Frameworks and Ladders: National Parks and Protected Areas in the College Classroom

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At first glance, national parks and protected areas can seem a rather attractive and straightforward subject of study for many undergraduate students. Associated with beautiful landscapes, amazing wildlife (at least in some cases), historic places, and/or recreational activities, parks may also trigger fond memories of family vacations or time with friends for those who have had the opportunity to visit them. But despite this promising beginning, the actual study of protected areas can quickly devolve into an encyclopedic exercise involving picturesque slide shows accompanied by a litany of descriptive facts that can overwhelm (or bore) students. While important, statistics on size, location, geology, and biogeography, as well as lists of significant historic dates, can also be disorienting absent a larger narrative that offers a framework for meaning.

Most would agree that the best way to both teach and learn about national parks and protected areas is simply to visit them. Public education is, after all, one of the most important roles played by the parks in modern society. Since the 1916 passage of the National Park Service Act, the Park Service has taken great strides in this respect, creating the role of naturalists, constructing roadside museums and visitor centers, providing written educational materials, and offering an array of activities from walking tours and campfire talks to junior ranger programs. The parks are ideally suited to experiential learning, blending social and ecological insights with the visceral sights, sounds, and smells of traversing through a distinctive landscape.

But of course, learning *in situ* isn't always possible. Depending on one's location, the distance and cost of travel to protected areas may not be viable. And it must be said that just because someone makes the trip, we should not always assume that they walk away with a rich understanding of a place. So, what are the other options?

This paper articulates an approach I've developed and refined over several decades for teaching the subject of national parks and protected areas to undergraduate students in the college classroom. A similar approach informs my book-length works, which are geared not just to students and academic peers, but to the general public. Consequently, I believe these ideas may also be useful for public outreach. They involve the use of conceptual frameworks and what I refer to as "ladders." While the frameworks allow students to better contextualize and identify broad themes in their study of national parks and protected areas, the ladders refer to pedagogic strategies for making rather abstract or historical ideas more tangible, concrete, and meaningful for students. The approach is illustrated with examples drawn from a seminar course that I teach on US federal public lands at Gettysburg College. The seminar, in turn, follows the structure outlined in my book, *America's Public Lands: From Yellowstone to Smokey Bear and Beyond*.[1]

SETTING THE STAGE

Instruction begins by meeting students where they are. We discuss what attracted them to the subject in the first place. We consider which parks or protected areas they visited in the past (if any) and ask, What was the most memorable part of the trip? If there were no limitations on time or financial resources, which protected areas—anywhere in the world—would they like to explore in the future and why?

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This discussion establishes a few things. First it confirms their interest in the topic and makes some connections between personal experiences and the larger topic at hand. But perhaps more importantly, it tends to underscore the positive image and high value national parks and protected areas hold among the general public. Indeed, public lands seem to be one of the few institutions capable of bridging many of the social and political divisions within modern American society.

The next class discussion, however, begins with a challenge to this assumption. Short readings on public

land conflicts (perhaps the armed takeover of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in 2016 or debates over Bears Ears National Monument) underscore the extent to which protected areas can serve as a focal point for conflict. Depending on their age and background, some college students may not be familiar with these relatively recent incidents, much less historical fights over Hetch Hetchy, Jackson Hole, the northern spotted owl, or Echo Park. The idea that seemingly benign places like national monuments and wildlife refuges can also serve as places of tension, discord, and even violence can be disconcerting.

This type of discussion offers a segue to the fact that America's national parks and protected areas are rife with management challenges and apparent contradictions. And underlying all of it is a foundational quandary: How is it that the country in the world arguably most committed to the idea of private property rights would decide to set aside close to one-third of its land area as federally managed conservation land? Such dissonance cries out for explanation, for conceptual and theoretical frameworks that can offer some answers and understandings about national parks and protected areas rather than a mere listing of facts.

THE FRAMEWORKS

The frameworks are two-fold. The first draws upon historical chronology. It divides American environmental history into distinct eras in which significant developments occurred regarding the public land system. The eras used are listed below, but please note that for each, the corresponding decades are rough approximations and other instructors may choose to be more precise or use an entirely different set of historical categories.

The historical framework offers students a way to organize information, examine primary source material, visualize historical trends, and begin to craft a narrative understanding of the evolution of national parks and protected areas.[2] The first era (Indigenous/Pre-Colonial) predates the establishment of the public land system, but is important to remind students of the vast history of Indigenous habitation on the continent. This habitation, of course, continues into the present and has a powerful role to play as public land management continues to evolve (as illustrated in recent managerial collaborations such as those concerning Yellowstone bison and Bears Ears National Monument).

The Colonial/Early-Nationhood era marks the origin of the major ideas that led to the concurrent establishment of both the United States and the public domain. From

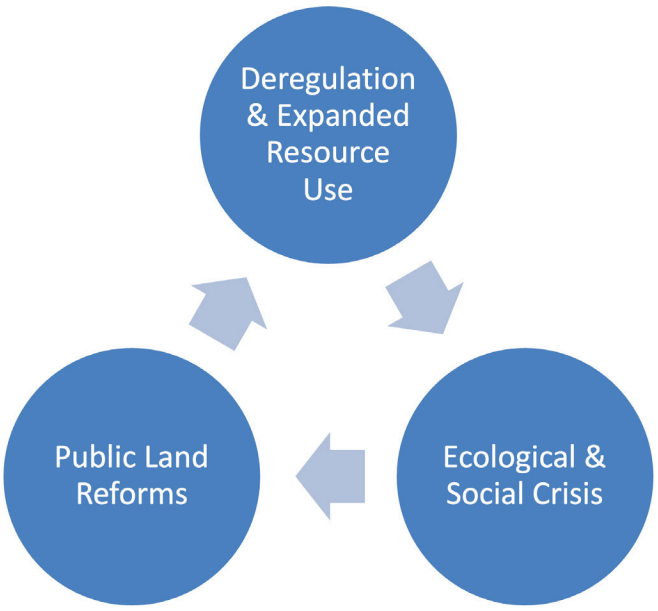
• Indigenous/Pre-Colonial Era (dating back thousands of years)
• Colonial/Early Nationhood (early 1600s through early 1800s)
• Romantic/Progressive Era (mid-1800s through 1920s)
• New Deal Era (roughly the mid-1930s through 1950)
• Modern Environmental "Decade" (mid-1960s through the 1970s)
• Pendulum Years (1980s to the present)

TABLE 1. Significant historical eras for national parks and protected areas in the US.

this period onwards, each historical era emerges as part of a three-stage cycle (Figure 1). The first stage is characterized by a period of relatively unfettered resource use and development, propelled in part by new technologies and industries. In the second stage, the often-unanticipated impacts of these developments result in social and environmental crisis. For public lands, these impacts may take the form of resource exhaustion, water or air pollution, habitat loss, and/or the eradication of wildlife. These issues trigger a third stage of public land reforms, involving the expansion and establishment of new protected areas, new management agencies, and new environmental regulations. After a time, new technologies emerge with unanticipated effects, deregulation returns, and the cycle repeats itself.

By way of illustration, we can see how the excesses of 19th-century industrialization, westward expansion, and unfettered resource use created a series of social and environmental crises that spurred the establishment of national parks, monuments, and forests (and their

FIGURE 1. Three-stage cycle of public lands and protected areas policy (adapted from Wilson 2020).



accompanying management agencies) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. After the Roaring Twenties ushered in a new period of deregulation and industrial growth, the cycle began anew. The social and ecological tragedies of the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression resulted in the New Deal Era (broadly defined), which witnessed the establishment of the National Wildlife Refuge System, regulations on grazing on the public domain, and, eventually, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The Modern Environmental Era of the 1960s and 1970s, spurred by the social and environmental crisis of the post-World War II period, witnessed the formal establishment of wilderness areas, national wild and scenic rivers, and national historic trails. And the Pendulum Years (within which we are still living) speaks to the increasing politicization of parks and protected areas, as reflected in the increase (or decrease) of protections depending on the political party in power. Again, a valuable aspect of this approach is the opportunity for students to examine primary-source writings of historical figures from each era, writers like Gifford Pinchot, Theodore Roosevelt, and George Meléndez Wright, as well as the texts of foundational laws and documents ranging from the US Constitution to the Antiquities Act to the Wilderness Act and beyond.

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The second framework used in the course draws upon ideas in philosophy and critical social theory. Introduced by varying levels of abstraction, we consider the concepts of ontology (the study of being or existence), epistemology (conceptual assumptions related to how we know what we know), theory (models and explanations), and practice (management actions and applications). Using such concepts as organizational tools is reflective of political ecological studies of national parks and protected areas that emerged in the 1990s.

Realizing that this may represent the first encounter with such ideas for some college students, efforts are made to keep things simple. For this class on national parks and protected areas, we focus in on epistemology, defining it as the conceptual assumptions about nature that guide our explanations for how nature "works" (theory), which in turn, helps us to decide how to value, use, and manage public lands (in practice).

To further simplify, we refer to these conceptual assumptions about nature as "big ideas." In the realm of US public lands, they include (but are not limited to) "nature-as-commodity," "nature-as-under-federal-sovereignty," "nature-as-unpeopled," and "nature-as-static, eternal, and pristine."

Each of these conceptualizations can be mapped onto the framework of historical eras. Following the insights provided in the work of William Cronon,[3] Charles F. Wilkinson,[4] Mark David Spence,[5] and others, we explore how many of these "big ideas" emerged during the Colonial/Early Nationhood era in the United States.

Nature-as-commodity thinking, for example, has deep roots in North American colonialism and the process of westward expansion. Driven in large part by the search for commodities, many European migrants came to North America in search of improved social and economic standing. As land was auctioned off to the highest bidder, it was often interpreted, first and foremost, as a commodity. The implications were wide ranging. It not only meant that nature could be owned, bought, and sold, but that it could be used as an owner saw fit without consequence. Historians such as Roderick Nash[6] noted how these economic imperatives were further supported with religious and moral values that became infused with efforts to convert wild nature into domesticated landscapes.

Early nationhood also marked the establishment of federal authority over the public domain, as documented in the US Constitution. This implied a rejection of pre-existing land claims, including those by Indigenous Peoples. The idea of "nature-as-unpeopled" helped legitimate federal claims of ownership, but also had implications for later conservation efforts by supporting the idea that wild nature was static or "eternal" and therefore didn't necessarily require active management. In short, each of these "big ideas" not only impacted the early history of national parks and protected areas in the United States—both in institutional form and early management approaches—but left a powerful legacy that has rippled through subsequent historical eras and still impacts us today.

THE LADDERS

So how do we make connections between these rather abstract conceptualizations to something more tangible and "on the ground"? And how do we link up foundational events from various historical eras with contemporary

issues of immediate concern? This is the role of the "ladders," which take the form of case study examples of specific and ongoing conflicts and conundrums faced by managers of national parks and protected areas. The cases serve as ladders for the historical and conceptual frameworks insofar as they help students to anchor the abstract to the concrete (epistemology to theory to practice) while also anchoring the past to the present.

To illustrate, I offer case studies drawn from management challenges facing Yellowstone National Park. There are plenty to choose from. In terms of wildlife management, one can look to challenges with invasive fish species (rainbow and lake trout), bison and brucellosis, the supplemental feeding of elk, the wolf reintroduction program, and grizzly bear management. And this is just a start. Visitation and budgetary issues are perennial concerns, including questions of over-use, lodging and transportation, in-park development, language and communication challenges, and, more recently, disputes over staffing levels and signage interpreting historical events. Any one of these issues can be better understood by looking back to the historical evolution of Yellowstone National Park and the legacy of the "big ideas."[7]

In speaking with visitors to Yellowstone National Park, a common explanation for the park's establishment is that it grew out of the Romantic Movement as a response against environmental harm caused by 19th-century industrialization. Some will point to President Theodore Roosevelt as the responsible party. Of course, both claims are common misconceptions.

While it is nice to think that Congress acted to protect Yellowstone out of concern for its inherent value, historical documentation of the process leading to the establishment of the first national park says otherwise. As it turns out, the idea of nature-as-commodity had a profound role to play in the making of the nation's first national park.

FIGURE 2. Entrance sign, Yellowstone National Park. RANDALL K. WILSON

To begin with, funding for both the Montana Territory-led Washburn expedition and the federally backed Hayden expedition came from transnational railroad companies. Within months of Ferdinand V. Hayden's return to Washington, DC, in October 1871, bills to set aside Yellowstone as a national park were introduced in the House and Senate. In March 1872, President Ulysses S. Grant signed the law establishing Yellowstone National Park. The speed at which the legislation moved through Congress suggests that one of the most powerful commercial enterprises of the era had mobilized its political influence to see its interests served.

Further evidence of nature-as-commodity thinking is found in the transcripts of congressional debates. While some politicians supported the bills as a matter of national prestige—arguing that Yellowstone's geothermal features surpassed anything of similar standing in Iceland or Europe—the most fervent advocates underscored the fact that Yellowstone held no economic value and was therefore, unsuitable for Euro-American settlement or resource development. The elevation was too high for agriculture, they argued, and the geology too volatile and dangerous for mining.[8]

Given the dominance of nature-as-commodity thinking, most agreed that if the land had any economic value, it should be used for those purposes. Only if Yellowstone lacked economic value could the idea of setting it aside as a public park be condoned.[9] But of course, the railroads did see economic opportunity in Yellowstone. To realize its potential, however, they could not allow the land to be settled or privatized. Rather, it had to be left open to the railroad companies as a destination for nature tourism. In the years following the park's establishment, the railroads directly or indirectly controlled most transportation to the Yellowstone and most of the park's visitor concessions. In time, the Northern Pacific offered all-inclusive vacation packages that included train travel from eastern cities, on-site hotels and restaurants, and in-park guided tours.[10]

From the very beginning, then, Yellowstone National Park was infused with nature-as-commodity thinking. The legacies of this conceptualization are long-standing and multifaceted. It can be seen in the 1916 National Park Service Act through its dual mandate for both environmental preservation and the promotion of recreational use. It helps explain the introduction of non-native fish species for sportfishing. And it provides the rationale for the historical presence of domesticated cattle in the park

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(providing milk and beef to hotel restaurants), which allowed brucellosis to find its way into the Yellowstone bison herd. The problems of feeding bears for tourist entertainment, or feeding elk and eradicating predators for the presumed benefit of sports hunters, can both trace their origins to a tendency to prioritize the tourist economy over conservation. In fact, it helps explain why and how each advance in ecological science over the years that translated into new management practices and priorities in the park (such as those contained within *Fauna No. 1*, by Wright and his colleagues), was initially met with resistance if it somehow challenged recreational or other economic interests.

To be sure, the history of Yellowstone also provides examples of the influence of other problematic big ideas, including nature-as-unpeopled and nature-as-static among others. Making explicit the influence of these various conceptualizations of nature helps to explain many of the contemporary challenges faced by managers, not only in Yellowstone but in all other national parks and protected areas in the United States.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

For the final project in class, students select a region in the United States they would like to visit on a two-week trip and construct an itinerary for an "Expedition to the U.S. Public Lands." They select a minimum of four stops that represent different types of federal protected areas. Three of the stops must be drawn from the "big four" public land types: national parks, national forests, national wildlife refuges, or BLM lands. The fourth stop can be a national scenic or historic trail or river, a wilderness area, national recreation area, national monument, or one of the many other types of federal conservation lands managed fully or in part by the National Park Service.

In addition to logistical considerations, students are tasked with delving into the historical evolution of each of their four sites and identifying current management challenges. The goal is to better understand the issues faced by managers by tracing out the influence and legacy using the "big ideas" of nature over time. Beyond that, my hope is that for at least a few students, their itineraries

become realized at some point in the future. But whether or not they ever take the trip, the process of crafting a unique travel itinerary allows students the opportunity to apply the frameworks and ladders learned from class in a pragmatic way. In the process, they take a deep dive into federal conservation lands not otherwise explored in class. If all goes to plan, students will have gained not only topical knowledge, but also tools for asking questions and learning about national parks and other protected areas for which all US citizens serve as stewards.

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ENDNOTES

1. Randall K. Wilson, *America's Public Lands: From Yellowstone to Smokey Bear and Beyond,* 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020).
2. Matthew Lindaman, "Encountering America's Public Lands: Abundant Landscapes, Complex Histories, and a Multitude of Teaching Opportunities," *The History Teacher,* Vol. 54, No. 2 (February 2021): 209–229.
3. William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in W. Cronon (ed.), *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 69–90.
4. Charles F. Wilkinson, *Crossing the Next Meridian: Land, Water and the Future of the West* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1992).
5. Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
6. Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind,* 3rd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982).
7. Many of these Yellowstone issues are explored in just this fashion in Randall K. Wilson, *A Place Called Yellowstone: The Epic History of the World's First National Park* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2024).
8. See for example, *Congressional Globe*, 42nd Congress, 2nd Session (December 18, 1871), 15.
9. See Alfred Runte, "Yellowstone: It's Useless, So Why Not a Park?" *National Parks and Conservation Magazine: The Environmental Journal,* Vol. 46 (March): 4–7 (1972).
10. Mark Daniel Barringer, *Selling Yellowstone: Capitalism and the Construction of Nature* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002).