

THE NATIONAL PARKS: A Forum on the "Worthless Lands" Thesis

NATIONAL PARKS: WORTHLESS LANDS OR COMPETING LAND VALUES?

by Richard W. Sellars

Editors' Note

When Richard W. Sellars submitted his critique of Alfred Runte's "worthless lands" thesis to *JFH*, we agreed to publish it with the understanding that Runte would be invited to respond in print and that both statements would be the basis for comment by three scholars well known for their study and appreciation of the national parks and their history. Hence, we present a kind of forum on Runte's "worthless lands" thesis; readers are invited to respond to any or all of the statements with succinct letters that may be considered for publication in a future issue.

Alfred Runte's book, *National Parks: The American Experience* (University of Nebraska Press, 1979), describes the evolution of the national park idea. It discusses the various influences on the early concept of public parks, the efforts to get the park system on a firm political footing, the change from preserving only monumental scenery to preserving entire ecological systems, and the more recent struggles over development versus preservation of parks or proposed park lands.

Of the several themes discussed, we are concerned here with the idea that national parks are comprised of "worthless lands"—that is, lands without economic value. The author claims that scenic lands can be set aside as parks only if they are otherwise worthless, and they continue as parks chiefly because of their worthlessness. This idea, earlier presented in article form in the *Journal of Forest History* (April 1977), appears in detail in *National Parks*, particularly in chapters 3 and 4. As early as the preface, Runte states that "today the reserves are not allowed to interfere with the material progress of the nation" (p. xii). And throughout the book he reiterates the theme:

There evolved in Congress a firm (if unwritten) policy that only "worthless" lands might be set aside as national parks (p. 48).

But although Americans as a whole admit to the "beauty" of the national parks, rarely have percep-

tions based on emotion overcome the urge to acquire wealth (p. 49).

No qualification outweighed the precedent of "useless" scenery; only where scenic nationalism did not conflict with materialism could the national park idea further expand (p. 65).

In the quest for total preservation, no less than the retention of significant natural wonders, the worthlessness of the area in question was still the only guarantee of effecting a successful outcome (p. 109).

And in the book's epilogue:

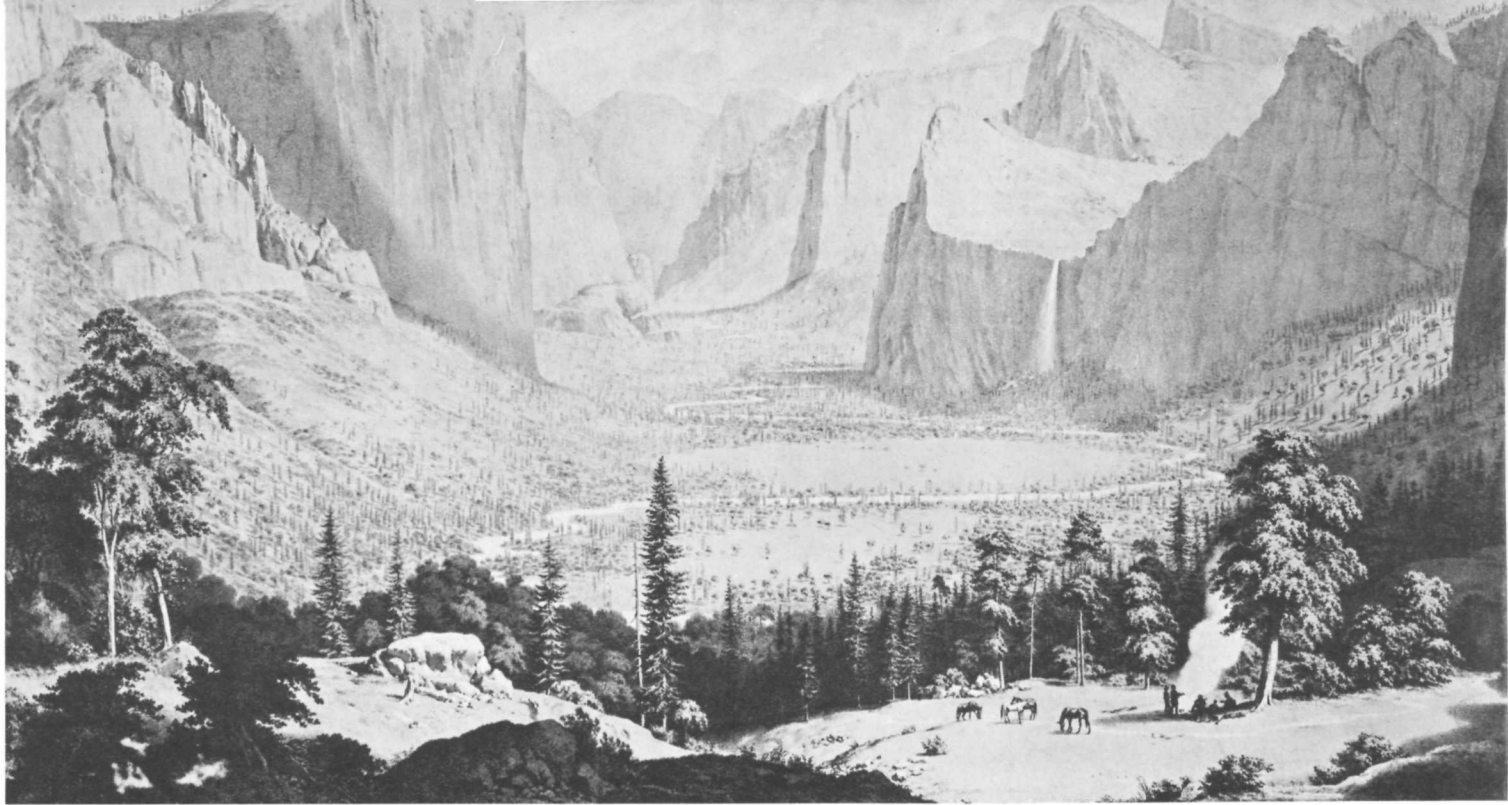
As for the United States, . . . national parks must appear worthless, and remain worthless, to survive (p. 183).

The many difficulties with this theory stem chiefly from two fundamental definitional problems: (1) Runte defines, or uses, the term *national parks* in the most narrow construction possible; and (2) he severely limits the definition of *worthless lands*. These narrow definitions exclude many park areas as well as a number of economic factors, which, when considered, directly contradict the notion of parks as worthless lands.

National Parks Narrowly Defined

The national park system is much more varied and extensive than Runte would have us believe. The author indeed limits his discussion of worthless lands to those units that had, or were eventually to have, actual national park designation. Today about 15 percent of the total number of units in the system fall under such designation; about 13 percent were so designated when Runte's book was written. This narrow focus—bound by the Park Service's confusing nomenclature—is presented as representative of the "American experience" with national parks. It ignores the broader composition and history of the system's evolution and therefore distorts the case for parks as worthless lands.

In fact, the National Park Service Act of 1916 provided that the new agency administer what had already become in effect a system of parks, which



Yosemite Valley, viewed from Inspiration Point in this 1859 lithograph, stands as one of the finest testaments to the national park idea. Although the value of this and other national park lands may seem altogether evident to today's appreciative visitors, historians still debate the motives behind the parks' establishment. Were these scenic wonders set aside because they were otherwise "worthless lands," or were they established in spite of real and potential competing economic uses?

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included 21 national monuments, the ruins at Casa Grande, and the Hot Springs Reservation, in addition to 14 national parks. Today, with a very large and complex system of more than 300 units, Park Service nomenclature consists of almost two dozen different designations—such as national parks, monuments, preserves, military parks, battlefields, historical parks, and historic sites, to name a few.

The Park Service defines national parks—one category among many within the system—as large and diverse areas with enough land or water to protect the resources adequately. Yet the national park category alone encompasses a diversity of park types and sizes. For example, Yellowstone National Park is a very large natural area, Mesa Verde National Park is a large cultural area, and Hot Springs National Park is a smaller, essentially urban recreational area. The confusion over park nomenclature is reflected in the book's only map (a U. S. Forest Service map following page 96), which confuses natural and cultural types of parks. The map identifies Mesa Verde National Park and Wupatki, Canyon de Chelly, and Bandelier national monuments as primary natural units, when without exception these parks are primary cultural areas, set aside not at all because of natural features but to preserve very important prehistoric sites and structures.

The point is that the arguments that justified preservation in virtually every one of these varied units in the system bear directly on the question of

land values and alternate economic uses. Each different kind of park area that came into the system had its own accumulated political, economic, and environmental history, but Runte ignores this. He presents his theory using incomplete evidence, basing his sweeping conclusion upon the history of only a portion of the system—those areas having national park designation. In fact, a truly conclusive argument that park land is worthless land must consider the whole system, including its natural, cultural, and recreational areas. Evidence for Runte's sweeping generalization—the "worthless lands" thesis—should not be restricted by the limitations of park nomenclature, which itself is often confusing and arbitrary.

In this regard, the potential economic value of many areas within the system (not specifically those designated national parks) is beyond dispute. Federal Hall National Memorial, a structure commemorating numerous historic events of outstanding importance (including the first inauguration of George Washington), sits on a .45-acre tract at 26 Wall Street, diagonally across from the New York Stock Exchange. Castle Clinton National Monument, an early nineteenth-century military fort, is situated at the tip of lower Manhattan. These park units occupy some of the most expensive real estate in the world. Similarly, Independence National Historical Park comprises more than 36 acres in downtown Philadelphia, and the varied and numerous national park



units comprising the National Capital Parks occupy more than 6,000 acres in the District of Columbia. Some recreational areas of the system contain extremely valuable lands, such as the variety of units included in both Golden Gate (San Francisco) and Gateway (New Jersey-New York) national recreation areas.

Nor does Runte take into account the value of the national monuments set aside for their significance in prehistory. It is important to note that many early excavations of prehistoric sites in the Southwest brought economic benefits to people involved in marketing antiquities, especially pottery. The 1906 Antiquities Act was inspired by groups seeking to preserve these sites and specifically to prevent their commercial exploitation. For all its faults and weaknesses, the act has resulted in the preservation of many areas by including them in the national park system, and has helped prevent the economic exploitation of both historic and prehistoric properties on federal land. (The Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979 provides even greater protection against economic exploitation of both historic and prehistoric properties on federal land. This act was passed after Runte had written his book.)

Runte states in his preface that it would be "impossible in the scope of one book" to consider the variety of other areas in the system that are "now often ranked with national parks proper" (p. xi). This blanket disclaimer seeks to justify a limited focus on areas that support his thesis. But certainly he offers no proof that his chosen subjects are representative, and the existing literature suggests that a broader treatment would indeed be possible in the scope of one book. In any event, the history of the national parks alone cannot be isolated so neatly or logically from the history of the national park *system's* very complex origins, evolution, and composition, most especially when presenting a theory having such wide implications.

Worthless Lands Narrowly Defined

In the opening section of the chapter titled "Worthless Lands," Runte states that "national parks, however spectacular from the standpoint of their topography, actually encompassed only those features considered valueless for lumbering, mining, grazing, or agriculture" (p. 49). Although no precise definition is given, in almost all instances the "worth" of the lands in question is judged in terms of these extractive industries. The principal exception appears to be the use of land for reservoir sites, especially the Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park. Reiteration of the "worthless lands" idea extends the concept from the beginning of the national park movement to the present day, when

"national parks must appear worthless, and remain worthless, to survive" (p. 183). Runte's failure to consider a broader variety of land values, however, leaves the argument incomplete and highly vulnerable. Not only did the parks contain valuable lands when established, but today in many park areas these values have increased enormously.

Runte himself makes it clear that national park lands were not entirely worthless. He points to various forms of enterprise—grazing in Yosemite, farming and ranching in Jackson Hole, and hunting alligators and snowy egrets in the Everglades—pre-existing in areas later established as parks. Also, according to Runte, ranchers and farmers sought to divert the waters of both Yellowstone Lake and the Bechler River (within Yellowstone Park) for irrigation, and timber operators threatened the forests of the Great Smoky Mountains and the Blue Ridge area. Runte's own evidence thus cuts squarely across his theory, though he fails to note the contradictions.

From the very beginning of the national park movement, moreover, the lands to be set aside as parks had obvious potential for tourist trade. In fact, the famous campfire discussion held in September 1870, at the Madison junction in the Yellowstone country, dealt precisely with the potential economic value of this area. Around the campfire, the Yellowstone explorers discussed plans to acquire rights to lands containing the most interesting phenomena. This, even as Runte tells it, would have in time "become a source of great profit to the owners" (p. 41). However, the proposal to seek private profits was quickly rejected in favor of the public interest, and thus the birth of the national park idea—so the story goes. In any event, according to Runte, explorer and park proponent Ferdinand V. Hayden made it very clear to Congress in 1872 "that the explorers' *determination to avoid another Niagara* was indeed a *primary incentive* for the Yellowstone Park campaign" (p. 52, italics added). The development around Niagara Falls represented excessive commercialism and profiteering in a scenic area. These very early efforts to prevent commercial exploitation of the Yellowstone flatly contradict the "worthless lands" concept.

The railroad industry very quickly understood the potential of tourism in Yellowstone and other park areas. Runte shows that the Northern Pacific Railway promoted the establishment of Yellowstone National Park and in the 1880s helped finance a number of hostels in the park. The Santa Fe Railroad constructed El Tovar Hotel on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon in 1904, four years before the area was set aside as a national monument and fifteen years before Congress designated it a national park.



The commercial value of national park lands, Richard Sellars argues, is apparent in the beginnings of "industrial tourism" in Glacier National Park, Montana. The majestic Many Glacier Hotel, pictured at right, was built by the Great Northern Railway in 1914-1915 as the "showplace of the Rockies." It provided accommodations for park visitors and, not incidentally, greater business for the railroad that monopolized tourist traffic in the area.

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The Great Northern Railway promoted the establishment of Glacier National Park, realizing that it could virtually monopolize tourist traffic in the area. Runte observes that these railroads had few if any environmental concerns in supporting parks; rather "the lines promoted tourism in their quest for greater profits" (p. 91). It is abundantly clear from the book itself that with the very establishment of the national parks came "industrial tourism," generated by public interest in these great institutionalized western landscapes.

Runte also discusses the later efforts of preservationists, especially Stephen T. Mather and Horace M. Albright, to promote the economic potential of tourism in the parks in order to secure a greater degree of political and economic stability for the park system. He states that they "invoked the profit motive," sought to "dilute the utilitarian rhetoric by playing upon the value of the national parks as an economic resource," and helped make Congress aware that "national parks were capable of paying economic as well as emotional dividends" (pp. 103-05). Runte very clearly demonstrates that these leaders recognized the economic *value* of park lands, not their worthlessness.

Although Runte repeatedly acknowledges the economic value of tourism, only in a passing, almost timid way does he allow this to qualify his otherwise very firm assertion that parks consist of worthless lands. He notes, for instance, that some parks established in the twentieth century were considered to be "economically valueless from the standpoint of their natural wealth, if not their potential for outdoor recreation" (p. 140). Yet never does he bring the obvious and significant values of tourism fully to bear on his analysis of parks as worthless lands.

The value of real estate, specifically as it pertains to development potential for commercial lodging, houses, cabins, small farms, and, especially today, condominiums, second homes, and apartments, should have been central to the discussion of parks as worthless lands, yet Runte disregards these real estate values. Though of lesser concern in the early history of most of the large western national parks, such values are a major factor in limiting the growth rate of the park system today. The notion that national parks must be "worthless to survive" must confront the obvious potential land values in such important national park areas as Jackson Hole, the Yosemite Valley, or the South Rim of the Grand Canyon. Placed on the open market, such lands could produce enough revenue virtually to pay off the national debt. In the hands of private developers, individual lots or condominium units in Jackson Hole or the Yosemite Valley, for instance, could create a real estate bonanza of the first order.

Fortunately, the American public realizes the inestimable scenic value of these and many other park areas. For decades Americans have acted directly contrary to Runte's notion that the public "rarely" lets "perceptions based on emotion overcome the urge to acquire wealth." In fact, economic values are overridden in the public interest with virtually every acre of prime real estate preserved by the federal government in the national park system.

Through a discussion of the Hetch Hetchy dam controversy, Runte shows that the value of land as reservoir sites can override scenic values in a national park. Yet what he does not discuss are the later and very significant preservationist victories over the Echo Park, Marble Canyon, and Grand Canyon dam proposals. In these instances, dam



proponents predicted that construction would bring a variety of economic benefits to large regions of the country. Nevertheless, the economic potential of these park lands (and some adjacent nonpark lands) as reservoir sites was sacrificed to preserve the great scenic and scientific values of the parks. Defeat of both the proposed jetport near the Everglades and the proposed Mineral King Basin recreational development near Sequoia National Park provides further examples in which the ecological diversity and spectacular scenery of "worthless" lands were ultimately valued over material progress. With the exception of Mineral King Basin, Runte mentions all of these proposals in the book, but he fails to acknowledge the manner in which they contradict his "worthless lands" theory.

Origins and Implications of the "Worthless Lands" Thesis

Ultimately, the historical significance of the idea of parks as worthless lands derives from its use as a rhetorical ploy, rather than from the reality of the park lands situation. The rhetoric of park proponents frequently contained references to the limited economic value of lands, and the argument has had no small effect on park establishment. But because the term has been used rhetorically does not in any way make it an actual fact. This is a cardinal distinction, and it deserves discriminating analysis, which the book does not provide. Instead, Runte bought the rhetoric at face value.

Essentially, the "worthless lands" theory gauges American public values at rock bottom. Bluntly stated, Runte's theory implies that only if there are no economic values at stake will the American public support park establishment. Yet the American experience with national parks plainly shows the public's determination to preserve park lands in the face of sometimes immense economic values. Furthermore, this great and impressive commitment has deep historical roots and remains at the heart of the broader preservation movement in the United States. Much of Yellowstone, for example, remains essentially unchanged since the park's establishment more than a century ago, and its establishment and ongoing preservation have achieved international importance historically and symbolically. And to whatever degree the concept of parks as worthless lands applies to the national park system, it must surely apply also to preservation actions in general and to the setting aside of other federal, state, or local lands for a variety of public uses. For instance, the "worthless lands" thesis ignores the implications of hundreds of nonfederally owned parks in valuable land areas, two striking examples being Central Park in New York and the Boston Common.



Yellowstone, established in 1872 as America's first national park, demonstrates the historical continuity of the nation's preservation effort. Despite immense numbers of visitors, most of the park retains its essential wilderness character.

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Worthless is an absolute term meaning flatly that something has no value. It leaves no room for exception or nuance. Other than for its importance as rhetoric, the term has limited application in the history of a movement that from the beginning has involved competing land values. The resulting compromise and sacrifice of these competing values has been worked out in the public forum and is endured by both sides—those who would develop and those who would preserve. □

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REPLY TO SELLARS

by Alfred Runte

Along with other critics of *National Parks: The American Experience*, Richard W. Sellars first of all has missed the origins of the term *worthless lands*. The definition is not mine; rather it was Senator John Conness of California, opening the very first speech on behalf of the national park idea in the United States, who resorted to this distinctly paradoxical note: "I will state to the Senate," he began, "that this bill proposes to make a grant of certain premises located in the Sierra Nevada mountains, in the State of California, that are for all public purposes *worthless* [italics added], but which constitute, perhaps, some of the greatest wonders of the world."¹ The phrase "all public purposes" itself deserves special scrutiny. The wording reassured Conness's colleagues that no universally recognized alternative to preservation had been detected in Yosemite. Gold especially being absent, the United States certainly could afford to recognize the valley for its substantial "intrinsic" worth.

According to Sellars, this limitation of the term *worthless* to natural resources implies a "narrow" definition of land value. However, it was precisely this meaning of the term that was adopted and understood by Congress, not only in 1864, but throughout the history of park establishment. Historically, land defined as natural resources, not as personal real estate, has formed the basis of our national economy. The United States can survive without spreading skyscrapers over every acre of Central Park; it cannot survive without oil, natural gas, timber, waterpower, minerals, and agriculture. It is misleading, in other words, to suggest that the possibility of rimming the Grand Canyon with condominiums can be equated with the feasibility of damming the chasm for hydroelectric power, irrigation, and water storage.² Ever since the commercialization of the brink of Niagara Falls, similar projects, although lucrative, have been condemned as purely individualistic and therefore crass. Almost simul-

taneously, however, the diversion of Niagara Falls for hydroelectric development was hailed as a great collective enterprise and therefore one worth the aesthetic sacrifice. Put another way, there is a distinct difference between development and despoliation. By the same token, however, forbidding the latter temporarily is no test of the nation's willingness to forego the former indefinitely.

Sellars also suggests that the Antiquities Act of 1906 contradicts the "worthless lands" hypothesis. Here again, he ignores the distinction between crass commercialism and commerce. Those "people involved in marketing antiquities," as he so blandly



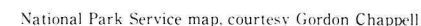
Senator John Conness of California opened the debate on the national park idea in 1864 with a speech on behalf of park status for Yosemite Valley. Although Yosemite included "some of the greatest wonders of the world," Conness argued, the lands were "for all public purposes worthless." His paradoxical statement would be reiterated by later park advocates.

California State Library photo, FHS Collection

¹*Congressional Globe*, 38th Cong., 1st sess., May 17, 1864, p. 2300.

²The most recent threat to the Grand Canyon comes from upstream. See, for example, "A River No More? Grand Canyon is Threatened by Power Plant Expansion," a four-page leaflet issued by the American Wilderness Alliance in 1981.

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describes them, were out-and-out vandals. Any monetary reward from pilfering the artifacts of the American Southwest was distinctly personal and private. Not only did the national economy as a whole fail to benefit, but national prestige was sorely compromised by such acts of maliciousness. As noted in *National Parks*, Congress, responding to the cultural anxieties of the United States, has consistently distinguished between these two forms of exploitation. The "sin" of development is not development per se, but development that cannot simultaneously be rationalized as being in the national interest.³ To borrow a modern example, individuals who destroy aboriginal artifacts on the public lands are still subject to stiff punishment. Yet the Army Corps of Engineers and Bureau of Reclamation have inundated literally scores of aboriginal sites. In each of these instances, however, the sacrifice has been justified as a "necessary evil" vital for the improvement of the nation as a whole.

Only by insisting that the "worthless lands" hypothesis be tested in the smallest possible arena does Sellars's argument have any historical merit. Granted, citizen outrage and concern saved Mount Vernon, Independence Hall, Central Park, the Washington Mall, and a host of open spaces and historic structures from the subdivider's bulldozer and the wrecking ball. In no instance, however, did the outcome affect the national economy. Any financial losses sustained were basically local and individual; in most cases, development simply shifted a few hundred yards from where it was forbidden to where it was not.⁴ Comparing the city parks and corner lots of New York, Philadelphia, and Washington against stands of timber, mineral deposits, waterpower sites, and grazing districts affecting major regional and national economies is a strained analogy at best. Obviously the United States has not been totally callous, nor did *National Parks* insist on this interpretation. The point of the "worthless lands" passages is to demonstrate why the idealism of the national park idea has rarely been achieved in reality. Bluntly, ecological needs have come in a poor second because the nation has been extremely reluctant to forego any reasonable opportunity, either present or future, to develop the national parks for

their natural resources.

It is not that this observation is so startling; it is merely that its implications are so unsettling. Everyone would prefer to attribute the national park idea to idealism and altruism. Accordingly, it is especially tempting to reject contrary interpretations as either imperfect or contrived, as when Sellars insists that the "worthless lands" speeches in Congress were nothing more than "a rhetorical ploy." Yet this term in fact resolves nothing; it merely begs the question all over again. Specifically, for whom was the ploy intended? Whom did supporters of park legislation need to deceive, especially if the Congress was so altruistic and public-spirited in the first place? Why protest that what people say is not in fact what people mean? Given the sharpness, sophistication, repetition, and consistency of the "worthless lands" speeches throughout national park history, something more than saving "political face" was at stake.

Rather than reject the evidence out of hand, historians critical of the "worthless lands" thesis should check the accuracy of the written word against the geography and natural history of preservation. Here, too, critics of *National Parks* have labored under a host of mistaken assumptions, none of which is more illusory than the belief that the mere size of a park is somehow synonymous with its economic value. In this vein, for example, historians have spoken about the "wealth" of natural resources denied the nation through the protection of Yellowstone's "extensive" timber and mineral deposits.⁵ Yet, fully 75 percent of Yellowstone's tree cover consists of lodgepole pine, a stunted, toothpicklike species infamous among Yellowstone's early explorers not as potential timber, but for its frustrating habit of toppling over into a hopelessly entangled mass that thwarted their progress south of Yellowstone Lake.⁶ Another presumption, equally false, is that the "idealists" of the celebrated Yellowstone Campfire of September 1870 brought important pressure to bear on Congress, resulting in the national park. Congress may have felt sympathetic, but Congress was hardly naive. The crucial assessment of Yellowstone's potential came from Dr. Ferdinand V. Hayden. Not only was he a government scientist, but William H. Goetzmann describes him perfectly as "par excellence the *businessman's* geologist" (italics

³Runte, *National Parks: The American Experience* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), p. 53.

⁴A dramatic example of the modern perils of "leapfrog" development in urban planning is the nation's capital. Stymied in downtown Washington by long-standing height restrictions, builders have retreated across the Potomac into Virginia, where skyscrapers now mar the backdrops to such famous landmarks as the Lincoln Memorial and Washington Monument.

⁵See, for example, John Ise, *Our National Park Policy: A Critical History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1961), p. 17, and Gordon Chappell's review of *National Parks in Arizona and the West* 23 (Spring 1981): 67.

⁶A detailed assessment of the Yellowstone forest and its composition is found in Richard A. Bartlett, *Nature's Yellowstone* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974), pp. 53-54.



added).⁷ Personally, for Hayden to have misled Congress about the “worth” of Yellowstone would have jeopardized government appropriations he had worked long and hard to secure. The point here is that Hayden effectively silenced most of the opposition against Yellowstone Park that was based purely on the question of its size. Time and again he reassured Congress that the land area of Yellowstone by itself was not proof that the region contained significant deposits of natural resources; topography was the clue.⁸ And fortunately for Yellowstone, Hayden’s analysis withstood the test of time.

My harshest critics, regrettably, have ignored the sources completely. Instead they have resorted to a “ploy” of their own, which, for lack of a better term, I label “park dropping.” The procedure works as follows: just find the name of a national park not mentioned in the book and “drop” it into a critique as “evidence” that I purposely chose only those parks whose histories agreed with my hypotheses. This, however, is just another assumption in lieu of introducing new sources.⁹ Sellars, for example, contends that the map following page 96 of *National Parks* “confuses natural and cultural types of parks.” His evidence? Another statement: “The map identifies Mesa Verde National Park and Wupatki, Canyon de Chelly, and Bandelier national monuments as primary natural units, when *without exception* [italics added] all of these parks are primary cultural areas of the system, set aside *not at all* [italics added] because of natural features but to preserve very important prehistoric sites and

structures.”

Had Sellars consulted the documents, he might have realized how dated his own statement has become. Certainly he is no longer speaking for the Park Service, for the official documents that squarely contradict his observation have been sitting on the shelves of national park libraries for more than a decade. One of the most responsible and thought-provoking of these is the *National Park System Plan*, released in 1972. In Part 2, dealing with natural history, the Park Service sought to identify every unit in the system with an area large enough to warrant classification as a “natural” environment. Among the units singled out for the protection of “significant natural features” were Mesa Verde National Park and Canyon de Chelly National Monument.¹⁰ Two years later, in March 1974, the House Subcommittee on National Parks and Recreation held hearings on the first official proposals to designate portions of Mesa Verde National Park and Bandelier National Monument as wilderness. Throughout the hearings, a parade of Park Service officials and representatives of major environmental organizations stressed, as one witness put it, “that wilderness designation in portions of archeological parks and monuments is appropriate for a number of reasons.” Mesa Verde National Park alone contained 42,000 acres of roadless—hence “natural”—terrain.¹¹ Finally, on September 22 and October 1, 1976, respectively, the House and Senate approved legislation designating 8,100 acres of Mesa Verde National Park as wilderness. Simultaneously, Bandelier National Monument won wilderness status for 23,267 of its 36,971 acres.¹² Granted, Wupatki National Monument in Arizona has not yet achieved similar recognition; its 35,253 acres, however, certainly entitle the monument to treatment as both a natural and prehistoric site.¹³

Sellars is correct in noting that none of these parks originally was established to protect a natural environment. But I never claimed otherwise—the year

⁷William H. Goetzmann, *Exploration and Empire: The Explorer and the Scientist in the Winning of the American West* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 498.

⁸Hayden’s observations included the following statement: “*The entire area* [italics added] comprised within the limits of the reservation contemplated in this bill is not susceptible of cultivation with any degree of certainty, and the winters would be too severe for stock-raising. Whenever the altitude of the mountain districts exceeds 6,000 feet above tide-water, their settlement becomes problematical unless there are valuable mines to attract people. *The entire area* [italics added] within the limits of the proposed reservation is over 6,000 feet in altitude, and the Yellowstone Lake, which occupies an area 15 by 22 miles, or 330 square miles, is 7,427 feet. The ranges of mountains that hem the valleys in on every side rise to the height of 10,000 and 12,000 feet, and are covered with snow all the year. These mountains are all of volcanic origin, and it is not probable that any mines or minerals of value will ever be found there. . . .” House Committee on the Public Lands, *The Yellowstone Park*, H. Rept. 26 to accompany H.R. 764, 42d Cong., 2d sess., February 27, 1872, pp. 1-2.

⁹An especially revealing example of “park dropping” is Lawrence Rakestraw’s review of *National Parks* in *Pacific Historical Review* 51 (May 1982): 226-27.

¹⁰See Table 4, “Listing by National Regions of areas of the National Park System having significant natural features,” U. S. Department of the Interior, *Part Two of the National Park System Plan: Natural History* (Washington: GPO, 1972), p. 19.

¹¹House Subcommittee on National Parks and Recreation of the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, *Designation of Wilderness Areas, Part IV, Hearings on H.R. 13562 and H.R. 13563*, 93rd Cong., 2d sess., March 22, 25, and 26, 1974, pp. 45, 55, and passim.

¹²*Congressional Record*, 94th Cong., 2d sess., September 22, 1976, pp. 31888-91; *ibid.*, October 1, 1976, p. 34446. Acreages of the respective parks and their wilderness areas are provided in National Park Service, *Index of the National Park System and Related Areas* (Washington: GPO, 1982), pp. 15, 17, 22, 40. (For my book, I relied on the 1977 edition.)

¹³*Index*, p. 17.



In 1871 and 1872, Dr. Ferdinand V. Hayden (seated, at the far end of the table) headed the scientific expedition that assessed the fabled Yellowstone region, then under consideration as a national park. Geologist Hayden assured Congress that, although large in geographical terms, the region contained negligible timber and mineral resources or potential for agriculture.

U. S. Geological Survey photo, FHS Collection

my map represents is 1978. By then his proclamation that these parks are primary cultural areas of the system had ceased to apply categorically to any of the parks he singled out in support of this particular criticism of *National Parks*.

In this type of reaction from a ranking official of the Park Service, I detect another example of the simmering rivalry between managers of historic sites and their "traditional" counterparts in the long-established scenic areas. Increasingly the former have voiced their displeasure at being treated like second-class rangers, so to speak. Indeed, as Robert Utley recently noted, the historical branch of the Park Service has tired of the statement, "But that's how they do things at Yellowstone."

As a historian myself, I sympathize, but not at the risk of allowing Sellars another distortion. Of the more than 300 units of the park system, he observes, only "about 15 percent of the total number of units in the system" bear the actual designation *national park*. But observe the acreages involved. Although size alone has little relationship to the actual presence of natural resources, a larger park is a surer measure of ecological integrity. As of January 1, 1982, the 48 units of the system designated *national parks* comprised 46,862,406.81 acres; the 78 *national monuments* added an additional 4,693,988.34 acres. In contrast, all 62 *national historic sites* comprised only 17,380.71 acres (about the equivalent of the Dallas-Fort Worth jetport). Similarly, the 26 *national historical parks* contained but 150,254.21 acres.¹⁴ The

mere number of parks, in other words, is illusory. Where protecting the environment in particular is concerned, only those parks with substantial acreages hold forth any hope of preserving sensitive natural ecosystems as integral biological units.

Much of Sellars's argument rests on the fragments of the national park system. Forts, battlefields, birthplaces of famous people, and other historic structures are important to have, of course, but as sites they do little to protect the integrity of the American land as a whole. Similarly, what Sellars suggests are recent contradictions of the "worthless lands" hypothesis, such as national seashores, lakeshores, scenic rivers, and urban parks, are in fact mostly strip reserves—narrow slivers or corridors of property squeezed on all sides by conflicting and often damaging encroachments.¹⁵ By grasping for the apparent contradictions—by "park dropping"—Sellars completely overlooks the significant contradictions even among the park designations he himself prefers to emphasize. Why is it, to cite just one noted example, that only 1,298 acres of the 3,300 acres designated the Antietam National Battlefield are actually in federal ownership?¹⁶

Fortunately, "industrial tourism," as opposed to mere profiteering, did come of age after the turn of the century. But tourism does not contradict the "worthless lands" hypothesis—it supports it. In the

¹⁵The serious threats posed to every unit of the national park system are listed and described in *State of the Parks—1980: A Report to the Congress* (Washington: Office of Science and Technology, National Park Service, 1980). Threats to the urban parks in particular are graphically described by Robert Cahn in "New Urban Parks Face a Fight to Survive," *Christian Science Monitor*, June 17, 1982, pp. 12-14.

¹⁶*Index*, p. 32.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 10. Other similar categories include: national memorials (23 units), 8,228.10 acres; national military parks (10 units), 34,668.22 acres; and national battlefields (10 units), 11,037.62 acres.

by Robert M. Utley

In fact, altruism and materialism

There are many criteria by which historians attempt to measure cultural values. The national symbols people choose to preserve—the visible reminders of how a nation came to be



Establishment of Redwood National Park in 1968 embodied the conflicting goals of materialism and altruism. The park preserved stands of redwoods of enormous economic worth, but it failed to include adjacent forestlands vital to the park's ecological integrity. The photo above, taken in 1976, shows the effect of logging operations directly above the Tall Trees Grove on Redwood Creek. Park boundaries were expanded two years later in the most costly land acquisition measure ever passed by Congress.

Dave Van de Mark photo, courtesy Save-the-Redwoods League and Alfred Runte

Runte's basic thesis cannot be disproved by citing units of the national park system that were purely historical, that were established within urban environments (and thus had different forms of "worth" as open spaces), or were established after the wave of environmental awareness left behind a vocal constituency of its own.

On the other hand, I think Runte is also mistaken, particularly in his contention that people generally say what they mean. This has not been my experience in historical research; people lie, obfuscate, confuse, or simply lack the language by which they can express their innermost feelings, which often must be extracted from what they do. I choose a parallel in quite another field of history: the antislavery and abolitionist movements, especially in Britain. In the 1920s the conventional wisdom on this subject was that the British government had put an end to the slave trade in 1807, and to slavery within the British Empire in 1833, for humanitarian reasons. By the 1940s a reverse view was widely held: that the so-called humanitarians were hypocritical and that slavery was ended by the West Indian interest in the British Parliament, who had realized that slavery did not pay. In short, either the "humanitarians" were fools, or they were duped by hard-nosed planters, or they simply lied; "realism" triumphed over "idealism" in the abolition of slavery. By the late 1960s, however, more sophisticated research had demonstrated that, even though historians (using book-keeping methods not known to the planters) could demonstrate in retrospect that slavery was no longer paying, there

was little evidence that the planters themselves knew this. Given the ignorance of the planters about the decline in the slave economy—real though it was—the humanitarian impulse was genuine and was necessary to the abolition of slavery. Finally, by the 1970s historians further realized that all views were compatible, none mutually exclusive. Some planters had sensed that slavery would not pay in the future; they united with humanitarians who were indifferent to the question of the "worth" of slave labor. Humanitarians in turn were happy to argue that slavery did not pay, or would not pay in the future, to win to their alliance the votes they needed. This view does not render the humanitarians any less humanitarian; it merely shows them to have been shrewd.

Many Americans may well have argued that Yellowstone was "worthless" in order to hold developers at bay. I do not tell my friends of my favorite small country inn, after all. Many potential exploiters may have felt genuinely that certain park lands were worthless; others may not have known or may have thought the lands would remain worthless for their lifetime and had no desire to look further. Many, perhaps, saw potential profits, including natural resources, in the park areas, and yet were happy, in the interests of a higher cause, to assert that the lands were worthless. I do not think we really know. I do not think that any historian who ascribes a given effect to a single cause really knows. Runte says there is no point in engaging in semantics; he will let Congress define "worthless lands." There is every point in engaging in semantics precisely be-

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cause, in any congressional debate, and certainly in the final vote, semantics lead to the kind of alliance that defeated slavery.

Both papers contain numerous assertions with which I would like to quarrel. I will limit myself, however, to two comments. I believe Runte is correct in saying that his thesis cannot be refuted simply by dropping exceptions into a critique of his argument. The argument must be taken as given, and it requires sustained analysis and reexamination. But I feel he engages in much the same approach in analyzing how wilderness designations have been applied in parks originally set aside essentially for archaeological reasons. In truth, his charge is aimed at the confusing designations used by the National Park Service for many of its units. The rationale for designations such as parks, monuments, preserves, historic sites, historical parks, battlefield sites, battlefield parks, memorials, lakeshores, seashores, recreational areas, and so on has been obscured in recent years, so that the relative value (or "worthlessness") that might attach to any given designation is quite impossible to determine except on a case-by-case basis. This charge does not speak for or against his central thesis, however, which remains provocative, though unproven. In the end, Runte virtually says so, since he too admits that "worthless" is not absolute but relative. Of course. Nor do we need a symposium to discover that most legislators are imprecise, all language is relative, and overstated theories tend to attract overstated rebuttals.

John Steinbeck, in his *Travels with Charley* (1962), wrote: "It is my opinion that we enclose and celebrate the freaks of our nation and of our civilization. Yellowstone National Park is no more representative of America than is Disneyland." Just so. The representative is seldom preserved. The unrepresentative, precisely because it is unusual, will be preserved and, in being unusual, is a testimony to a nation's values. Such a place, then, can scarcely be worthless. □

Mr. Winks, a professor of history at Yale University, has written broadly in the fields of comparative imperial and diplomatic history. He is currently chairman of the National Park Service Advisory Board and has personally visited 310 of the system's 334 units.

The "Worthless Lands"

Thesis: Another Perspective

by Thomas R. Cox

There is no question that Alfred Runte's *National Parks: The American Experience* and his related articles are valuable—or that they have stirred controversy. The essay by Richard W. Sellars is but the latest attack. Sellars focuses on what has come to be known as the "worthless lands" thesis, which is the most original portion of Runte's work and central to it. Runte's reply restates—and qualifies—his case.

In the judgment of this reviewer, Sellars does not go far enough in his critique. The "worthless lands" thesis, I submit, is flawed at its heart by presentism—the historian's cardinal sin of judging past events by present-day standards and values. Moreover, Runte's work appears inadequately informed by relevant historical literature. History is a cumulative discipline; a scholar ignores the work of his predecessors at his peril. Yet Runte, seemingly intent upon forcing all into the procrustean bed that is the "worthless lands" thesis, ignores contrary conclusions of others—or denies that their arguments are informed by evidence.

The creation by Congress of the early national parks needs to be viewed within the context of the times, and especially in light of the prevailing perception of the proper role of the federal legislature in dealing with public lands. A host of studies of federal land policy have made clear that in the nineteenth century Congress was generally expected to encourage national development by speedily transferring public lands to private ownership. Land questions focused not so much on whether this should be done, but on how to encourage family farms while preventing engrossment of the land by a wealthy few. When Senator John Conness and others described proposed parks to fellow congressmen as encompassing "worthless" lands, they meant that creating the parks in question would not be a violation of Congress's basic responsibility to encourage family farms and the democracy they supposedly buttressed. One did not need to be a dyed-in-the-wool Jacksonian to

speak thus. Such arguments were frequently rhetorical, as Sellars notes, intended to disarm the many champions of Jacksonian democratic ideals who had the power to thwart creation of any parks to which they chose to offer serious opposition.

Debates over the creation of parks were shaped by class as well as ideological considerations. It was easy to see them as undemocratic reserves for the wealthy. When the first national parks were being established, few Americans could afford to take their leisure far from home. Speaking of Yellowstone and Yosemite in 1882, the *San Francisco Chronicle* put it bluntly: "The rich—foreign and native—enjoy a monopoly of these pleasure grounds. It is wrong in principle and oppressive in practice for any government to tax the common people and the poor for the exclusive benefit of the rich." Not until the 1920s, when the automobile revolutionized American use of leisure time, could Robert Sterling Yard write, "We can no longer dismiss national parks as travel resorts, or consider them from a class point of view. . . ." One should hardly be surprised if Conness and others went out of their way to further the belief that the land involved in proposed parks was worthless—that is, that the advocates of parks were not proposing to take from poor would-be farmers to give to the rich.

But one should not interpret such statements too literally. If no one had seen economic value in the land that was to be made into parks, there would have been little reason to protect them with park status. The lands might have been worthless for agriculture or mining, but, as Sellars points out, they could be readily put to other uses, most notably to attracting tourists. Facilities to cater to visitors sprang up during the late nineteenth century near almost every accessible natural wonder. They appeared near some even earlier, threatening to destroy much of the beauty that had called the facilities into being. Against such uses, national park status promised at least some protection.

In his rebuttal, Runte tries to escape the implications of this for his "worthless lands" thesis by limiting his definition of worth to the use of natural resources that further national development. He is especially contemptuous of those who carried out digs in order to obtain Indian artifacts. They were "vandals," rather than people seeking



Automobiles revolutionized Americans' use of leisure time and made national parks accessible to greater numbers of tourists. Winding through the dense forests above are visitors to Mount Rainier National Park, ca. 1912.

S. C. Lancaster lantern slide, courtesy R. J. Fahl

commercial gain. The argument misses the point. Those whom he dismisses were carrying out digs to turn a profit, not to advance wanton destruction. Those who fenced off mineral springs, caves, and geysers or erected hotels, cabins, restaurants, and dance halls beside them did so for the same motive that moved "pot hunters": personal profit. Although the quest for private profit had long fueled the nation's material progress, early parks advocates opposed such development both because it despoiled the site's natural beauty and because it frequently barred free public access to the natural wonders or scenery that had drawn visitors in the first place. One pioneer put it succinctly in 1871 in explaining why he set aside Soda Springs as Oregon's first dedicated public park: "nature's special gifts are not intended for private exploitation." The national parks were established for precisely the same reason: to prevent

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private exploitation that might be destructive or was otherwise deemed contrary to the public interest. Lands that needed (or warranted) such protection were by definition not worthless. To try to sidestep this fact, as Runte does with the argument that profits not earned in resource extraction are irrelevant to the material development of the nation, is simply unsound economics.

The problem with many of the early national parks was not that they encompassed only worthless lands, but that people saw so many things of value in them. When the area around Mount Lassen became a national park in 1916, it already boasted some 1,200 summer homes, a fact that created subsequent problems for park management. Glacier National Park had not only summer homes, but also valuable timber stands, reservoir sites, railroad routes, and grazing lands within it. Congress recognized the existence of all these when it created the park in 1910; it sought to accommodate a variety of uses through what a later generation would have called a multiple-use policy. Such a mixture of uses seemed less anomalous then than now, for there was as yet no firm concept of what a national—or any other public—park should be. Patterns of management and use varied as much as did the parks themselves.

The attitudes of early park advocates concerning which of the many possible uses would be tolerated were in large part shaped by the values of the well-to-do classes from which nearly all of them sprang. To most such people, the rude facilities that appeared beside many a tourist site seemed desecrations. They wished for finer facilities and a higher class of visitors. Summer homes and grand hotels were two means to this end: they would attract a stable and prosperous group of visitors. Park status would provide the means by which use could be planned, controlled, and kept “proper.”

Stephen T. Mather’s work in behalf of a Park-to-Park Highway to link up the national parks of the West also aimed at bringing increased numbers of comfortably well-off visitors to the parks. Like mountaineering groups, parks advocates were as yet unconcerned with the dangers of overuse; instead they sought to encourage more visitation. Far from viewing parks as worthless, they saw them as having value that was as yet insufficiently appreciated.



Stephen T. Mather, director of the National Park Service from its founding in 1916 until 1929, clarified the national park idea and dedicated his career to protecting the park lands from inappropriate development. Lands that needed such protection, Thomas Cox argues, “were by definition not worthless.”

FHS Collection

Mather worked assiduously to define more precisely just what the national park system and its constituent units should encompass, and he spent much of his time fending off proposals for parks that did not measure up to his standards. Among these was Secretary of the Interior Albert B. Fall’s idea of making a national park out of grazing and timber land near his ranch in New Mexico. Mather’s objections were not that the site had nonscenic commercial value but that it had too little scenic merit to be a national park. Mather also attempted to rid the national system of parks, such as Sullys Hill and Platt, that had little to justify being classified as national parks. Mather undertook this work to narrow and clarify the definitions of what national parks were and of what uses should be allowed within them because, like many others, he considered the parks priceless and feared that without careful protection they might be spoiled.

The extensive historical literature on individual parks provides further grounds for dissent from the “worthless lands” thesis. Many a park came into being only after a long struggle against those who feared a “locking up” of resources. Such objections would have made no sense if the land involved had been worthless, yet the history of the parks movement is replete with examples of parks that were established only after extensive debate over the propriety of doing so. Such debates became especially common after Mather had successfully narrowed the range of uses that was to be allowed within national parks. As a result, the grounds for protest shifted from earlier concerns about a drain on the public purse to opposition to closing out private (or public) exploita-

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tion of commercially valuable resources. And resources *were* locked up—as the economic traumas of the redwood industry and local economy following creation of Redwood National Park dramatically demonstrate.

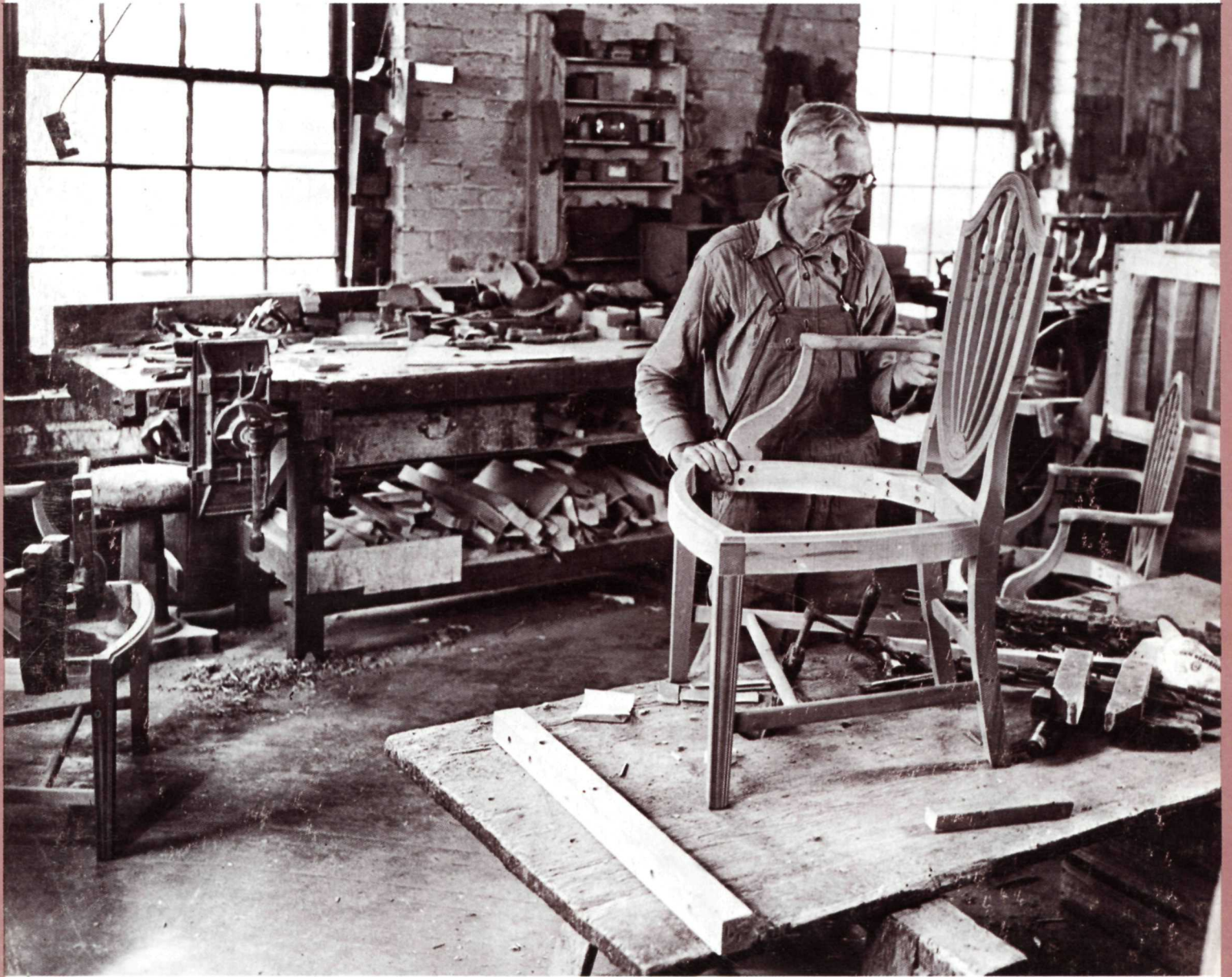
Runte’s arguments that early parks were not delimited along natural boundaries and failed to include lands necessary to the health of their ecosystems—and his repeated resort to ecological arguments elsewhere—are especially presentist. Ecological understanding was far in the future when most of America’s national parks were created. Early park makers were interested in “natural wonders” and monumental scenery, not biological preserves, as Hans Huth and Earl Pomeroy had made clear long before Runte claimed “monumentalism” for his own. Parks failed to include key portions of the ecosystems involved not because the lands involved were too valuable commercially to be given park status, but because they lacked sufficient scenic merit.

But if Runte seems consistently guilty of failing to view his subject within its historical context, Sellars is at times guilty of the same offense. Runte’s objection that Sellars uses the contemporary bureaucratic definition of national parks, not that of most Americans over the years, is sound. Runte is addressing the question of the value of old-line, traditional national parks; the worth of much of the rest of what is now administered by the National Park Service is really irrelevant to that question.

Sellars does not need to argue for a broader definition of national parks. Even using Runte’s narrower terminology, the “worthless lands” thesis must be judged as ahistorical. In the final analysis, Runte’s attempt to read the recent struggle between the champions of economic development and environmental protection back into a period when parks and the issues surrounding them were viewed in a very different light tells us more about the pitfalls of historical research than about the history of the early parks movement. □

Mr. Cox, a member of our Editorial Board, is a professor of history at San Diego State University. He is the author of numerous works in forest and conservation history and is completing a book on the state parks movement in the Pacific Northwest.

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Western Forestry Center
Portland, Oregon
October 18-19, 1983

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TUESDAY, OCTOBER 18

- morning • registration
• plenary session
• concurrent sessions
- afternoon • concurrent sessions
• reception (Oregon Historical Society)

*See summer
Cruiser for
program*

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 19

- morning • concurrent sessions
- afternoon • concurrent sessions
- evening • SAF Awards Banquet (Marriott Hotel)

FHS ANNUAL MEETING SCHEDULE

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 20

- 9 a.m.-4 p.m. • field trip to Tillamook State Forest
- evening • FHS Banquet (marks end of Stewardship Project)

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 21

- morning • committee meetings
• Presidential Awards Luncheon
- afternoon • business meeting

37th Annual Meeting of the
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Western Forestry Center
Portland, Oregon
October 20-21, 1983



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COVERS

Furniture making was one of the first industrial uses for the abundant hardwood resources of North America. Our cover photo (FHS Collection) demonstrates one of an infinite variety of shapes that American hardwoods have taken in the hands of skilled furniture craftsmen. While the preferred species have changed to satisfy consumer tastes in furniture and other needs of the manufacturers, wood itself has remained the key material used in the industry. In an article beginning on page 122, Harold and Carmen Wisdom provide a historical overview of wood use in furniture making. Their article was written for the *Encyclopedia of American and Forest Conservation History*, a new reference work that is advertised inside the back cover of this issue.

The photo on the back cover captures a stellar cast of officials strolling to the site of a dedication ceremony at the Lady Bird Johnson Grove in Redwood National Park, August 27, 1969. The park itself, established a year earlier, suggests an ironic tension between materialism and altruism in the national park idea. The original park boundaries preserved some of the tallest specimens of California’s coastal redwoods but failed to protect surrounding timberlands within the larger ecosystem, which many believed was essential to sustain the giants. In a special forum beginning on page 130, five historians distinguished in the field of park history assess the motives behind America’s commitment to its natural wonders.

