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Beacons of Beauty

Many of the concerns about Yosemite National Park carry with them an anomalous implication: The park is actually too beautiful, too beautiful for its own good.

It is the park's beauty, after all, that attracts so many visitors, who bring with them the crowding, traffic, smog and litter that wear down the ecosystem, clutter the landscape and obscure the experience that makes the park such a desirable place to visit.

Yosemite may be too beautiful for our good, as well.

Think for a minute why we visit Yosemite. Most likely it is to see beauty in its most spectacular, stupendous, awesome incarnation—landscapes that are nothing short of national (or planetary) treasures, certainly nothing like we can find near home.

When we visit, if we are lucky, we will be infused with the inspiration countless artists and the founders of this country's environmental movement found in this remarkable place, or perhaps be driven to a new height of personal dialogue with nature.

Let me suggest another reason why we visit Yosemite, particularly the Valley: because we can. A century ago, our government, deeming it worthy to protect both the landscape and public access to it, designated Yosemite a national park. Since then, as hoped, humans have hardly changed the landscape (compared to how they've change the landscape elsewhere).

On the other hand, Yosemite has changed more than wilderness areas, which have even more protection than parks. Highways have been built through it and to its most spectacular attractions, signs and travel guides chart the route to it from hundreds of miles distant, and the park itself is assigned a special color on our maps in order to stand out.

Lodgings, restaurants, gas stations and wilderness outfitters are creeping towards the park's boundaries and are strategically stationed throughout the park. Traveling to and through Yosemite is nowhere near as daunting as it was before Yosemite was designated park land, nor as difficult as exploring other parts of the Sierra Mountains.

Consequently, Yosemite is not only a place where beauty is preserved but also a beacon in the midst of undifferentiated wilderness, a beacon that coaxes us to witness its spectacle. You might call it a beacon of beauty.

One night a moth escaped from the dark sky through a window into my study and became trapped, circling madly around and around and around the light affixed to my ceiling. It was blinded by the brightness, and did not realize that if it were to fly away from the light it would find what it really wanted, a return passage to its nocturnal world.

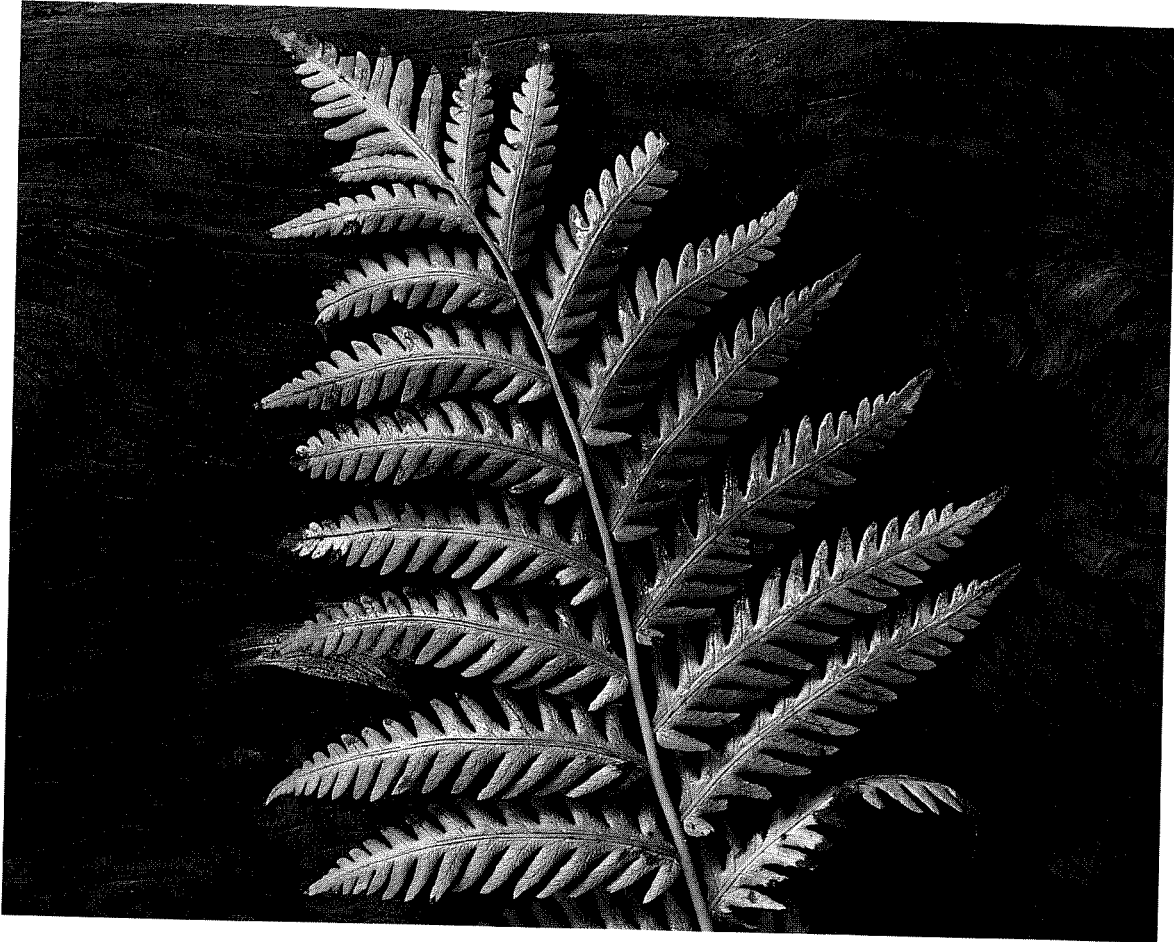
Just as moths are attracted to lights and seemingly blinded to their surroundings, we are drawn to beacons of beauty while tending to ignore beauty elsewhere. I learned this on my first trip to Yosemite, during which I ignored the Valley's beacon and passed through the Park, across Tioga Pass and into Inyo National Forest, on the Sierra's eastern slope. One day I hiked at Mono Lake, where one can climb to the top of a dormant volcano and sit. It was the most quiet, solitary place I had ever been. I meditated on the silence, overlaid with the persistent high desert wind. I reveled at Mono Lake's ever changing color: Depending on one's position, the angle of the sun and the cloudiness of the sky (or, perhaps, Mono's temperament), the lake can aspire to any color from black to emerald green to deep blue.

Other places, not necessarily beacons of beauty, have moved me just the same. The virgin stands of Gifford Pinchot National Forest in Washington State are being logged vigorously. The clear cutting, at first glance an act of violence, intrigued me because of the abstract, visual impact of logging on the landscape. The removal of trees reveals striking landscapes: Denuded mountains crouch in their raw form, exposing silhouettes and surface textures I had never imagined before. The policy of cutting small stands of trees in any one place at any one time, then replanting, has created a living laboratory of ecological succession.

The lines we draw around national parks are valuable defenses against unwieldy human interference in the course of natural events. In our society, it is essential to make parks accessible to everybody. (Whether this must be by automobile is another matter.) We should all have an opportunity to witness Yosemite's grandeur and to make what we can of our place in nature.

Yet, as national park borders have been drawn around some of our most spectacular landscapes, those landscapes have become magnets to which people flock. They have come to define what we expect from our encounters with nature and to be the yardstick by which we evaluate our impressions of natural beauty.

We cannot become confused; spectacle alone is not beauty. We must not follow Yosemite's beacon to find beauty but seek it everywhere we can; if we look hard enough, we might find it in places all around us. If we could teach ourselves to do that, our souls would be energized more than they ever would by making pilgrimages, even a thousand times over, to beacons of beauty.



John Sexton,
Fern and Log.
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