

Am I Visionary, or Just Crazy?

an excerpt from
*George Meléndez Wright:
The Fight for Wildlife and Wilderness
in the National Parks*

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Wright spent almost two years working in Yosemite National Park—from the fall of 1927 to the summer of 1929—learning the trade of a Park Service naturalist. During this entire time, Wright was formulating a groundbreaking idea. And it soon became all-consuming, constantly playing in the forefront of his mind as he flourished in Yosemite Valley. Finally, cautiously, he began to talk about his proposal with a few of his mentors, several close colleagues, and his new friend Ben Thompson. His idea? To organize and finance a wildlife survey for the western national parks—an undertaking that had never been pursued before.

Starting at a young age, and on his own initiative, Wright had traveled extensively throughout the western United States to visit national parks. He had explored Sequoia National Park, Kings River Canyon, and the Sierra on foot with the Sierra Club. He had dusted off his Model T and completed at least two large national park circuits as he drove around the West. And he had sailed north with Dixon, reaching Alaska’s Mount McKinley National Park and conducting fieldwork for almost three months there. During his years in Yosemite, he had continued to observe firsthand how extremely out of balance the wildlife and natural systems of the western national parks were, and had been for at least a generation, if not longer.

In particular, Wright disagreed with the Park Service’s tradition of feeding bears at dumps, or “bear pits” as they were called, as well as the construction of bleachers so that the public could witness massive grizzlies and their cubs in Yellowstone and black bears in other parks grovel and fight over garbage. He questioned corralling elk and bison for convenient and close observation by park visitors, and he intensely disliked the so-called park zoos (as did Grinnell), such as the ramshackle pens in Yosemite, which displayed sad and often maimed specimens of local wildlife to fulfill the same purpose: easy viewing for tourists. And, like his mentor Grinnell, he railed against the indiscriminate and widespread killing of any predators found in or near park boundaries—from wolves, mountain lions, and coyotes down to porcupines and skunks.

Wright believed these practices ran completely counter to any notion of a natural and functioning landscape, especially within a national park. He considered these, and other Park Service management activities, not only harmful to the long-term health of the parks but in contradiction to how he interpreted the National

Park Service Organic Act of 1916 that created the parks. The act states, in part, that the purpose of national parks “is to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein 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.” There is no question Wright was influenced in this belief by Grinnell, but he had also studied the act and would come to cite it often.

Wright was slowly, and quietly at first, mounting a challenge to what historian Richard West Sellars has termed “façade” management: the park management style that was created and vigorously promulgated by the service’s first two legendary directors, Mather and Albright. Façade management, as described by Sellars, was “protecting and enhancing the scenic façade of nature for the public’s enjoyment, but with scant scientific knowledge and little concern for biological consequences.” This was a tension born of managing for short-term aesthetic purposes and convenience over managing for long-term ecological health: tourism, trains, hotels, and roads versus

what Wright would come to call science-based restoration and management of the “pristine state.”

In the fall of 1928, for example, Wright’s Yosemite field notes contained many entries about the nonnative but endangered tule elk that had been shipped to Yosemite Valley in

1921 from California’s San Joaquin Valley, then corralled and fed by the Park Service during the intervening seven years. He was also disturbed by their unnatural presence in the valley as well as the small zoo maintained there. From his viewpoint, they were one and the same. “The elk problem bothers me very much,” he noted. “There are many sides to the question.”

On the same day that he recorded the “elk problem” in his field notes, Wright wrote a letter to Grinnell in Berkeley. His former professor had sent a prominent Russian zoologist and ecologist, Daniil Kashkarov, to

Recognition that there are wild-life problems is admission that unnatural, man-made conditions exist. Therefore, there can be no logical objection to further interference by man to correct those conditions and restore the natural state. But due care must be taken that management does not create an even more artificial condition in place of the one it would correct.

GEORGE WRIGHT

OVERLEAF Wright in flight suit, Johnson’s Field, Big Bend, Texas, February 18, 1936.
GEORGE GRANT, PHOTO / COURTESY OF PAMELA MELÉNDEZ WRIGHT LLOYD



The wildlife survey truck with Wright behind the wheel, Steamboat Rock, Fredonia, Arizona, May 1930. JOSEPH DIXON, PHOTO / COURTESY OF PAMELA MELÉNDEZ WRIGHT LLOYD

Yosemite with a letter of introduction. Wright had served as Kashkarov's guide for the day.

"My own interest in ecological studies has always been very great, if, perhaps, undernourished," admitted Wright. "However, contact with this scientist stimulated me to new enthusiasm." And then, as if sneaking in a hint about his budding wildlife survey idea, Wright complimented Grinnell on his

monumental book that served as their guide that day. "As on many past occasions, it was most fortunate that we had *Animal Life in Yosemite* to fall back upon. This sort of work certainly should be carried on in all of the national parks as soon as practicable." He then let Grinnell know that he could always call on him for anything whatsoever because "I feel that it was largely through you and Joe Dixon that I find myself in this very congenial situation."

Joseph Dixon and George Wright had a very collaborative and close relationship: an almost father-son, or older brother-younger brother, bond. Their Alaska trip in 1926 cemented that connection. There is no question that from the beginning, Dixon was one of Wright's thought partners and teachers as the young assistant naturalist solidified his ideas around the wildlife survey. Only later did Wright loop in his boss and friend, Carl Russell, as well as Ben Thompson, while Professors Mulford and Grinnell, and a few others, would be included in the discussions a few months later.

Dixon had four young children by 1928, and his correspondence with Wright indicates that he was constantly looking for greener pastures. Money was tight. In

October of that year, Dixon informed Wright that he had taken a different approach to potential solvency. He had applied for the position of head field naturalist for the National Park Service. Wright responded that he was truly happy for Dixon, envious really, but the two had already been in talks about the wildlife survey and Wright wanted Dixon to partner with him on the project. "My wonderful experience with you in Alaska has proved to me that no one would be more satisfactory to work with," Wright lobbied from Yosemite, "However, until we can talk to one another at considerable length and really lay all of the cards on the table, I suppose it will be impossible to formulate any definite plans. But you have no idea how anxious I am for that talk to come about."

July 1929, Yosemite National Park: Wright listening to Maria Lebrado (Totuya), one of the last American Indians who fled Yosemite Valley during the 1851 attack by the Mariposa Battalion. They conversed in Spanish. [JOSEPH DIXON, PHOTO / COURTESY OF PAMELA MELÉNDEZ WRIGHT LLOYD](#)





Wright crossing a stream in California's Sierra Nevada on a Sierra Club High Country trip, early 1920s. COURTESY OF PAMELA MELÉNDEZ WRIGHT LLOYD

Four months later, in February 1929, Wright wrote Dixon and laid out his initial plan of action for a two-year wildlife survey, while thanking him for giving him “new courage,” and also fully acknowledging the daunting task before him and admitting a few personal foibles, desires, and fears. “I know myself quite well enough to be entirely confident that I would fulfill my promises,” Wright continued. “When I contract to sponsor this thing for two years I’ll have it bought and paid for at the start. Your salary and money for field expense can be put in an account where I can’t even reach it.... Joe! Am I visionary or just crazy?” He signed off with “More power to our side.”

In those intervening four months, Wright and Dixon had slowly circulated the wildlife survey idea to a wider circle of people. Some of them thought Wright too young and inexperienced to take on such a large and important research project for the Park Service. Grinnell, although a big supporter of his former student, was apparently one of those doubters.

Early on, Wright admitted that he was intimidated by Grinnell. But this sentiment would utterly change

in the years to come, as Wright and Grinnell would exchange correspondence and ideas pertaining to national park issues, as well as more social notes discussing Cooper Society events and updates from the Berkeley scene. As Wright’s career in the NPS flourished, Grinnell proved to be his confidant, sounding board, and intellectual guide as his thoughts around wildlife management and wilderness in the national parks, and other park-related issues, matured.

In response to this feedback, Wright and Dixon agreed that Dixon would become the front man for the project, lending it his seniority and years of field experience. Without hesitation, Dixon took his cue from Wright and wrote to Albright, who had assumed the directorship in January 1929 after Stephen Mather suffered a stroke and resigned. Albright had already been part of earlier discussions.

“At last I think we are in a position to get real action on the proposed survey of wild life problems in National Parks,” Dixon suggested to Albright. “I spent the major portion of last Sunday night going over with George Wright, the details of his offer to finance

the investigation. I subsequently again went over the proposed program with Mr. Ansel Hall.”

Like Wright, Hall was a Berkeley forestry graduate who had joined the Park Service early on and quickly rose to become the first chief naturalist and chief forester. The initial thinking by the Park Service was that the wildlife survey should be part of the education branch, which housed the naturalist program. Wright disagreed. He wanted it to be a discrete program: he wanted a measure of independence.

Bee Ray and George Wright, Yosemite National Park, ca. 1930. They would marry the next year. [COURTESY OF PAMELA MELÉNDEZ WRIGHT LLOYD](#)



“George is very anxious that the work begin July 1, 1929,” continued Dixon, “as a regular National Park project associated with the Educational Division. George is very modest and does not wish to have any undue publicity given to his part in the program. At the same time, he, like the rest of us, appreciates credit being given where credit is due.”

Again, Dixon emphasized that all funds would be secured ahead of time to cover field equipment, supplies, and travel expenses for two years. Wright also wanted to buy the wildlife survey’s research vehicle and not go through government procurement channels because, according to Dixon, “he wanted

to have a good engine under him.” Dixon let the director know that all of the members of the secretary of the interior’s Educational Advisory Board, which provided advice on the Park Service’s educational programs, had given their enthusiastic approval of the project. In another letter on the same day, Dixon wrote to Harold Bryant, by now a senior Park Service employee in the education branch based out of Washington, DC, and also a member of the board. Dixon was delighted that the advisory board was behind the project. In particular, he mentioned the support of John C. Merriam of the Carnegie Institute (by way of Berkeley’s Paleontology Department), and his practical suggestion that “some of the outstanding and most pressing problems can be defined at once and work on them started at an early date without waiting for the entire survey to be completed.”

Over the course of the next few weeks a fundamental shift occurred with the dynamics of the wildlife survey. Wright began communicating directly with Albright. Dixon was still intended to be the titular head

of the wildlife survey, but Wright's guiding hand and confidence began to shine, and they never dimmed. Wright sent a letter to the director from Yosemite and submitted the wildlife survey plan "reduced to its simplest terms." He told Albright he looked forward to discussing it soon, during the director's upcoming trip to the valley. Wright included his "Proposed Survey of Animal Life Problems in National Parks" with the letter. It spelled out, for the first time, and with quasi-legal or contractual precision, the essence of the wildlife survey:

The object of this work shall be to make an inventory of wild animal problems in the National Parks, and (a) to seek to define the more important and more pressing problems, (b) to seek a fair appraisal of the possibilities and methods of solving such problems. To this end, specimens, fieldnotes, photographs, and other scientific data showing actual conditions affecting animal life in the National Parks shall be sought.

Wright reiterated his desire to start on July 1, 1929, and agreed to deposit \$10,000 in a San Francisco account that would be managed by a board of three trustees, including his former professor Walter Mulford, a Park Service representative, and a bank or other financial representative to be chosen by Wright. Dixon was to receive the title of Field Naturalist, with

an annual salary of \$4,000 (increasing to \$4,500 the second year). He then stated that during the first two years of the survey, the government must strive to procure funds to continue the survey into the third year and beyond, if necessary. He insisted that the wildlife survey headquarters would be based in Berkeley. And he established a basic annual schedule, balancing fieldwork with time in the office, allowing the team a third of each year to concentrate on their report, based on the field studies. Additionally, he wished for the assurance that the results would be published by the government within a year after the survey was completed in a form that could be useful as a reference for fellow Park Service staff in the field.

Albright replied to Wright two days later, stating in no uncertain terms that he had a "keen personal interest in you and my desire to see you continue your association with us in this tremendously interesting new field which at the present time has prospects of developing into the biggest and most important activity of the National Park Service." He thanked Wright for his "splendid offer" and looked forward to discussing the details. Albright, once an architect of façade management, believed Wright's wildlife survey plan was brilliant and critical for the Park Service's future. He approved it immediately. George Wright wasn't "just crazy," as he had suggested to Dixon. He was a visionary.

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On the cover of this issue

“Strength,” a Tarot illustration representing a radiation of power coupled with inner understanding and love. | [HENRY CRAWFORD ADAMS](http://henrycrawfordadams.com)