

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

Olmsted's Yosemite, A Vision Betrayed [Place Debate: Yosemite National Park - Prospects]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4r35843n>

Journal

Places, 6(3)

ISSN

0731-0455

Author

Sax, Joseph L

Publication Date

1990-04-01

Peer reviewed

Olmsted's Yosemite, A Vision Betrayed

From the moment American pioneers first saw Yosemite, it was obvious the Valley would be an object of intense and competing desires. Yosemite's history could be written as a succession of efforts by all who aspired to save it from the ruin they thought others would wreak upon it.

In 1864 Abraham Lincoln granted the federally owned Yosemite Valley to California to be held "for public use, resort and recreation." At the time, there was nothing of today's conflict between those favoring development and use and those favoring preservation. The threat was much starker: the occupation of the Valley by homesteaders and the clearing of its trees.

The park idea was a democratic one: Such wondrous places ought to belong to everyone rather than being the exclusive preserve of a privileged few. The stunning natural settings, thought more wondrous than anything that Europe had to offer, persuaded the Government that their primary value lay in their beauty, rather than in industrial or agricultural use. The key concepts were "public" rather than private, and "recreation" rather than resource exploitation.

National parks have certainly been saved for public recreation. With few exceptions, the battle against using parks for timber, dam sites and cattle grazing has been won. But many of the most cherished parks—and Yosemite preeminently—embody a striking paradox. The mind's image of a great natural park is of stunning scenery, great vistas and a primeval silence broken only by the singing of birds. But often, as in Yosemite Valley, the reality is different: a noisy, polluted and congested cityscape put down in a mountain paradise.

Is this bad? Many think it is not. The much maligned Valley, sometimes contemptuously called Yosemite City, or the home of industrial tourism, is enormously popular. For those who come year after year to camp among the crowds or to enjoy high-toned musicales or Christmas at the elegant Ahwahnee Hotel, to return the Valley to its primitive former self would be to take away a part of their personal geography. The Valley has been a highly developed recreation area for a long time, and it has generated a constituency whose stake in it as it is cannot be gainsaid.

Is this good? I do not think so. By permitting the most sought-after locations in our parks to become nodes of urban tourism we have lost the chance to offer to the average urban individual the rare opportunity of an engagement with a natural setting, a place where the eye is not drawn to a human-made structure, where we are not led along pre-set paths and drawn to

planned and organized sights and scenes.

Of course, there are abundant opportunities to find real natural settings. The vast acreage of most parks is mostly wilderness or near wilderness. But close as it is, most of us stick close to what we know best, a managed environment plunked down in the mountains. That is the pity of the parks today and of Yosemite Valley—the premier example of a lost opportunity.

What is the alternative we might still choose at some places? No one has painted the picture better than Frederick Law Olmsted, the designer of Central Park, for a short time the chair of the commission that managed Yosemite and active in the mid-nineteenth century campaign to save Niagara Falls. It was in the latter capacity that he put forward a vision of a park that was accessible to the ordinary person and yet permitted a genuine opportunity to engage with nature.

Even a century ago, as many as 10,000 people a day visited Niagara, which had been taken over by commercial enterprises that led tourists around and built roads to accommodate ever more people in their hurried visit to all the scenic sites. Olmsted wanted to restore an older Niagara, where people could experience the place "in an absorbed and contemplative way," to go back to the setting when:

... a visit to the Falls was a series of expeditions, and in each expedition hours were occupied in wandering slowly among the trees, going from place to place, with many intervals of rest. . . . There was not only a much greater degree of enjoyment, there was a different kind of enjoyment. . . . People were then loath to leave the place; many lingered on. . . revisiting ground they had gone over before, turning and returning.

This was just the sort of experience Olmsted envisioned for Yosemite in a report he wrote about the purpose of the park in 1865. He wanted the opportunity to invoke the contemplative faculty, to permit the natural scent to dominate and to permit the visitor to wander at length and at leisure, without anything to distract him from the natural setting.

Is this a visionary's dream, impractical in a world full of busy people whose pace of life allows for no such casual wanderings?

It was just for such people that Olmsted thought Niagara and Yosemite were most needed. Of course his vision asks a trade-off between quantity and quality of experience, and it demands some effort and some commitment of time by the visitor. It requires that park managers put aside the "turnstile" mentality that makes numbers served and concession revenues primary considerations.

It is probably much too late for Yosemite Valley. But such opportunities still exist elsewhere, at least in time. The secret is that for all the crush of summer, there are still great parks where winter remains a pristine time, where roads are not plowed and snowmobile trails do not yet dominate, where the skier or snowshoer is welcome to wander and see the park as it might have been a hundred years ago.