and George Bird Grinnell who backed them. Wilderness and Indians were important to these conservationists, but often overshadowed by their primary effort to rationalize society and its use of natural resources. In particular, conservation’s emphasis on state-led economic modernization—as opposed to the waste, fraud, and chaos of unregulated private industry—dovetailed nicely with the goal of curtailing subsistence uses. From this perspective, then, Indian removal was part of a larger process of bringing the land and its resources under the hand of professional managers.

The large ambitions of conservationists and the economic importance of parks suggest the need to include a breadth of social actors—hunters, guides, politicians, tourists, railroad executives, town boosters—alongside Spence’s rather short cast of park rangers, conservationist thinkers, and natives. What role did these groups play in the establishment of parks? What did they hope to gain or preserve from specific park service policies? How did they view Indians and other subsistence users? What influence did they have on the park service and other conservation bureaucracies? Spence’s thoughtful analysis of the meanings of exclusion to Indian peoples makes one wish that he had paid more attention to the architects of their dispossession.

A growing number of works, some of them on the very regions examined in Dispossessing the Wilderness, augment Spence’s account. In some places and times, parks were managed with little or no input by local residents, white or native. Such seems to have been the case, for example, with Yellowstone, which the United States Army operated from its founding in 1872 until 1919. Examining key policy-makers and environmental thinkers may thus render adequate explanations of the basis for this instance of removal—although even in the case of Yellowstone nearby white residents resented the Army in much the same way as did the Shoshone or Bannock. Most of the time, however, local constituencies played important roles in shaping conservationist policies. Elites with access to state or federal bureaucracies often used them to serve their own goals for economic development, political control, or ethnic hegemony. Indeed, Louis Warren has gone so far as to declare turn of the century conservation “an alliance of rural and urban elites arrayed against
more marginalized rural people.” The curtailment of subsistence practices—game hunting, food gathering, timber removal—often became a primary focus of such alliances. Sports hunters and the businesses catering to their needs saw “pot hunters,” whether Indian or not, as unwanted and primitive competition, both on and off park lands. They found the expanded state power embodied by conservation bureaucracies to be a useful tool. The criminalization of widespread subsistence practices was powerfully felt by many rural Americans, Indians among them, in the early twentieth century. Mark Spence’s study of the removal of the Blackfeet, Shoshone, Bannock and Yosemite is thus a part of a larger story of the ideology and politics of modern conservation.

Benjamin Johnson teaches history at the University of Texas at San Antonio. He has published articles in Environmental History, Social Policy, and The Countryside in the Age of the Modern State: Political Histories of Rural America, eds. Catherine McNicol Stock and Robert D. Johnston (2001). He is at work on a book on racial violence and Mexican American identity in twentieth-century Texas.