

## RED WHITE AND BLACK IN THE NATIONAL PARKS

### Author Note

Joseph Meeker teaches literature and environmental studies at the University of California at Santa Cruz. He was formerly a ranger at Crater Lake and Mt. McKinley National Parks. "Red White and Black in the National Parks" has been adapted from a series of lectures given by Dr. Meeker during 1972 at the National Park Service Training Academy at Grand Canyon.

Joseph W. Meeker

National Parks were created as an expression of deeply rooted but poorly understood values inherent in American culture and in the traditions of Western civilization. No one need be surprised if ethnic groups who do not share those values fail to see the parks as their founders did, or as the National Park Service might like them to. It is worthwhile to review some of the myths and images relevant to park lands in Western culture in order to measure their distance from the traditions of other ethnic cultures whose heirs are minority groups in America.

#### Nature as a Refuge

The Western world has long looked upon nature as a symbol of peace and purity. The garden of Eden was a natural setting characterized by beauty, simplicity, and moral innocence until it was infiltrated by corrupting influences. Ancient Greek thought also idealized a 'Golden Age' somewhere in the dim past, and it, too, was conceived as a garden where food was abundant and adversity unknown. Both the Greek and Hebraic roots of Western culture agree that man originated in a garden setting of benevolent nature, and that subsequent civilization is in some sense a debased condition intended to punish man. When he was expelled from the benevolent garden, man went forth to build the ugly and hostile cities where he now suffers.

Efforts to regain the lost garden as a refuge from urban life have long occupied our minds. We dream of safe natural settings which will provide the comfort and repose which are lacking in the city. Such nostalgia for nature is common in our time but it is also found strongly among the urban aristocrats of ancient Rome. The Roman poet Virgil is remembered not only for the Aeneid, but also for his pastoral poetry which glorifies the peace and simplicity of the rural countryside in contrast to the anxieties of urban life in Rome. And Juvenal, a Roman satirist of the second century A.D., speaks of "Rome, the great sewer" because of its pollution problems, then proceeds with a long list of other Roman miseries, including degrading poverty in the ghettos, high taxes, inflated prices for poor goods and services, corrupt government crime and vice in the streets, pressures of social conformity in the suburbs, and poor schools run by wicked teachers. Juvenal's advice to weary Romans is "Tear yourself from the games and get a place in the country" where life will be easier, safer, and

more sensible. Our culture has long agreed with Juvenal and Virgil that city life degrades man and that the country restores his sense of dignity; in the city man is controlled but in the country he controls. Rural settings have symbolized both the purity of nature and the power of man since the beginning of the Western cultural tradition.

It may seem a paradox that the love of nature has been strongest in those civilizations which have produced the largest cities and the most complex technologies. From ancient Rome to modern America, nature has been thought of as a place of refuge from the problems of civilization. Within that tradition, humans have expected to find in natural settings a reaffirmation of human worth and purity. Like Adam and Eve in their garden, park visitors often feel their personal sanctity when they enter natural surroundings, and they feel the loss of sanctity when they return to the profane life awaiting them in the city. Nature is not sacred, but humans feel sanctified by their contact with nature. Such attitudes are not to be found among hunting and agricultural cultures like those of Africa and the American Indians, where nature itself is thought to be sacred, and where humans participate in that sacredness according to the degree of their integration with natural processes. The need to protect nature from human activities is thus strongest in those cultures where humans look upon themselves as separate from natural life, and where they see that civilization is dangerous to the natural settings they need for spiritual relief.

#### The Royal Privilege

The recreational enjoyment of natural surroundings has been until recently a privilege reserved for aristocratic classes. Since Roman times, only those who enjoy wealth and leisure have been free to escape the pressures of the city. The great park lands of Europe were originally established as royal game preserves and forest resources from which commoners were strictly barred. British common law held that wildlife and forests belonged to the crown, as Robin Hood discovered when he poached the king's deer. The American translation of this tradition specifies that wild lands and animals belong to the people as a whole, but the idea of state ownership was long established by European monarchs before America appeared on the scene.

Early settlers in North America looked upon the land as a natural refuge from the oppressive cities of Europe. America was thought of from the beginning as a gigantic garden or wilderness park where humans could regulate their lives according to the principles of nature rather than the whims of kings. America was a national park in

the minds of our founding fathers, but one which existed for the benefit of all the people rather than merely for a handful of royalty.

Yet, strangely, the aristocratic view of gardens remained alive as our early history unfolded. The leaders of the American Revolution were members of a new kind of aristocracy that was also based upon land ownership. They shared the view that a social utopia would be created if the values traditionally associated with gardens and farms could somehow be fused with the needs of civilized life. Thomas Jefferson envisioned a civilization which would draw its moral strength from the people's attachment to the land. In Jefferson's words, "Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God . . . whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue." Jefferson, of course, was not thinking of the American Indians or of the black slaves who labored in the earth of the plantations, but rather of farmer-landowners like himself, the pastoral gentlemen who owned and managed the American garden. Jefferson connected both moral virtue and political rights to land stewardship exercised by landowners. The slaves and Indians, no matter how close they might be to the land, were excluded from Jefferson's vision and from the Constitution which he and his fellow proprietors created.

#### Snakes and Machines in the Garden

Jefferson also feared the intrusion of a snake into the American garden, and he knew that the snake's name was industry. Leo Marx's revealing book, The Machine in the Garden, traces Jefferson's anguish as he fought the development of manufacturing and industry in the hope of preserving the garden qualities of America. Jefferson even argued that America should export raw materials to Europe for manufacture and then return finished products to the American market rather than developing factories on the garden soil of America. He knew that the machine and the garden were incompatible.

Jefferson's hopes for retaining a garden America dissolved, Leo Marx tells us, when the War of 1912 made it necessary to develop manufacturing in the interests of national defense. Like Adam in the Garden of Eden, America then fell from its state of purity, and Jefferson wrote in his diary that "Our enemy has indeed the consolation of Satan on removing our first parents from Paradise: from a peaceable and agricultural nation, he makes us a military and manufacturing one." Expelled from the garden by the two-headed snake of war and industry, we proceeded to build more and more machines in the garden, but Americans have never lost their sense of nostalgia and regret for the pastoral peace that has been left behind.

The middle years of the nineteenth century were devoted to the machine and to the conversion of the wilderness garden into an efficient farm. Power and wealth appeared along with cities and industry, and America became more urban each year as it overwhelmed the natural wilderness with mechanical progress. Those who still cherished the dream of a garden America then organized themselves to preserve some part of that vision from the encroachment of machine America, and the national park idea was born in 1872 at Yellowstone.

America's National Parks are expressive of a myth that has been present in Western culture for some four thousand years. They are National Gardens of Eden where we can feel close to the origins of human life and to the peace, innocence, and moral purity that myth ascribes to the pre-fallen state of mankind. They are also places to seek refuge from cities and machines, offering us the psychological relief (the literal meaning of re-creation) which makes it possible to continue our work in unpleasant urban surroundings. They are remnants of the Jeffersonian dream of a garden Utopia, comforting for the evidence they offer that there are still a few places where the machine has not yet spoiled nature. And somewhere within us, they also feed our aristocratic ego by showing the world that we are rich and powerful enough to afford gardens. All Americans can think of themselves as kings who control vast game preserves.

#### The Roots of Minority Indifference

It is a source of some embarrassment and concern to National Park Service officials that the Parks have never appealed equally to all the people. Poor people, black people, and ethnic minorities generally show little enthusiasm for the park idea. Despite recent strenuous efforts to bring "Parks to the People," the parks stubbornly remain essentially playgrounds for middle-class citizens.

The reasons behind minority indifference toward National Parks are largely unexplored, perhaps because indifference doesn't demand to be understood as strongly as hostility does. No minority groups really hate the parks, but none seem to care much about them either. Recent attempts at cultural self-appraisal by thoughtful black and Indian writers offer some insight into the lack of enthusiasm for parks displayed by American minorities.

To begin with, it is important to remember that the Myth of the Garden is not a cultural property of either African or American Indian traditions. The mythologies of both cultures assume that the civilized structures of human life are perfectly compatible with systems of nature, and both emphasize that the adaptation of human affair to natural processes is one of the essential responsibilities of civilization. Before

Africa and Indian America were influenced by the intrusions of European civilization, neither had ever heard that nature is a place of refuge from the evils of civilization, or that the present state of humanity represents a fall from an earlier state of purity symbolized by the garden. It is thus no wonder that the great national parks created by white men in Africa and America have always been difficult for the natives of both places to understand. Their inherited mythology simply does not support the idea of separate value systems for nature and for humanity.

In addition to their varying cultural mythologies, the red man and the black man have more practical reasons to hold different views of the American wilderness than those common among white Americans. For the past few centuries, both groups have learned in pain that their association with the land is a source of misery and humiliation, not of peace or fulfillment. Black and Indian values today not only lack the pastoral garden imagery reflected in the National Parks, but both are in some ways actively hostile to that imagery.

#### Black Prisoners on the Land

Shortly after his release from prison in 1968, Eldridge Cleaver wrote an essay called "the Land Question and Black Liberation" in which he pointed out that one of the more important consequences of slavery in America was that "black people learned to hate the land." The American land was a place of punishment and imprisonment for slaves, not the source of liberation that white settlers found in it. From a black point of view, Jefferson's idyllic image of the nobility of rural gardens was thus completely reversed. The history of black people in America has tied them to the land with hatred, not with love, and with servitude rather than with ownership. That is why, according to Cleaver, "one of the most provocative insults that can be tossed at a black is to call him a farm boy, to infer that he is from a rural area or in any way attached to an agrarian situation." Since the end of official slavery gave blacks some small mobility, they have "come to measure their own value according to the number of degrees they are away from the soil." The city and its symbols, Cleaver concludes, are more likely to attract black allegiance than any images of nature.

Black efforts over the past few decades have been concentrated on the struggle for social justice and for political power, not for relief or for a pastoral retreat from pain. When refuge is needed from that struggle, black people are not likely to look for it in any wilderness setting, but among other black people where they can expect to find understanding and human compassion. Nature, parks, and wilderness are terms which rarely appear in black vocabularies. A search among scores of recent

books by black authors reveals no reference or index entry concerning National Parks or wilderness lands. For most black people, the word park refers to an urban setting containing basketball courts, baseball diamonds, and perhaps a lawn for picnicking. The only wilderness of any concern is of the kind found in cities, the wilderness of the ghetto.

### The Humiliation of American Indians

Indians, too, need to be free of the images historically imposed upon them by the white man. Vine Deloria, one of the most articulate Indian spokesmen of recent years, summed up in a nutshell the traditional white view of both blacks and Indians: "Negroes were considered draft animals, Indians wild animals." White images pictured the slave as a domesticated animal laboring in the American garden, and the Indian was thought of as a wild brother to the deer, the antelope, and the other creatures who were at home on the range. When National Parks were established to commemorate the white conquest of the American wilderness and its wild animals, Indians were of course included. So now we can see bears at Yellowstone, wolves at Mt. McKinley, Hopis at Grand Canyon, and Navajos weaving blankets at many National Monuments of the Southwest.

The National Parks are places of humiliation for Indians who are displayed and exploited there. The curio counters are piled high with cheap imitations of Indian artifacts to be sold as trinkets to white tourists, and in the evening the naturalist's lecture is likely to begin with a brief description of the quaint Indians and other animals who used the park lands before the white man arrived on the scene. Many of the parks specifically glorify the white conquest over Indians or commemorate the white appropriation of Indian lands. Even the few preserved Indian victories are monuments to white dominance, as at Custer Battlefield where it is shown how the Indians won the battle while losing the war. As the plantations remind blacks of both past and present causes for shame, so the parks often recall to Indians the destruction of their cultural heritage.

### Economic and Social Problems

It is small wonder, then, that neither blacks nor Indians show enthusiasm for National Parks. The usual explanation for their disinterest, common among sociologists and National Park Service officials, is of course also pertinent: blacks and Indians are generally poor people who can ill afford the time or money needed for enjoyment of nature, and neither group is likely to find much pleasure in the hiking, camping, photography, and nature study which attract middle-class whites to the parks. But even if blacks and Indians could be "taught" to appreciate park lands in the same way



that many white people do, and even if both groups could somehow be provided sufficient wealth and leisure to visit the parks regularly, only the protruding tip of an enormous iceberg of indifference would have been melted. The larger influence of established cultural values which disagree with those of white Americans would not have been touched.

Can the great wilderness parks, then, be of any benefit to black and Indian minority groups in America as Park Service officials now say they would like them to be? Perhaps not, except in the relatively superficial matters of providing inexpensive recreational space without discrimination for those few blacks and Indians who may choose to use the parks on weekend outings. The deeper emotional and cultural needs of both groups are unlikely ever to be satisfied in the sense that the parks satisfy Americans of European ancestry. Neither blacks nor Indians are ever likely to find the Garden of Eden in Yosemite Valley as other tourists do. Attempts by the National Park Service to attract minorities to the parks assume that these groups will find them pleasant and meaningful in the same way that white middle-class visitors do, but that assumption is most likely false.

#### Social Protest in the Wilderness

The National Parks have not so far been involved in the great struggles between races and economic classes which have characterized recent decades, to the good fortune of the parks. It is possible to imagine, however, the advent of a sad day when the wilderness parks might become just one more symbol of white American exploitation, as white banks and businesses now are to many young people of racial minorities. The parks do represent white American values, not universal human values, and there is no reason for them to be held sacred by groups who may choose to oppose those values. A bit of plastic explosive in Old Faithful would go a long way as a protest demonstration. The features preserved in the parks are delicate and difficult to defend against those who do not willingly respect them. If it should ever become fashionable to bomb and burn the national parks, we will have reached a profound and perhaps irreversible level of cultural and racial warfare. The very values which Americans have attached to the parks have made them vulnerable symbols of white exclusiveness, and so subject to such attacks.

The National Parks need not be thought of as Gardens of Eden to be tended primarily for aristocratic or middle-class relaxation from toil, or as symbols of white man's conquest over nature or over his fellow man of whatever race, or as playgrounds useful for relief or distraction from urban social ills. Their most important values may lie



Instead in the integrity of the wilderness ecosystems which are protected within them, quite apart from any emotional needs they may satisfy for the American people. Wilderness ecosystems, capable of maintaining their equilibrium without human laws or intervention, and they represent our best source of information about the necessary preconditions for long-term survival of complex living communities. It is perhaps time now to look to our parks for the knowledge that is inherent in their natural structures rather than for relief from the private fears which we bring into them from somewhere else.

### Ecology vs. Justice

Social justice and environmental stability are the two urgent needs facing American policy in the remaining decades of this century. Often their demands seem mutual exclusive, as when minority groups demand new industrial developments which will produce more jobs and more pollution, or, conversely, when attempts at population control are regarded by racial minorities as white genocide directed against them. As the implications of both movements begin to unfold more fully in public, positions of neutrality between them will be more and more difficult to hold. The National Park Service, like most federal agencies, has so far elected to respond to the demands for social justice made by racial minorities, for that demand has been voiced most powerfully. The parks are increasingly expected to play a role which responds to legitimate social demands, even if a few demands of nature must be sacrificed in the process. The pendulum of Park Service policy, which has always swung precariously between "preservation" and "recreation," seems now to be caught increasingly on the recreation side, and the imperative of preserving park wilderness must suffer accordingly. But that is a hopeless position for park policy to take, for even if it were possible for the parks to be made accessible to all oppressed people in America, many of those people would not want the parks.

Racial prejudice is an internal disease of society which has grown from faulty human attitudes toward other humans. Environmental degradation is the sad result of mistaken human attitudes toward the processes of nature. Ecosystems, like racial minorities, have now announced to the white man that they will tolerate no more of his garbage or exploitation. Though both crises have been created by the inordinate egotism of white culture with its demand for symbols of power and dominance, yet the two diseases should not be confused with one another, for their treatments must be different.

The goals of social justice will not be served by converting our best remaining

examples of environmental integrity, the National Parks, into settings for mass recreation. Prejudice and discrimination must be overcome by improving the laws and customs that govern human social relationships, not merely by providing minority groups with the recreational escapes which have sometimes helped white men to forget their problems. Similarly, environmental disease cannot be treated if we sacrifice our few surviving healthy ecosystems to social purposes. We will desperately need parks and other wilderness lands to study for the knowledge they alone contain about the ingredients essential to equilibrium among biological species, including our own species.

Black people and Indians have much to teach white culture about both problems. Both groups have survived tenaciously against overwhelming odds because they have learned better than whites how to encourage tolerance and brotherhood among humans and how to adapt human activities to the conditions of natural environments. Both know that men must be changed in order to agree with the world, not the other way around. That is a lesson that the white man has yet to learn from his fellow humans and from the wilderness land that still persists.