Yellowstone National Park: Photography then and Now

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Tressa Roberts and Robert Graham, Design

My project was inspired by something I learned in my history of photography class; we learned about the first people to discover some of the national parks, including Yellowstone. No one had traveled to The West, and the way people around the world were able to see what it looked like was through photography. With National Parks becoming more a tourist destination, I wanted to compare what the parks looked like when first discovered to how they look now.

More than 3.8 million people visited Yellowstone in 2016. With tourism becoming more accessible, I can only predict that these numbers will increase. As I was doing more research and planning my trip to Yellowstone, my mentor and I started discussing the effect that tourism has on the environment. The way tourism has shaped National Parks goes along with my theme, Then and Now.

Before visiting, I knew my main focus was going to be watching the people. I wasn’t there as a tourist, I was there to document and observe how the people were behaving. I also decided to add more than one National Park to my list to visit. I also visited Zion National Park and Arches National Park. My first stop was Yellowstone National Park, and I headed straight to Old Faithful.

I was shocked when I saw how many people were surrounding Old Faithful. I had no idea it would be that crowded. Not only was there a huge crowd of people, but everyone had their phones and cameras right in front of their faces. The only people who didn’t have phones up were the kids who were too young to have technology. Old Faithful erupts about every forty-five minutes, I watched two eruptions while observing the crowds. I decided to focus on taking pictures of the tourists taking pictures. My objective was not to take pictures of Yellowstone, but to document the people.

I saw very similar things when I went to Zion. Most people would get to the top of a hike, take a picture and then hike down. Because my objective before I came to these parks was to observe the people, it was easy for me to look at what they were doing from an outside perspective. I, myself, have often taken pictures without really looking up with my own eyes. Documenting where you’ve been is a great thing. I don’t believe we should stop taking pictures. I think we should realize when we’ve taken the picture we need, put away the camera, and enjoy our surrounding for what it is.

Tourism is a luxury of our time. We are lucky to be able to travel to such diverse places around the world with such little effort. When William Henry Jackson explored Yellowstone for the first time, it took months of traveling with large amounts of equipment. It wasn’t just a plane or car ride away. If we could find a way to step back while we’re touring, we would be able to appreciate God’s creations in a deeper way. We can learn to appreciate taking pictures, sharing where we’ve been with our social media followers, but also appreciating what we’re witnessing, thinking about the past, and contemplating.
Figure 1 – Weeping Rock at Zion National Park

Figure 2 – People watching Old Faithful erupt at Yellowstone National Park