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Peer reviewed

Review: Wilderness in National Parks-- Playground or Preserve

By John C. Miles

Reviewed by Elery Hamilton-Smith
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Miles, John C. *Wilderness in National Parks – Playground or Preserve*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2009. x,334 pp. ISBN 9780295988757. US\$35.00, paper.

John Miles has set out to describe and analyse the long-changing role and relationships of wilderness within the United States National Park system. He recognises that the Park Service has struggled, and continues to struggle, with resolving the ambiguities of wilderness policies for the almost one hundred years of its existence. Because of his clear focus on the wilderness question, this is one of the most thorough and detailed historical study of the Park Service yet published. It also demonstrates a very soundly based balance between a great love of the parks and his capacity to critically examine all aspects of decision-making and management of the Service.

Strangely, the United States National Park Service has consistently claimed to be the first and greatest such operation in the whole world. Certainly, they were the first to use the name "National Park," but many cultural groups throughout the world had recognised and protected valuable areas which served the purposes of national parks each in their own way. This was not only widespread but had endured over very many centuries. Even in the Americas, there is good evidence of such sites long prior to the arrival of Europeans. Regrettably, even the claim to greatness is misplaced because of the long-standing "control and command" assumption underlying park management.

The underlying sense of spiritual value in everybody's vision of the National Parks evoked a powerful emotional response and commitment to almost every issue which demanded attention. The inevitable complexity of the policy arena inevitably led to complex and shifting differences. Politicians, virtually always including the President, and the administrators of the park system all had a very strong personal vision. Various other governmental land management agencies often saw the Park Service as a threat to their own powers and so joined the debate. A growing number of both NGOs and commercial interests grew up both in support of and against nature conservation ideals and also made their voices heard at all times. Finally, there were the many individual opinion leaders including heroes like John Muir, Henry Thoreau, Bob Marshall and Aldo Leopold.

One of the strange outcomes of the continuing debate and fragmentation of thinking is that there is surprisingly little soundly based research carried out within the Park Service. President Reagan's Commission on Americans Outdoors made it clear that there was a very real need for research which would serve to generate and support improved decision making. This was taken up by the U.S. Forest Service and many invaluable research studies were generated. A valuable retrospective summary and assessment of some of the Forest Service research is provided by McCool et al (McCool, S.F., Clark, R.N., and Stankey, G.H. *An assessment of frameworks useful for public land recreation planning*. General Technical Report PNW-GTR-705. Portland, OR: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Pacific Northwest Research Station, 2007). But little of any quality emerged from the Park Service. But, I must balance what I have written above. There have been many inspired and visionary individualistic on-ground managers who have risen above mediocrity in park management and produced wonderful opportunities for truly positive visitor experiences. So, to do justice to the Service, it simply demonstrates that in almost all spheres of action, the United States has the best and the worst of everything!

Miles has done a real service to scholarship in his detailed reporting and analysis of the underlying conflicts over many years. It provides one invaluable basis upon which enhanced research and management policies may be based.

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