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Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming

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WHAT IS NATURAL? PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS AND YELLOWSTONE PRACTICE

Paul Schullery¹

EDITOR'S NOTE.—The following remarks were Paul Schullery's introduction to a roundtable discussion presented during the 5th Biennial Scientific Conference on the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, held 11–13 October 1999 in Yellowstone National Park. His remarks serve a second purpose in this issue of the WESTERN NORTH AMERICAN NATURALIST, as they set the stage for and introduce the remaining articles, all of which are papers, presentations, or addresses from that conference. The 1999 Yellowstone Biennial Conference was entitled "Exotic Organisms in Greater Yellowstone: Native Biodiversity Under Siege." Mr. Schullery is a resource naturalist with the National Park Service in Yellowstone.

It is probably true that most of us, if we think at all about the people who established Yellowstone National Park in 1872, tend to see them as being essentially like us, only rather stupid. We see them primarily as being at the opposite end of Yellowstone history, totally deprived of all the things we have learned in the past 127 years.

This attitude toward our ancestors probably guarantees that 100 years from now our descendants will be justified in thinking the same about us. Yellowstone's founders were not just dumbed-down versions of us. They inhabited a remarkably different world and responded to cultural and natural environments we seem hardly to understand today. A few examples should make the point.

First, in 1872 the Industrial Revolution was accomplishing the urbanization and mechanization of society. Both changes swiftly divorced people from daily contact with nature. Think of it—after thousands of years, suddenly large numbers of people no longer depended, on a daily basis, on animal power. They no longer saw and handled animals as part of life's most local routines. They no longer expected or required any kind of behavior from nonhuman beings with whom they had grown up.

Historians have traced the increasing popularity of a long-existing humane movement to these momentous changes. People now had the luxury of caring about the treatment and well-being of animals, in part because they no longer had to count on those animals for society's most miserable chores.

Second, in 1872 there were very few adult American memories that were not struggling with or fleeing from personal horrors of the Civil War. This was a societal trauma unlike anything the nation had experienced before, or would experience later. Those of us living today probably cannot comprehend the magnitude of the nation's post-traumatic stress in that first post-war generation.

Third, in 1872 these same people were caught in the first shock waves of the Darwinian revolution. *The Origin of Species* was published in 1859, and *The Descent of Man* appeared the year before Yellowstone was created.

In this unprecedented intellectual, emotional, and cultural turmoil, it is hard to imagine a generation in greater need of Yellowstone, except perhaps our own. But each generation has its own set of needs, and Yellowstone has been responsive to all of them. Perhaps the most important and least understood among those needs are those related to human values. We tend to think of national parks as being good for things we can define, such as recreation and commerce. We are much less comfortable, especially those managers among us, considering the spiritual and emotional aspects of Yellowstone; successful management of public lands is generally defined as numbers: recreational visits per year, regional income generated by tourist dollars, board feet of lumber, tons of ore extracted. This is unfortunate, for although it is true that Yellowstone undeniably has been one of the world's

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foremost “natural laboratories” (to use an early phrase applied to the park) and that it indeed has been a similarly important laboratory of ideas, it is also true that human values underlie all other roles Yellowstone plays in our culture.

Consider those people who established Yellowstone National Park in 1872. Whatever their knowledge and ignorance of geology or ecology, think of their values and then of ours. They killed predators on sight and poisoned carcasses of ungulates in hopes of additional random killing. Without much thought or premeditation, they disenfranchised the native humans of the Yellowstone region. They desperately wanted to improve the Yellowstone landscape in countless ways most modern Yellowstone enthusiasts do not even know were discussed: an elevator to the foot of the Lower Falls of the Yellowstone River; railroad tracks to the geyser basins and beyond; roads through the Thorofare, over Bighorn Pass, around Yellowstone Lake; a system of dams in the Bechler country. They piped water from hot springs for commercial bathhouses; they trashed scores of aquatic ecosystems that had taken thousands of years to evolve; they turned wild bears into garbage dump clowns. In these and many other ways, they changed the place. They did not do these things because they were stupid (though some of them certainly were, just as some of us are). They did them because their view of

nature, and of their relationship with it, was substantially different from our own. Most of them did not see these things as wrong; most of us do. They did not have our values, but that does not mean they were without values.

Yellowstone has weathered our stumbling efforts to apply human values to wilderness settings in surprisingly good shape, but it would be foolish to think that we, at the beginning of the 21st century, have arrived at some finished form of the national park. National parks are institutions that must always adjust. The test of an institution’s success over the long haul is how responsive it remains to the changing needs of the society that created it. The test of a society over the long haul is its ability to change its institutions only enough to keep them true to whatever high impulses led to their creation in the first place. Yellowstone tests us just as rigorously as we test it.

This conference on the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem gives us an opportunity to consider where we are today in this very complicated and often painful process of revising our understanding of national parks. Nonnative species provide us with a host of stimulating case studies that do more than perplex policy makers and managers. They reach deeply into our belief systems; they expose the rawest emotional underpinnings of the institution to the often unkind light of day. Best of all, they make us think.