

Michigan Law Review

Volume 79 | Issue 4

1981

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Recommended Citation

Peter Steinhart, *National Parks and Self-Restraint*, 79 MICH. L. REV. 802 (1981).

Available at: <https://repository.law.umich.edu/mlr/vol79/iss4/21>

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NATIONAL PARKS AND SELF-RESTRAINT

*Peter Steinhart**

MOUNTAINS WITHOUT HANDRAILS: REFLECTIONS ON THE NATIONAL PARKS. By *Joseph L. Sax*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 1980. Pp. 152. Cloth, \$10; paper, \$5.95.

Nobody quite knows what to do with the national parks. The 1916 National Park Service Act instructs the National Park Service to conserve scenery, wildlife, and historic objects, and "to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."¹ We have never determined how to "provide for the enjoyment" in such a way as to still "leave them unimpaired." We continually debate whether preservation or exploitation ought to be the cornerstone of our attitude toward nature, and we argue just as regularly whether preservation or recreation is the chief purpose of national parks. Anybody who has watched the National Park Service try for the past fourteen years to write a master plan for Yosemite or to decide how many rafts to allow on the Colorado River has seen that such contests grow long and bitter.

In *Mountains Without Handrails*, Joseph Sax explains the preservationist view and argues convincingly for restraint in providing visitor services in the parks. Sax argues that the parks are the last public places in which men and women can develop the values and character we admire as a people. Says Sax, "The parks are places where recreation reflects the aspirations of a free and independent people." They ought to remain "places that have not been tamed, contemporary symbols for men and women who are themselves ready to resist being tamed into passivity" (p. 111).

The first parks were established in the latter half of the nineteenth century as an antidote to the disheartening greed and contention of America's boisterous industrialism. While the authorizing legislation of the early parks appealed to economy by pointing out that the lands being set aside were otherwise unexploitable (lands

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1. National Park Service Act, ch. 408, § 1, 39 Stat. 535 (1916) (current version at 16 U.S.C. § 1 (1976)).

below 8000 feet elevation were stripped from the original Yellowstone park proposal because they were deemed fit for grazing), proponents of those acts asserted the need for common purpose and self-restraint in an age of individual aggrandizement. Promoters of Yosemite wanted to make it a "public recreation grounds" to keep it from falling into the hands of a few who would turn it to their own selfish purposes. In 1872, the same year Yellowstone National Park was established, the British Lord Dunraven tried to claim the Yellowstone region as his own private hunting preserve, but was driven out by angry locals. Sponsors of Sequoia (then General Grant) National Park denounced entrepreneurs who dynamited giant redwoods merely to make grapestakes.

Park proponents feared collection of resources by a wealthy few would trap the American masses in the same drudgery, dependency, and despair that the less advantaged classes of Europe suffered. Emerson observed that "[t]he spirit of the American freeman is already suspected to be timid, imitative, tame" (p.26).² The real meaning of the parks was that America, devoted as it was to private enterprise and rapid expansion, would nevertheless hold some objects back, restrain the avidity of its citizens by committing a few precious objects to common care. National parks were a declaration that America could embrace both progress and abiding values, individuality and community, commodity and spirit. They were, above all, an act of national self-restraint, and the activities citizens pursued in them ought to reflect that sense of discipline.

Today, however, we view parks as playgrounds or as ecological reserves. We have lost sight of the earlier ideal of self-regulation because the parks have grown crowded. Park visitors increased from 11 million in 1945 to 283 million in 1978 (while park area only tripled). Fourteen million visit Valley Forge in a year. Nearly three million visit Yosemite, and on a summer weekend, 50,000 of them may wedge themselves into Yosemite Valley's seven square miles. The crowds change the feeling of the parks. There are traffic jams, smog, long lines in restaurants and supermarkets, litter, and noise. Twenty per cent of Yosemite's visitors come in recreational vehicles, bringing all the artifacts of the city with them. At night, in the campgrounds, you do not see the yellow glow of wood fires, but the dull gray flicker of the television screen. You do not hear the rustling of pines, but the angry growl of rock music from stereo speakers

2. R. EMERSON, *The American Scholar*, in *SELECTED PROSE AND POETRY* 55 (2d ed. R. Cook ed. 1969).

mounted atop a visitor's car. Whether you like it or not, in most of our parks, you are part of someone else's agenda.

The crowds eliminate much of the contemplative and self-willed activities the parks were intended to foster. Sax recalls Frederick Law Olmsted, one of the founders of Yosemite and later a critic of commercial development at New York's Niagara Falls State Park. In 1879, Niagara Falls was drawing 10,000 visitors a day, and Olmsted argued that the visitor ought at least to get out of his carriage to see the falls. "His concern," writes Sax, "was with the installation of facilities or entertainments where 'care for the opinion of others' might dominate, or where prepared activities would occupy the visitor without engaging him. . . . His goal was to get the visitor outside the usual influences where his agenda was present, and to leave him on his own to react distinctively in his own way and at his own pace." Olmsted saw in the development of tourism at Niagara a "contemptuous disregard of the individuality of the visitor," and he feared it was part of a trend that might lead to "a nation of unquestioning, mute, and passive followers." (pp. 22, 24).

Today's preservationist criticizes the parks for the same kind of commercialization and convenience. As traffic, noise, and crowds drive out silence and solitude, visitors seek new entertainments. The Park Service receives an increasing array of proposals for use permits. Concessioners want to build tramways and convention centers and provide interpretive services as a form of entertainment. Motorized traffic on the Colorado increases. Western parks are now licensing llama packers, but so far they have resisted applications from people who want to ride elephants. Many of the proposed uses have nothing to do with the scenery. For a time, Yosemite found it impossible to enforce rules against parachuting off El Capitan. The parks host bicycle races, marathons, hang gliding, roller-skating contests, rock concerts, and Kiwanis Club conventions. The list of activities suggest that people feel so crowded that they must bring snowmobiles, television, transistor radios, parachutes, motorcycles, and hot air balloons to keep themselves from noticing other visitors.

Sax observes that "tourism in the parks today . . . is often little more than an extension of the city and its life-style" (p. 12). He mentions noise and congestion and commercial services as signs of the urbanization, but citification goes much deeper. The city implies ownership, management by third parties, competition for activities, and judgment of actions by others. Visitors in an urban atmosphere are less apt to see themselves as independent, self-willed citizens. They are apt to expect the park management to do their thinking for

them, and the Park Service is therefore increasingly subject to tort claims brought by visitors who expected nature to be tame but were disappointed. A lady is suing for \$50,000 after she slipped on a paved path in Yellowstone; she claims it was too steep and ought to have had a handrail. Another party is suing for \$3 million because their son was bitten by a tick while hiking in Glacier National Park. (He contracted Rocky Mountain spotted fever and died.) A few years ago, a judge in Los Angeles applied urban standards to a Yellowstone incident and awarded \$100,000 to the survivors of a young man who avoided rangers, camped illegally and, as a result, was killed by a bear. Increasingly, the Park Service must post warning signs, trim back overhanging tree branches, and destroy panhandling bears. Signs next to Yosemite's high waterfalls warn that swimming over them may be hazardous to one's health. The signs add to the sense of management, and apparently inspire some visitors to take more foolish risks. Every year, a few recalcitrants wade past those signs and are swept to their deaths.

The sense of independence of spirit and mind we sought to preserve in the national parks vanishes under such signs. The first parks came to be in the era of Teddy Roosevelt, when Americans believed a sickly city boy could take his life firmly in hand and, traipsing off into the woods, develop knowledge, skills, and a sense of competence. Today, when a young man sues the National Park Service claiming that Yosemite rangers ought to have sought him out to inform him that diving off a bridge into eight inches of water was dangerous, he is refusing to accept responsibility for knowing even the obvious. He is asking to be taken care of.

To the preservationists, it is human character that is at stake in the parks. "The preservationist constituency is disturbed," writes Sax, "not only . . . by the physical deterioration of the parks, but by a sense that the style of modern tourism is depriving the parks of their central symbolism, their message about the relationship between man and nature, and man and industrial society" (p. 11). When preservationists and tourists fight over whether to remove automobiles and hotel accommodations from Yosemite Valley, Sax sees that the debate is not a question of rival claims over incompatible uses, but a question of how a public resource ought to be used to promote character. "The attitudes associated with an activity may be more important than either the activity itself or its setting," writes Sax (p. 33). He maintains that:

[T]he preservationist is at least as much interested in changing the attitudes of other park users as in changing their activities. And he is as

much concerned about what others do in places remote from him as when they are vying for the same space he wants to occupy. . . .

The preservationist is not an elitist who wants to exclude others, . . . he is a moralist who wants to convert them. [Pp. 13-14.]

The preservationist wants to wean the tourist from his dependence upon third-party intervention, planned entertainments, and third-party judgments of the value of his recreational activity. "The recreational vehicle user," explains Sax, "comes incased in a rolling version of his home, complete with television to amuse himself when the scenery ceases to engage him. The snowmobiler brings speed and power, Detroit transplanted, imposing the city's pace in the remotest backcountry" (p. 12). Organized river rafting tours "suggest associations with the personal qualities of courage, independence, and self-reliance" but in actuality guarantee that the tourist need only sit back and let the scenery pass by while the guides do all the work (p. 98). Such chaperoned activities merely encourage passivity and deny the participant the opportunity to act on his own. The park visitor becomes consumer instead of actor, tourist instead of citizen.

The preservationist wants to transform the tourist into a self-willed, independent, considerate human being. He hopes to do so by encouraging participation in the more traditional forms of dispersed recreation, such as backpacking, fly fishing, hunting, and mountain climbing. Each of these activities emphasizes individual engagement with the setting, so that the individual learns to master the environment without either drawing upon someone else's power or destroying the setting. The essence of these activities, ideally practiced, is self-restraint. Fly fishermen, mountain climbers, and hunters alike "disembarrass themselves of equipment whose purpose is simply to increase the ability to prevail" (p. 33). Fly fishermen eschew the random chance of bait and learn to read water, insect hatches, and fish behavior, and to develop technique. Mountain climbers eschew ropes, pitons, and helicopters. Hunters, ideally, observe seasons and limits and hunt far from roads. Satisfaction in the activities comes from one's own knowledge and skill. Gradually, the backpacker learns that "[e]verything put in the head lessens what has to be carried on the shoulders" and that the wet wood, cold campsites, and mosquitoes that once frustrated him are easily overcome. One loses the fear that things will break down (pp. 30-31).

"It's not only what we do, but what we refrain from doing" that counts, Sax points out (pp. 29-30). The preservationist limits not only his reliance upon others, but also his effects on the landscape.

The ideal climber does not leave pitons in the rock. The ideal hunter does not leave gutshot animals in the woods. And self-restraint is applied also to one's audience. The preservationist is able to evaluate his experience himself. Declares Sax:

We are at our best when we have not been tamed into the passivity of stock responses, of dependency, of insulation from intensity of experience. . . . [T]o be able to draw satisfaction from a walk in the woods, without calling on others for entertainment; to be content with a fishless day, demanding no string of fish to be counted and displayed: These are the characteristics of an individual who has "refined" wilderness without taming it into the personality of the mass man. [P. 45, footnote omitted.]

The preservationist is an elitist, Sax concedes, in the sense that he "seeks to persuade the majority to be distrustful of their own instincts and inclinations, which he believes are reinforced by alienating work and the dictates of mass culture" (p. 51). Sax compares the preservationist to one who argues for museums, educational television, or universities. "The idea is not that reflective recreation should consume all our leisure time, but rather that we should develop a taste for it, and that stimulating the appetite should be a primary function of national parks" (p. 61). The preservationists are merely asking those to whom wilderness does not exert a siren call "to entertain the suggestion that the parks are more valuable as artifacts of culture than as commodity resources" (p. 108). Concludes Sax, "[t]he preservationists are really moralists at heart, and people are very much at the center of their concerns. They encourage people to immerse themselves in natural settings and to behave there in certain ways, because they believe such behavior is redeeming" (p. 103).

Americans have responded cheerfully to this kind of appeal from religious sects and political parties and in movie theaters and sports arenas. Character building is America's main preoccupation, and it has been a main theme of our relationship with nature from the lives of Abraham Lincoln and Teddy Roosevelt down to media fictions like Grizzly Adams and The Electric Horseman. Thousands have gone to summer camps or joined the Boy Scouts with just such lessons in mind. Outward Bound and university extension courses take thousands into the wilderness every year to promote self-reliance and self-restraint.

The questions raised by *Mountains Without Handrails* are important ones. Ought government to resist commodity demands and hold out for the character of independent men? Government certainly attempts to impose character on its people when it preserves a

monument such as Independence Hall or Gettysburg. But we pretty much agree that bravery and patriotism are traits all our citizens should have. Should we add self-restraint to the list? The preservationist's argument is more abstract than the patriot's, and the efficacy of self-restraint is a difficult thing to argue. Preservationists have been couching their case in poetic terms, which often miss the mark. "Climb the mountains and get their good tidings," exhorted John Muir. "Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees."³ Sax's long overdue argument makes it clear that "nature's peace" is human character. *Mountains Without Handrails* is a rich resource, not just for park managers and wilderness enthusiasts, but for anybody who cares about American character and the subtle relationships between environment and human outlook.

3. J. MUIR, *The Philosophy of John Muir*, in *THE WILDERNESS WORLD OF JOHN MUIR* 311 (E. Teale ed. 1954).