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Places

Title

Looking Beyond the 1980 Plan [Place Debate: Yosemite National Park - Prospects]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3r30t1qr>

Journal

Places, 6(3)

ISSN

0731-0455

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Publication Date

1990-04-01

Peer reviewed

Looking Beyond The 1980 Plan

Yosemite Valley is a symbol. It engraves powerful images upon our minds and evokes feelings of love, care and respect as well as a range of opinions on how it should be managed. People feel deeply about this place and express their feelings with passion—there are as many responses as visitors.

Yosemite is also a sacred place, a place for pilgrimage, for renewing the human spirit, for enriching human life. Native Americans have lived here for 4,000 years; those living here today still feel a reverence for this place and believe much of the Valley is sacred. Their stewardship, even today, is an example from which we could learn.

For me, Yosemite is a sanctuary, not a consecrated place but a place of refuge and protection for native plants and animals, scenery and natural processes, each evolving and changing at its own pace, generally uninterrupted.

Having lived in Yosemite for 15 years I am continually mesmerized by it, especially as the seasons overtake each other or when nature plays tricks—like when flowering dogwood bloom in October, or the ground trembles following frequent rock slides, or a lightning-caused fire burns itself out, or a waterfall mysteriously appears as the result of a thunder shower somewhere miles away at the head of the watershed, or the river rises before your eyes during spring runoff.

The natural environment, especially in Yosemite Valley, has changed as a result of centuries of human intervention in natural processes. The most consequential changes have occurred during the last 100 years, ironically, ever since Yosemite was established as a park.

For example, at the west end of Yosemite Valley, a terminal moraine was dynamited to lower the water table and eliminate ponds in which mosquitoes bred. Motel rooms were built in the prime Yosemite Falls viewshed. Quarries and borrow pits were established to supply road and building material. The side of a glacially-polished dome was blasted away for the placement of a road that, ironically, gives access to an observation point named after Olmsted. Lichen were burned away from the face of Glacier Point from the Fire Fall's burning embers. The banks of the Merced River were stabilized with rip-rap. And until 20 years ago all naturally-caused fires were extinguished.

Those changes, however, have occurred primarily in the 11 percent of the Park not designated wilderness. Most are reversible or can be mitigated, but there are exceptions: the dynamited moraine, the quarry and the scar at Olmsted Point.

The most significant challenge for the foreseeable future is for the National Park Service (NPS) to determine the appropriate number, range, type and scope of visitor activities, services and experiences based on the ability of the Park resources to support them. Then the NPS must establish appropriate visitor use levels. It is important that people be able to experience this wonderful place all year long, at night as well as during the day. But not at the expense of the natural and scenic resources.

The 1980 General Management Plan, which involved as many as 60,000 individuals in an exhaustive participatory planning process, was aimed at returning the Park—particularly the Valley—to a more natural state and increasing the emphasis on visitors' experience of the Park's natural and scenic resources.

Since then, numerous buildings have been removed and the sites have been restored to a natural condition; abandoned roads, trails and fences have been removed and those areas restored to natural conditions; meadows have been revegetated and a band of bighorn sheep have been relocated to the east side of the Park—all at minor cost.

The number of visitors has increased by two percent every year during the last decade—last year more 3.6 million people visited Yosemite. In 1980, most visitors were repeat visitors from California. Since then there has been a significant increase in the number of visitors from foreign countries.

What visitors do in the Park has changed, too. Backpacking has declined; rock-climbing has mushroomed. Rafting, cross-country skiing and mountain-bike riding have increased measurably. More visitors arrive in recreational vehicles. There is an increase in the number of overflights. And last year there were more than 350 weddings.

Yosemite is also big business. A Fresno *Bee* article estimated that overnight visitors spend as much as \$100 a day in the Park, and that tourism in Yosemite, Sequoia and Kings Canyon national parks (both to the south of Yosemite) generates \$322 million a year and sustains 7,000 jobs in Fresno County alone. Communities at the Park's borders are growing in size and ever increasing the number of tourist facilities. Undoubtedly, this will result in both primary and secondary impacts on park resources.

We need to step back and look at the Park in its regional context, from a resource, transportation, economic and tourism perspective. We need to set aside jurisdictional concerns and develop a plan that, at a minimum, involves the surrounding four counties, four National Forests (administered by the Department of Agriculture) and the Park Service. We must think of this area as one large tourist region.

There are a range of possibilities—doing nothing, using natural resources wisely, providing minimum facilities, developing alternative destinations—and all should be evaluated in context with the Park's natural and scenic resources. Even the various

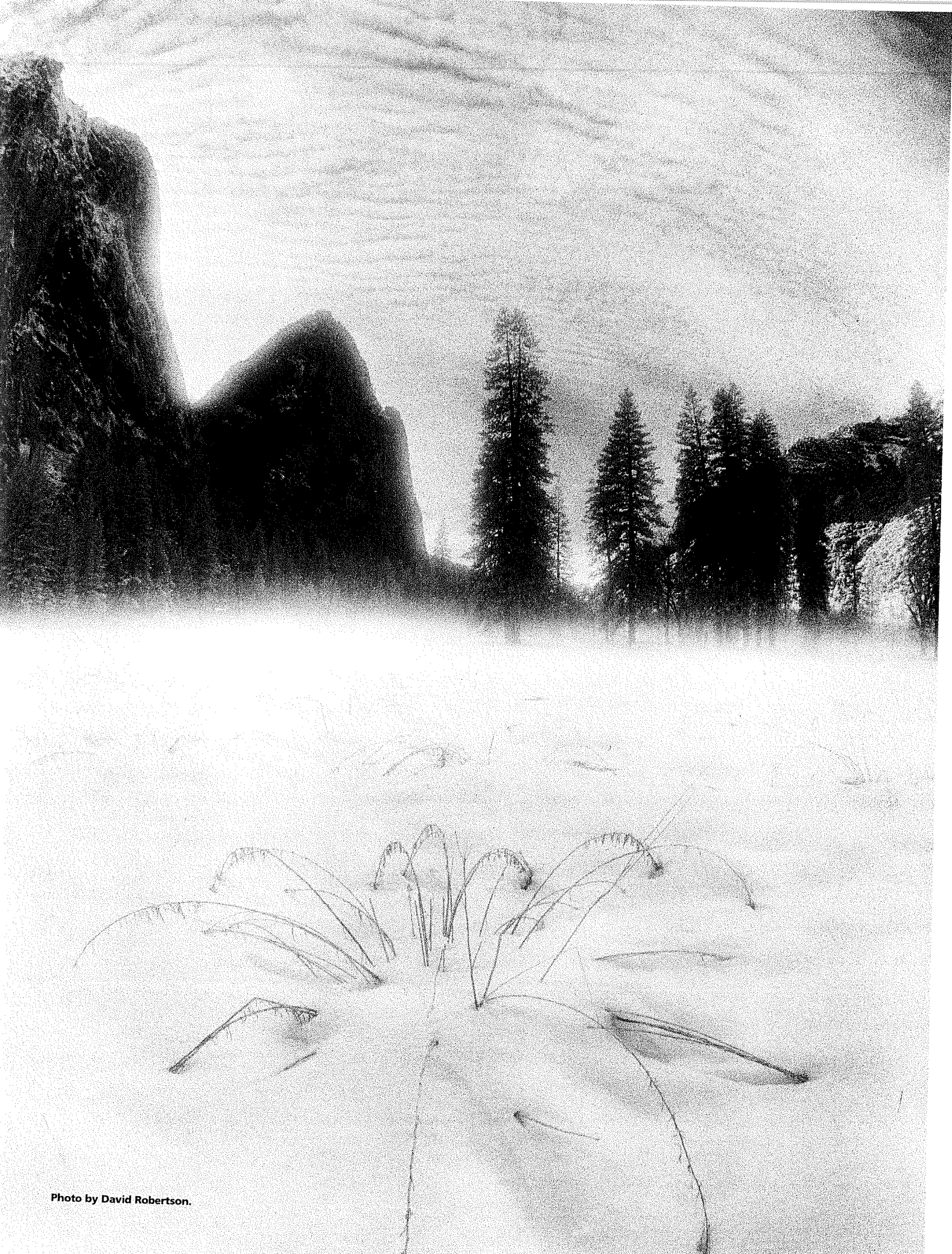


Photo by David Robertson.

groups and individuals involved with the Park agree on the same general goals: protect natural and scenic resources and provide for their enjoyment, provide a quality visitor experience and support a profitable tourist trade.

That given, why can't we do better? Why isn't it feasible to expect a better tourist experience? Isn't it possible that tourism and resource protection are more alike than contradictory? Isn't it possible that commercial tourism and recreation managed by public agencies are more independent than interdependent?

John Muir said that everything in the universe is connected to everything else. What we really need, as we begin our second century, is a new paradigm that is holistic or systematic in the widest sense. Any proposed action in this tourist region should be considered in light of its effects on the whole system of which it is a part. Certainly, Native Americans, whose presence in Yosemite predates its "discovery," believed in a more global perspective of this place.

It would be wonderful to think that a hundred years from now, at Yosemite's bicentennial, this centennial year will be remembered as the year we broadened our field of vision of this place by looking at the macroscopic instead of the microscopic.

Using its guest list as a mailing list, the Yosemite Park and Curry Co., the sole concessionaire at the Park, is mailing 93,000 letters urging former guests to lobby the National Park Service to abandon its 1980 plan to ease congestion in the glacier-carved Valley.

—San Francisco Chronicle, December 5, 1989

Over the years, the Park Service has spent \$2.3 million to refurbish the Wawona [Hotel]. It leases it to the Curry Co. for \$19,000 a year. At that rate, it will take more than a century for the [NPS] to recoup its investment.

—San Francisco Chronicle, January 7, 1990

Yosemite Needs You

Memories and emotions that last a lifetime are sparked by the unparalleled majesty of Yosemite Park—its waterfalls, sheer granite cliffs, alpine rivers and lakes, and valleys. The allure of vistas from Glacier Point, the sunset's glow at Tuolumne Meadows and the majesty of Yosemite Valley attract millions of visitors, even more admirers and, recently, people who are giving their time and money to help preserve and protect Yosemite's grandeur.

What motivates a person—whether a tourist, hiker, backpacker, or climber—to become an active supporter or advocate? Usually, a problem.

The transition from enjoyer to supporter may be subtle, the motivating force highly personal. My transformation was gradual. I have visited Yosemite several times a year throughout my life and hiked most of its trails. The joys of uncrowded trails, unique vistas and starlight camping spawned repeated visits.

But one day I was hiking in Matterhorn Canyon, a magnificent alpine area in the northeast corner of Yosemite when I encountered tree avalanches that blocked the trail for over a quarter mile. For me, this unmaintained trail was the last straw in a series of deteriorated trail conditions that I had experienced during the course of several summers. That evening I resolved to do something about it and became an advocate.

Yosemite has approximately 800 miles of trails, with about 100 distinctively identifiable trails. Through the mid-1960s, those trails were maintained annually by five crews. That financial commitment and work force diminished to only two back-country crews in 1987 and only one such crew in 1988 and 1989—and those were privately funded. As a result of Congressional and Presidential neglect over many years, the cost of restoring Yosemite's trail system is now estimated to be \$11,000 per mile.

Yosemite's budget (both operating and capital) for 1988-89 was \$10.7 million. According to the General Accounting Office,