



PROTECTING YELLOWSTONE

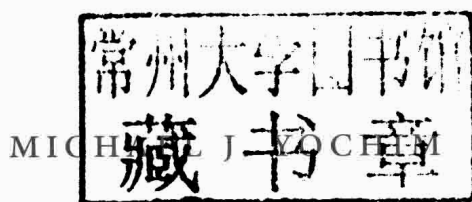
Science and the Politics of National Park Management



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Protecting Yellowstone

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Although the author is an employee of the National Park Service, he wrote this book entirely on his own time and at his own expense. Consequently, the views expressed in this book are entirely those of the author, not the National Park Service.

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PROTECTING YELLOWSTONE

To Mom and Dad, who, more than anyone,
have helped make me the person that I am.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

 SHORTLY AFTER PUBLISHING MY FIRST BOOK, *YELLOWSTONE AND the Snowmobile*, I left Yellowstone National Park to go to the other “Big-Y” park, Yosemite, where I have continued to work. The change in location has brought me new career possibilities, new wild places to explore, and new friendships. Like any change, though, this one came with upheavals, from leaving the house and landscape I loved to ending my relationship with the woman I thought I would marry.

Writing this book became the creative endeavor I needed to fill the holes in my life, to refocus my attention on the possibilities of the present, to enhance my budding career at Yosemite, and to help me look again to the future. It was with the support of many friends and colleagues that this new endeavor became a successful one.

First, I’d like to thank Bill Lowry, my colleague in St. Louis. Bill is one of just a few academics publishing book-length examinations of *current* National Park Service policy making and the influences—especially the political ones—on such efforts. He is the one who recognized the strength of my methodological approach and encouraged me to publish the results in this book. Bill was also gracious enough to encourage me to expand on the findings of his own books about the parks.

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CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| <i>Acknowledgments</i> | ix |
| INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| CHAPTER ONE: Fishing Bridge and the Son of Cody | 13 |
| CHAPTER TWO: Scientists and a “Barbeeque” | 45 |
| CHAPTER THREE: More Precious than Gold | 80 |
| CHAPTER FOUR: Wolves, Bison, and Snowmobiles | 120 |
| CONCLUSION: Science and Politics | 169 |
| <i>Notes</i> | 185 |
| <i>Bibliography</i> | 243 |
| <i>Index</i> | 255 |

INTRODUCTION

WHILE TRAVELING TO OLD FAITHFUL GEYSER IN YELLOWSTONE National Park, the visitor today passes by many of the great sights of the American West. Snow-covered mountains and sparkling waterfalls abound in all directions. The serene beauty of Yellowstone Lake and Hayden Valley invite a peaceful calm not ordinarily enjoyed by most Americans. Making the place their home and bringing the landscape alive are the park's wildlife, ranging from stolidly grazing bison and reclusive grizzly bears to graceful trumpeter swans and majestic bald eagles. For many, there are few American landscapes as compelling as Yellowstone.

Yet, if one looks closer or views the landscape over time, there are things that do not seem to belong. Along the north and west boundaries of the park, for example, are large corrals with bison droppings inside, suggesting that the bison do not always range freely. In the winter, snowmobile noise intrudes upon the park's profound winter silence, even in places like Shoshone Geyser Basin, more than five miles from the nearest snowmobile route. In an awkward juxtaposition, some tourist villages are situated amid prime grizzly bear habitat, such as Fishing Bridge Village. Similarly, some things that do seem to belong make one wonder how the National Park Service (NPS), Yellowstone's managing agency, is able to retain them in the modern world. Gray wolves are the single best example; eliminated from much of the country by the early 1900s, wolves now thrive in Yellowstone. Lightning-caused fires often burn in the park as well, fulfilling an ecological role despite the country's long history of putting them out elsewhere. Finally, the New World Mine—a gold mine that was proposed just outside Yellowstone's boundary—is absent; mines such as this are typically present in many western landscapes.

The landscape itself, then, prompts the following question: why do these anomalies occur? More specifically, and in the order presented above, why

are bison corralled and prevented from leaving the park when all other large animals are allowed this freedom? Why are noisy snowmobiles allowed in the park at all? Why does the NPS build tourist villages in the middle of important grizzly bear habitat when other less sensitive locations are plentiful? If these problems were the result of agency weakness or a lack of foresight (two possibilities among many potential explanations), then how did the same agency manage to restore the gray wolf to Yellowstone, allow naturally ignited fires to burn, and keep that gold mine from intruding?

As this study will demonstrate, the answers to these questions are complex. Each of these issues—bison, snowmobiles, Fishing Bridge and grizzly bears, gray wolves, fires, and the New World Mine—was the center of a policy-making controversy. All of these controversies erupted after 1980 and involved federal politicians, vigorous debates with interested members of the public, and animated discussion about the relevant science. As is clear from the landscape itself, however, the outcome of these policy contests varied according to the issue. What factors, then, determined the outcome? Why did the NPS create these policies?

The answers to these questions have been little examined, gathering dust in Yellowstone's files and archives, aging in the memories and minds of former park managers, and receiving little attention from national park critics and observers. Whatever the reason, only a handful of accounts exist detailing the influences upon contemporary NPS policy making, and these tend to be incomplete.¹ Unfortunately, no one has painted a complete picture of the primary influences upon contemporary National Park Service policy making.

This book strives to provide the important missing details. In brief, and as explained more fully below, by examining *every* recent, major policy-making controversy from this one park—a “controlled comparison,” which will be explained in more detail below—this book hopes to answer the following questions: what are the primary influences upon contemporary national park policy making, how do they function in the public policy process, and how may park managers best work within their contemporary policy-making context to preserve the national parks? The controversies to be examined are the six major issues Yellowstone managers have faced since 1980, as presented briefly above. The park is, of course, Yellowstone, the country's first—and to many, a bellwether for policy making in other national parks. The debates, all elevated to the national level, showcase the full suite of policy-making influences: 1) park managers and

how well they built a supportive coalition with external interests all working toward a common goal; 2) how well park managers framed the issue for public debate; 3) the existing scientific data and its thoroughness; 4) the policy implications for public access to the park; 5) the policy implications for local and regional economies; and 6) elected or appointed federal politicians.

Before explaining this book's direction in more detail, it is important to take note of what answers other authors have already provided to these questions. Virtually all students of NPS policy making discuss the roles played by the men and women working for the agency. These authors agree that from the earliest days, national parks have reflected the managers' dispositions, ideas, and ideals. Some were (are) visionary, while others were (are) bureaucratic tyrants, but all had (or have) profound and ultimately human influences upon their parks.² Often, the influences of such managers are manifested through their personal interpretations of the agency's mandates. As can be recited by heart by many NPS employees, the agency's stated purpose 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."³ Some managers err toward resource preservation, others toward visitor accommodation, and still others somewhere in between—and all can defend their actions as implementing the Organic Act. Whatever their interpretation, park superintendents and other key officials have strong influence over policy-making outcomes.⁴

Over time, national parks have expanded their purpose from the preservation of scenic landscapes ("scenic monuments," in the words of one historian) to include the preservation of natural processes such as predation, wildfire, flooding, and the damaging effects of wind. Embracing such natural process management has come with calls for science-based management; the agency has experienced fits and starts in encouraging research and in using science as a basis for management. With the exception of an ill-fated thrust toward encouraging research and science-based management in the 1930s, the agency has only recently embraced scientific research more broadly, with consequent effects on NPS policies. While there are some who disagree, the consensus among park observers is that science has been playing an increasingly important role in park management in the last few decades, with both scholars and park managers expressing support for science-based decision making.⁵

Managers and observers of the parks also express support for allowing local residents to influence park policies, although there is disagreement over to what extent.⁶ Often, local and stakeholder perspectives are manifestations of their core values. Because such values are also held by most Americans, the values and conflicts between them are also critical management influences. Indeed, values could be considered the ultimate policy influence, since most other influences derive their strength from various American values. (A full analysis of these values is beyond the scope of this book, which seeks to present the primary policy influences in ways that park managers and students of NPS policies can best apply in their day-to-day policy workings).⁷

Motivated in part by their values, stakeholders frequently bring their elected or appointed officials into the policy-making debates. A number of different authors, including several former NPS directors, argue that such politicians exert considerable influence over the NPS in its policy-making efforts.⁸ Only one author, however, has methodically examined this topic: political scientist William R. Lowry. In two different works, Lowry demonstrates that political influence on the NPS has increased over time and that the agency is more politicized than the park management agencies of some other countries, though less so than others.⁹

In a third book, Lowry examines the primary influences on contemporary national park management. Examining four different NPS controversies from as many national parks, Lowry found that park managers were more likely to succeed in a policy-making endeavor when they framed the fundamental issue compellingly; formed strong coalitions with affected stakeholders (such as environmentalists, gateway or local communities, and other government agencies); convincingly demonstrated that their proposal would protect local and regional economies; demonstrated consistent commitment toward their policy-making ends; and tapped into a robust and convincing scientific research base.¹⁰

Collectively, these authors demonstrate that parks are subject to a variety of influences, including park managers, gateway communities, scientists and proponents of science-based management, conservationists, politicians, and the values held by such stakeholders. However, many questions are still left unanswered, such as whether some of these influences are more important than others in determining policy outcomes. Similarly, the conditions under which scientific research is useful in park policy making remain unexplored. Also, the means by which politicians affect park policy creation

and the ways that park managers can successfully work with them to ensure such influence is positive need further explication.

As touched upon briefly, this book will provide insight into these questions by examining every major policy-making controversy regarding Yellowstone in the last thirty-two years. Each controversy will be examined critically, looking for those forces most influential in the controversy's outcome. By examining every major controversy from one national park in the modern policy-making era, this book thus conducts a *controlled comparison*. Controlled comparisons seek to control as many variables as possible in all the case studies pertinent to the inquiry, in an effort to discern common trends or influences among them, as well as substantive differences between them.¹¹ The variables that will be controlled are: 1) the *place* and *agency*—Yellowstone National Park and its managing agency, the NPS; 2) the *scale* of the controversy—all must have been major policy-making controversies occurring on a national stage, so that as many policy influences are experienced as possible; and 3) the *era*—all controversies must have occurred in the contemporary policy-making era, beginning in early 1981, so that all are subject to influences (which can change over time) within one era. Each of these variables will now be discussed in more detail.

First, all policy-making controversies must be from the same *place* and involve the same *agency*—Yellowstone National Park and the NPS. This exclusive focus is appropriate for three reasons. First, restricting the inquiry to one national park minimizes the variability inherent in examining controversies from different national parks; therefore, all controversies occurred on the same playing field, subject to similar influences. Second, the focus on all Yellowstone issues can discern associated policy influences, as well as demonstrate that each park has some unique influences, something that a park-by-park approach may not uncover. By comparing this study to others—see William Lowry's books, for example—such unique influences can become obvious. In Yellowstone's case, there is more political involvement than in other smaller or lesser-known parks. Finally, what happens in America's first national park often transfers to, or is evident at, other parks in the country.

The focus on Yellowstone and NPS policy making is important and sometimes nuanced, as illustrated by one controversy that occurred in the region in the years 1989–1992. The controversy involved the “Vision” document, which would have developed a framework for coordinated land management among the six national forests, two national parks, and two national wildlife refuges in the Greater Yellowstone Area (GYA), whose managers

collectively form a group known as the Greater Yellowstone Coordinating Committee (GYCC). When released to the public in 1990, the seventy-four-page draft document was perceived by some members of the public as an attempt to extend preservationist NPS policies to the area's national forests. Under political pressure, the GYCC revised the draft to a slim eleven-page booklet that made little change in the area's federal lands management. While the controversy was certainly major (the next criterion) and contemporary (the final criterion), it did not directly involve Yellowstone National Park policy making; policies *inside* the park were never under debate. Consequently, this controversy, and others like it that did not involve policy making for the national park itself, were excluded from this book because they did not meet the first criterion.¹²

Next, the *scale* of the policy-making controversies must have been major in order to be included in this book. All the policy-making influences are evident in such larger controversies, which produced more visible public debate, thereby capturing more public interest and opinion and introducing a full suite of stakeholders, perspectives on park purposes, and influences. There have also been a number of minor controversies in the modern era—the last thirty-two years—but these are excluded because they do not always involve the full complement of policy-making influences. While some of the forces evident in the major issues are also at play in the minor ones, other influences are absent. For example, in the mid-1990s, lake trout (or *Salvelinus namaycush*) were discovered in Yellowstone Lake. Native to the Great Lakes, lake trout have wiped out local trout populations when introduced to other western waters. Alarmed that Yellowstone Lake's native cutthroat trout (or *Oncorhynchus clarki bouvieri*) would suffer the same fate, park managers sought scientific input and, based on that opinion, began a program of selectively netting exotic trout to keep the species suppressed. The program continues today with uncertain results: plenty of lake trout have been caught, but cutthroat trout populations have plummeted, perhaps also due to drought and whirling disease, which makes them more vulnerable to predation. While scientific research was clearly pivotal in the managers' response to this crisis, the issue did not rise to the level of a controversy and has not seen much interest-group or political involvement. No major public debate resulted—a debate that would have introduced varying perspectives about the purpose of the park and what response was appropriate to preserve the park and the park experience. Consequently, this policy-making issue and other minor ones like it were unnecessary to include in



FIGURE 1: Old Faithful Geyser, 2008. Loved by many, Yellowstone National Park has been the focus of many controversies since 1981—most of which have included some of the region's politicians. An examination of those controversies may suggest to some that Yellowstone, therefore, is synonymous with political intrigue. Author photo.

the controlled comparison. The focus on the six highly visible controversies produces a sufficiently comprehensive picture of the forces influencing NPS policy-making successes.



FIGURE 2: Wolf in acclimation pen, mid-1990s. Working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service returned the wolf to Yellowstone in the 1990s. The wolves were held for two months in acclimation pens before being released into the wild. Wolf reintroduction was a hotly and nationally debated issue during which the full suite of policy-making determinants came into play. Consequently, it is one of the primary case studies of the controlled comparison discussed in this book. NPS photo.

Finally, all policy-making controversies must be from the contemporary *era*, defined as 1981 to the present. During this roughly thirty-two-year period, the policy-making framework for federal land managers has not changed substantially. That framework rests primarily upon the National Environmental Policy Act, signed into law by President Nixon on January 1, 1970, and the other environmental laws of the 1960s and 1970s. They include the Clean Air Act (1970), the Clean Water Act (CWA) (passed in 1948 as the Federal Water Pollution Control Act but amended and renamed in 1972), the National Historic Preservation Act (1966), the Endangered Species Act (1973), the Wilderness Act (1964), and the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (1968). By the early 1980s, the NPS had prescribed procedures for complying with these laws, and agency staff throughout the country had become familiar with

those procedures. These laws and procedures mandated public involvement and maximum use of the scientific data pertaining to the issue at hand, a mandate that brought new (today, familiar) influences upon NPS policy making. Standard NPS policy-making procedures have changed little since then.

President Reagan, who took office in 1981, marked a turning point in federal policy making. He essentially turned the Republican Party into the “state’s rights” party, generally opposing federal government intrusion into state-level policies. Because the environmental and historic preservation laws mentioned above were all federal, the Republican Party largely turned against environmental preservation (less so against historic preservation). For park managers, this has meant that the Democratic Party has more often been their friend, the Republican Party, their foe. Little has changed in



FIGURE 3: Snowmobiles parked at Old Faithful, early 2000s. Although snowmobiles have been present in Yellowstone National Park since the late 1960s, national public debate about their appropriateness in the park did not occur until the late 1990s and 2000s (the contemporary era, as defined in this book). During that time, park managers completed several examinations of the environmental impacts snowmobiles have on the park. Winter use of Yellowstone, therefore, is a good example of a contemporary issue that fits the requirements for this book’s controlled comparison. Author photo.