

BOOK REVIEW

MOUNTAINS WITHOUT HANDRAILS: REFLECTIONS ON THE NATIONAL PARKS. By Joseph L. Sax. Ann Arbor, Mich.: The University of Michigan Press, 1980. Pp. 152.

In *MOUNTAINS WITHOUT HANDRAILS*, Professor Sax of the University of Michigan Law School has written an apologia for a national park system designed to serve the preservationist elite. Drawing on a school of American nature writing which extends from Thoreau and Emerson to John McPhee and Edward Abbey, Sax contends that a relatively small minority provided part of the spiritual and political impetus for the insulation of millions of acres of public land from commercial development. The preservationist view, to which Sax adheres, holds that parks should remain free not only from the most overt forms of industrial development, but from the conventional demands of tourism as well. While conceding that these values may not be shared by the bulk of the American public, and that other influences played an important role in the creation and expansion of the park system, Sax asserts that preservationist ideology should remain at the heart of park administrative policy.

Professor Sax embraces the notion that parks are more valuable as symbolic and spiritual artifacts than as commodities for recreational use. Instead of engaging in what Edward Abbey calls "industrial tourism"—whereby people use parks as they would use Disneyland—visitors should bring to the parklands a willingness to take nature on its own terms and to experience its pleasures without the filters and distractions of modern amenities.

A great deal rides on this view. Sax likens the preservationist to a secular prophet, a converter of American recreational morals. A park without paved roads or hotdog stands is more likely to awaken our dormant qualities of "independence, self-reliance, [and] self-restraint." (P. 15.) Ideally, a wilderness encounter should force the individual to reflect on his own internal resources, to rediscover strengths that modern life with its emphasis on conformity and material status tends to diminish. "Contemplative recreation," as Sax calls it, leads not only to a sense of internal well-being but to the possibility of spiritual renewal as well.

The quasi-religious perspective that the modern preservationist brings to his calling has its roots in the nineteenth century; it was present at the genesis of the national park system. Exemplified by such luminaries as John Muir and Frederick Law Olmstead, the advocates of romantic naturalism helped motivate Congress to preserve Yellowstone, Yosemite, Grand Canyon and a host of lesser wonders during the late 1800s. The establishment of these parks was aided, as Sax points out, by the fact that at the time they had little economic value because of their remoteness. (P. 9.)

Sax recognizes that the frontier impulse to develop the wilderness also had a strong hold over the American consciousness. The country's approach to its natural wonders thus exhibited two conflicting ideological strands:

on one side a repugnance at the seemingly boundless materialism that infused American life, a spiritual attachment to untrammelled nature, and a self-congratulatory attitude toward preservation of nature's bounty; and on the other a commitment to economic progress wherever it could be exacted, nationalistic pride, and the practical use of nature as a commodity supportive of tourism and commercial recreation.

(P. 10.)

This dichotomy dominates Sax's treatment of the early history of the national parks. He views the development of the parklands in terms of a temporary alliance between conflicting intellectual beliefs. As a result, the book downplays more conventional versions of the origin of the American conservation movement. For example, progressivism, with its emphasis on rational resource management and the use of administrative experts, is hardly mentioned. Instead of concentrating on the politics behind the establishment of the national park system, Sax prefers to explore the thoughts of those who looked to the wilderness for commercial bounty and those who looked to it for spiritual comfort.

The "spiritualist" side was best articulated by Frederick Law Olmstead, the designer of New York City's Central Park and one of the earliest managers of Yosemite. Olmstead maintained that the true reason for establishing a park was to give the individual a unique opportunity to exercise his contemplative faculties. As Olmstead wrote in 1865, "[i]n the interest which natural scenery inspires . . . the attention is aroused and the mind occupied without purpose, without a continuation of the common process of relating the present action, thought or perception to some future end. There is little else that has this quality so purely." (P. 20.) To

nurture the contemplative experience, it was necessary to prevent any "artificial elements" from interfering with the park visitor's response to scenery. Thus Olmstead objected strenuously to a proposal that would allow people to view Niagara Falls without leaving their carriages. Such crowd accommodation, while perhaps justified in terms of popular demand, would detract from the purity of the contemplative experience.

Olmstead is Professor Sax's model park manager. Nevertheless, Sax recognizes that powerful forces advocate making the parks more accessible, entertaining and attractive to conventional tourists. Part of the reason given in the early congressional debates for the creation of a national park system was a desire to compete with Europe for the tourist trade. (P. 9.) It is not a very long leap from that early impulse to transform the Amercian West into "America's Switzerland" to the proposal in the 1970s to allow Disney Enterprises to build an alpine ski village in the Mineral King Valley. Sax acknowledges that the demand for planned resort facilities is both large and legitimate; he just wants to prevent national parks from catering to it and thus perverting their true purpose.

For the preservationist, an individual's recreational choice is nothing to be taken lightly. The dichotomy between contemplative recreation (fly fishing, cross-country skiing and backpacking) and what Sax calls power-based activity (snowmobiling, motorcycling and, to some extent, hunting) splits along economic and cultural lines. In what surely must be the most controversial section of *MOUNTAINS WITHOUT HANDRAILS*, Sax explores the relationship between class structure and leisure activity. Explaining why blue-collar workers account for only five percent of all wilderness visits, Sax posits that recreational choices reflect:

profound needs that no mere change of attitude or public policy can affect . . . [t]hose who already have power in the society (like successful professionals) are attracted to recreation that demonstrates to them that they are above needing power; while those who are powerless need nothing so much as to demonstrate (however pitifully) that they are capable of dominion. Thus the distinguished New York lawyer and fly-fisherman lies by the side of a stream contemplating the bubbles, while the factory worker roars across the California desert on a motorcycle.

(P. 48.)

Though stereotypical, this theory of class influence on leisure choices presents a disturbing challenge to the preservationist ethic. As Sax concedes, if parkland policy encourages only a contempla-

tive style of recreation, then a valuable public resource becomes the plaything of a very limited proportion of the population. (P. 47.) In response, Sax urges the preservationist to be more assertive about the rewards of reflective leisure. Like the university professor or the scientist, the preservationist should stick to his principles while trying to explain their value to the rest of the populace:

[he] is an elitist, at least in one sense. He seeks to persuade the majority to be distrustful of their own instincts and inclinations, which he believes are reinforced by alienating work and the dictates of mass culture. . . . To those who ask how anyone else can purport to know what another citizen should want, he responds that complacent acceptance of things as they are is not the hallmark of a democratic society.

(P. 51.)

There is a paradox in all this. As the preservationist succeeds in his self-appointed task of moral persuasion and demand for contemplative recreation grows, the parklands become less able to bear the burden of increased use. The problems of management and administration multiply dramatically; in order to handle the crowds compromises are called for; in the end the park is stripped of much of its original appeal. Yosemite Valley and the Grand Canyon are classic examples of this Catch-22.

Sax approaches the problem of park management with what he rather misleadingly calls a compromise proposal. He believes that the key to an effective management policy lies in presenting a clear choice to park patrons. Rather than seeking to serve "the wide variety of recreational preferences . . . , park managers would encourage all visitors—whatever their past experiences or skills—to try more challenging and demanding recreations." (P. 61.)

What this means on a practical level is somewhat unclear. By advocating that the national parks become the exclusive preserve of those who want to contemplate unspoiled nature, Sax relegates conventional tourism to privately owned resorts or less attractive public lands; he implicitly assumes that there will be enough of these facilities to meet the demand.

MOUNTAINS WITHOUT HANDRAILS fails in other ways to address the consequences of implementing the preservationist philosophy. For example, to those who ask how much public land should remain undeveloped, Sax replies that asking "[h]ow many acres of wilderness are enough" is like asking "how many books a library should have, or how many Brahms symphonies are sufficient." He maintains that "[i]f the public accedes to the preservationist posi-

tion, the task will be to hold on to as much national parkland as other irresistible public demands will tolerate." (P. 66.) That position can hardly be called a compromise.

A commitment to a preservationist policy also presents certain administrative problems which Sax tends to downplay. To encourage the sense that by coming to a park the visitor is doing something extraordinary—that it is a choice with consequences—Sax would discourage or prohibit motorized travel, forget about carefully maintained trails and sharply limit the number of overnight accommodations. To cope with the reduction in visitor capacity that this would entail, Sax suggests rationing access to the most popular sites. This is now being done at Point Reyes and in the Grand Canyon (where the waiting time for the chance to engage in reflective recreation is over a year). What others may consider a necessary evil, Sax views in positive terms; rationing heightens a sense of anticipation and makes the actual park experience more dramatic. (P. 83.)

Critics of keeping the national parks in a primitive state often voice concern that the elderly and the handicapped would be denied access. Sax views the developers' purported concern for the infirm with a measure of skepticism. Somewhat cavalierly he notes that "[p]eople who were active when they were young ordinarily continue to be as active as they can when they get older Neither the elderly nor the infirm, if they were active at other times, are in the forefront of those advocating intense development of parklands." (P. 80.) Sax is more convincing when he states that:

[o]ne does not provide . . . an opportunity [for contemplative recreation] for older people or inexperienced visitors by building a highway to the top of a mountain. Rather we can assure that places that *are* accessible to them are not so deprived of their natural qualities as to put such an experience beyond their reach.

(P. 80.)

Sax makes the point that it is misleading to equate preservationists with environmentalists. The formers' concerns are spiritual, not ecological. While the two may unite in their opposition to unregulated development of the parks, their interests may also conflict. For example, although Sax asserts that the kind of intensive experience he advocates uses less land than other types of recreation, there is little doubt that a backpacker camping two weeks in the backcountry will have more effect on the natural environment than a family who spends twenty minutes at park headquar-

ters to buy postcards. But a management policy designed to protect only the park's ecosystem is not acceptable to Sax and the preservationists. They do not care about wilderness for its own sake, but about its effect on its admirers. As an example, Sax points to the debate over allowing motorized rafts in the Grand Canyon; he concedes that such rafts have no greater impact on the canyon's fragile ecology than oar-powered boats. In fact, they may have less effect since they are able to make an otherwise twelve-day trip in three days—reducing the amount of time that people have to damage the physical environment. That does not matter to the preservationist; motor boats are undesirable because they turn the Grand Canyon into just another tourist area and rob the rafting adventure of its essential uniqueness.

For the preservationist, the true focus of park administration should be on cultivating an "intense" recreational experience rather than on conserving the natural environment. As Sax notes, *MOUNTAINS WITHOUT HANDRAILS* talks little about nature for its own sake and even seems "to denigrate ecosystem preservation as central to the mission of the parks." (P. 103.) For all his unabashed elitism, Sax cares more about people than nature. "The preservationists are really moralists at heart, and people are very much at the center of their concerns. They encourage people to immerse themselves in natural settings and to behave there in certain ways, because they believe such behavior is redeeming." (P. 103.)

Perhaps it is this moralistic underpinning that gives Sax's book its earnest tone. For a book about recreation, it takes the choices it presents very seriously. While Sax concedes that tastes may vary over how to spend one's leisure time, there is no doubt that he imbues his preference with a separate, higher value. The preservationist thus sees contemplative recreation as something the masses should support, though not necessarily enjoy. It is his duty to persuade the majority that it needs national parks as much as it needs universities, research laboratories and libraries. The preservationist philosophy demands that an elite interest has a right to be a cornerstone of public lands policy.

Wallace Stegner calls *MOUNTAINS WITHOUT HANDRAILS* "hard-headed and essential." This reviewer prefers to characterize it as eloquent but romantic. There is a danger that Sax's sentimental vision of what the national parks should be blinds him to their real dilemma. Whether a crusade for contemplative recreation can

move a country facing a future of ever-diminishing natural resources is at best problematic. Given new pressure to develop public lands, preservation of the wilderness is likely to have less rather than more political currency. In particular, the energy realities of the future may make Sax's dream of pristine national parks essentially irrelevant. Arguably then, the preservationists' major enemy is not the tour guide or the resort owner—at least they see some value in undeveloped public land, even if it is a commercial value. The most important struggle is not against those who want to popularize the wilderness, but against those who may want to abolish it altogether.

Alice Jump

