

The Tourist in Yosemite

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My wife and I first arrived at the Arch Rock entrance to Yosemite National Park in June of 1968. It was an auspicious time to be in Yosemite. Nearly one hundred years earlier John Muir had arrived in the valley to begin his life-long obsession with the Yosemite and what he thought it ought to represent in American culture. Just one century later, if what one read in the newspapers was true, the place that Muir had loved above all others was experiencing something of a crisis. To begin with there simply seemed to be too many people for the restricted confines of Yosemite Valley. Particularly congested were the Village shopping areas and the campgrounds, where long lines of hopeful but likely to be disappointed newcomers waited like vultures to pounce upon newly-vacated campsites. Parking space was at a premium, at best, and non-existent, at worst. Frustrated motorists pulled their vehicles off the roads and left them parked wherever they could find a spot big enough, regardless of all signs and restrictions that prohibited such practice.

As disturbing as the numbers of people were the activities in which they were engaged. In many ways the Yosemite Valley of the late 1960s reflected more the noise and honky-tonk of an urban amusement park than the pristine beauty and wildness of a national park. Drag racing teenagers, pot parties, and rock band concerts vied for attention with Half Dome, the Merced River, and the interpretive efforts of the National Park Service. Equally disturbing, at least to me, was the barbed-wire enclosed bastion of elitism that was the Ahwahnee Hotel. Standing on the underprivileged side of the fence, watching fashionably dressed dowagers playing a leisurely round of golf, I felt angry and frustrated by what seemed to be a colossal case of mismanagement. How could the Park Service possibly condone, in a tiny place like Yosemite Valley, the use of a barbed-wire enclosure that looked like it was designed to separate the privileged from the public? (The fence had not been built for that purpose – originally it had been intended to protect the Ahwahnee flower gardens from the depredations of the Valley's deer population.) Furthermore, what right did any group of visitors, whether the Ahwahnee crowd or the noisy vulgar marijuana smokers, have to treat a national park in the way that Yosemite was being treated? How could the National Park Service, entrusted with the care and management of what were arguably the nation's most precious resources, permit such a travesty upon the national park idea?

In defense of the National Park Service it must be pointed out that the situation was far from being as simple as it appeared to a rather naive graduate student. As part of the enabling legislation of 1916 the National Park Service was given the charge to manage the parks with a dual purpose:

The service thus established should promote and regulate the use of the Federal areas known as national parks, monuments, and reservations hereinafter specified by such means and measures as conform to the fundamental purposes of the said parks,

monuments, and reservations, which purpose is to *conserve* the scenery and the national historic objects and the wildlife therein and to *provide for the enjoyment* of the same in such a manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations (*Emphasis added.*)¹

To the founders of the National Parks Act conserving the parks largely meant protecting them from such traditionally exploitative interests as lumber and mining companies. Given the low level of use of most of the parks it was probably not anticipated that future visitor pressures might one day pose a threat to their preservation. It is even more unlikely that the Service's founders could have imagined the extent to which the meaning of the word "enjoyment" would change in the coming decades. By the latter 1960s, "enjoyment" of the Yosemite had come to include everything from backpacking in the High Sierra wilderness to taking a guided bus tour around the Valley floor; from scaling a granite cliff to playing a leisurely round of golf; from joining a guided nature hike to attending an evening night club show; from sleeping on the ground and eating canned beans to luxuriating in what was advertised as one of the resort world's most elegant hotels; from spending a quiet hour in a library to jostling for space along the crowded banks of the Merced River; from dancing to the decimating decibels of a rock band to lounging in a shaded lawn chair; from watching portable television in a camp trailer to enjoying a scenic movie at a nearby hotel; from fishing in a secluded alpine lake to playing a fast game of tennis; and from feasting on the scenic splendor of Yosemite Falls and Half Dome on a variety of psychedelic drugs. The list could go on and on. The problem that the National Park Service faced was largely one of definition. Who was to say what constituted "enjoyment" of Yosemite or any other national park? The only legal limitations imposed on visitor enjoyment of parks were contained in the charge to manage them so as to leave them "unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations." Over the years that has left, needless to say, room for a tremendous variety of interpretations. It is these interpretations, along with their origins and principal characteristics, that are the topic of this book. Expressed somewhat differently, this book is about the visitor experience in Yosemite National Park and how it has changed over the 130 years or so that Yosemite has functioned as a scenic attraction.

¹ Act of August 15, 1916 (39 Stat. L., 535)—An Act To Establish a National Park Service and for other purposes (as amended by act of June 2, 1920: 41 Stat. L., 732)—An Act To Accept the cession by the state of California of exclusive jurisdiction of the lands embraced within the Yosemite National Park, Sequoia National Park, and General Grant National Park, respectively and for other purposes).