Rethinking American Exceptionalism: Toward a Transnational History of National Parks, Wilderness, and Protected Areas

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The twentieth century has been described as the “prodigal century.” The growth in population, agriculture, industry and, consequently, resource consumption, energy use, and pollution made it unlike any century before. Those changes contributed to a dramatic reordering of people and the environment. But amid so much change, the twentieth century was also distinguished by efforts to protect the natural world from the forces that were transforming it. Among the most sustained of such efforts were those to set aside protected areas for tourism, recreation, scenery, wildlife, and habitat conservation. By 2003, governments worldwide had designated more than 100,000 protected areas encompassing 18.8 million square kilometers of the Earth’s surface. If those protected areas were gathered together into a single landmass, it would rival South America in size.¹

In 1972, Roderick Nash surveyed this growing parks movement and heralded the success of the United States in exporting “the national park idea around the world.” He explained, the United States is “known and admired for it, fittingly, because the concept of a national park reflects some of the central values and experiences in American culture.”² Indeed, the United States claimed the first national park, Yellowstone, in 1872. The U.S. National Park Service, established in 1916, became a model for parks agencies worldwide. The United States helped organize and support the scientifically minded International Union for Conservation of Nature after World War II. And the United States hosted the first two World Conferences on National Parks in 1962 and 1972. In 2004, Donald Worster echoed Nash’s celebratory tones, suggesting that “we have not fully appreciated how much the protection of wild nature owes to the spread of


modern liberal, democratic ideals and to the support of millions of ordinary people around the world.\textsuperscript{3}

But the rapid growth of protected areas, since the 1970s, particularly in developing countries and often in service to conservation science, drew new attention to the social and political consequences of western models of nature protection. In 1989, Indian scholar Ramachandra Guha warned that efforts to “transplant the American system of national parks onto Indian soil” trespassed on the rights of local peoples, catered to the interests of a conservation elite and foreign tourists, and privileged western science and scientists.\textsuperscript{4} In 1995, the historian William Cronon warned that idealizing wilderness as a pristine and untouched landscape masked the social consequences of protected areas.\textsuperscript{5} In 2006, Christopher Conte, like other scholars and journalists, traced this “American wilderness model” back to the nineteenth-century United States, which “set the global example for the strict preservation of nature through the American national parks system.”\textsuperscript{6} These critiques played an essential role in drawing attention to theretofore under-addressed social consequences of protected areas, both in developing countries and developed countries, in the past and present.

This dualism between American cultural chauvinism — the national parks are America’s best idea — and anti-imperial criticism — protected areas have been a form of imperial enclosure that romanticizes nature and alienates local peoples worldwide — has been central to the literature on parks, wilderness, and protected areas since the 1990s. But both sides in this debate have often shared one key assumption: that a coherent model of the American national park, predicated on wilderness protection, has been the definitive model for nature protection globally. But consider these figures: as of 2010, only eight percent of protected areas (by number) and 47 percent of protected lands (by area) fall into categories of land protection and management that are national parks or wilderness areas — meaning most protected areas is otherwise classified and managed.\textsuperscript{7} Many of the alternative categories of protected areas aim to support local communities, sustainable resource use, and cultural values; in recent decades, it is these protected areas


\textsuperscript{6} Christopher Conte, “Creating Wild Places from Domesticated Landscapes,” in \textit{American Wilderness}, 226.

categories that have been growing most rapidly. This is not to say that an American model of national parks has not been influential historically, but it is to suggest that there is considerable and under-appreciated diversity in the history of protected areas worldwide which historians have only recently begun to explore.

This essay calls for an approach to national parks, wilderness, and protected areas that, instead of beginning with a transcendent American parks model, takes up protected areas as a matter of practice and politics that has been formed and contested in local, national, and international arenas. To advance this call, the essay is organized into five parts. First, it argues that the historical debates over protected areas in the United States challenge claims of a singular American model of parks protection. Second, it asks how an American wilderness park ideal came to occupy a mythic place in the national parks movement and related scholarship. Third, it considers recent scholarship that suggests that parks can more profitably be understood in the context of a transnational circulation of ideas, practices, organizations, and individuals which have informed the creation of a range of protected areas in the United States and abroad. Fourth, it examines how critical studies of protected areas sparked new debates over the social consequences of protected areas and strategies for managing them. It concludes that taking a transnational approach to the varieties of approaches to protected areas worldwide can inform efforts to advance more effective and socially just approaches to protected areas in the future.

**Disentangling Wilderness and the United States National Park Ideal**

Champions of a United States tradition of nature protection have emphasized the significance and coherency of America’s national park tradition. Roderick Nash championed the “American invention of the national parks” in 1972.\(^8\) Wallace Stegner popularized the idea that the national parks were “the best idea we ever had” in 1983.\(^9\) And such sentiments inspired Ken Burns’s twelve-hour documentary tribute to the national parks, titled *America’s Best Idea*, which drew popular attention in the United States in 2009.\(^10\) The usual assumption has been that the United States’s spectacular wild lands and the nation’s fascination with wilderness inspired a parks movement of national and, ultimately, international significance. Before considering how influential this parks model was globally, however, it is worth considering to what extent such a coherent and durable model of nature protection actually existed in the United States. In contrast to the popular acclaim, a closer reading of the history of America’s national parks and concerns

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for wilderness protection suggests a more contingent and contested history of nature protection that did not yield a singular model of global importance.

Few scholars have done more to draw attention to wilderness and the national park ideal in American history than Roderick Nash and Alfred Runte. Nash, in his classic 1967 study, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, advanced a sweeping history of the wilderness idea in American culture, explaining how a nation determined to harness its resources to a growing economy in the nineteenth century came to value wilderness as one of the nation’s most distinct and formative influences in the twentieth century. In 1979, Alfred Runte, one of Nash’s students, offered the first synthetic history of the national park system, which emphasized how grand, scenic parks like Yellowstone and Yosemite became the inspiration for a national park ideal that hinged on monumental landscapes of little economic value that could stimulate an emerging tourist economy. As Paul Sutter has aptly noted, Nash and Runte “welded wild nature and American exceptionalism together in a narrative particularly befitting a moment of national environmental awakening” in the 1960s and 1970s. Although that celebratory narrative would rightly be subject to sharp criticism and revision in the 1990s and 2000s, these more recent critiques have often overlooked that in Nash’s and Runte’s analyses, the history of the wilderness ideal and American national parks, while related, were not congruent.

The United States Congress saddled the National Park Service with a broad and contradictory task in 1916, when it enacted an Organic Act for the national parks. The purpose of the new Park Service and the national parks “is to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” As both Nash and Runte explained, the initial motivation for protecting the early national parks was not the hope of protecting tracts of remote, impenetrable wilderness. Instead, authorizing legislation for the nation’s grandest parks, such as Yellowstone (1872), Yosemite (1890), and Glacier (1910), highlighted their outstanding scenic values, emphasized protecting the parks in in the public interest — rather than developing them for commercial gain —, and made the parks

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available for the “enjoyment of the American people.” This latter commitment reflected the partnership of park advocates and the railroad and automobile lobbies, which collectively urged Congress and the new Park Service to provide roads, rail stations, campgrounds, and hotels, that would open the national parks for visitation and encourage Americans to “See America First!”

Although, as Runte and other scholars have noted, the Park Service did attempt to give more attention to the scientific and ecological values of parks (such as with the creation of the Everglades National Park in 1934 or Redwoods National Park in 1968), those goals have been in tension with the Park Service’s enduring commitment to managing the parks for scenic tourism.

When preservationists began to deliberately mobilize the concept of wilderness to justify nature protection in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s, the national parks figured prominently in such discussions, but for surprising reasons. In the view of wilderness champions, such as Aldo Leopold or Bob Marshall, both of whom worked for the Forest Service, the real threat to wilderness was not just loggers or miners, it was roads and automobiles and the culture of tourism and consumerism that came with them. Although national parks like Glacier or Mount Rainer might have included vast tracts of wilderness, the Park Service in the 1920s and 1930s seemed eager to open up the parks for tourists, not protect remote tracts of wild lands for scientific research or primitive recreation. Indeed, the Civilian Conservation Corp played a crucial role in expanding the tourist infrastructure in local, state, and national parks during the 1930s.

As Paul Sutter details in his study Driven Wild, despite many, sometimes competing, ideas of what wilderness stood for, it gained significance among preservationists as a wild and primitive landscape devoid of cars and roads in the 1930s. That made wilderness distinct from national parks, national forests, and other protected areas, where land managers often gave priority to opening up the landscape to tourists, resource extraction, or game management.

These separate, but overlapping approaches to national parks and wilderness resulted in two distinct, but related, systems of nature protection in the United States. In 1964, Congress passed

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the Wilderness Act, which authorized the National Wilderness Preservation System, and designated “wilderness areas” on existing lands managed by the United States federal land agencies (including the Forest Service, Park Service, and Fish and Wildlife Service initially). In contrast to the National Park System more broadly, designated wilderness areas were meant to be primitive areas, off limits to roads, motorized vehicles, commercial activities (such as logging and mining) and other forms of development (including established campgrounds, lodges, or visitor centers). The park system and wilderness system have been important vehicles for protecting public lands in the United States. Since 1916, the park system has grown to 391 areas covering more than 84 million acres in 2013. Since 1964, the wilderness system has grown from 9.1 to 107.5 million acres, including 43.5 million acres administered by the National Park Service. Thus, although the Park Service oversees extensive wilderness areas, much of the land it manages is not so protected.

Considering the evolution of these two systems of land protection, and the debates that have defined them, suggests two important points regarding the history of protected areas. First, to conflate the history of national parks and wilderness in the United States — as later critics have often done — is to overlook the contingency of these distinct, but overlapping, strategies for establishing protected areas and the different ways in which people have tried to resolve tensions surrounding nature protection both in the United States and around the world. Second, emphasizing the national parks or wilderness as the prime vehicles for protected areas in the United States has meant that other important approaches, such as federal wildlife refuges, state conservation programs, or systems of private land conservation in the United States have drawn

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less scholarly attention, including how those approaches have drawn upon and contributed to similar approaches elsewhere in the world.²²

**Constructing an Export Model of the American National Park**

If there was no singular model of the national park, predicated on an American appreciation for wilderness, it is worth considering what explains the potency of an American model in histories of global nature protection. Anne Swenson put this question eloquently in 2012: “Given the scale of global interaction, an interesting question remains…as to why the transnational history of the national park has been remembered as a primarily American one, and why the American side of the story has been reduced to a narrative about American love for wilderness?”²³ This myth took root after the 1950s, as the designation of protected areas began to expand rapidly worldwide. Before 1960, countries had set aside 11,708 protected areas. That figure surged to 61,871 protected areas by 1990.²⁴ For newly independent states seeking to establish their place in the international arena, designating national parks and related conservation programs was a relatively easy act of statecraft, required little commitment of financial resources, and could draw international recognition and support (including that of tourists, foundations, and foreign governments). Several factors contributed to the consolidation of an American model for parks development internationally.

The United States National Park Service began to formalize its international reach in the 1960s. Although the agency had provided information to foreign park services, been visited by park observers, and consulted from afar on foreign park projects prior to World War II, as the United States expanded its international leadership in the 1950s, the agency began to actively host visiting park officials and advocates (organizing and funding such visits), train foreign park managers and personnel (through regular programs), and provide technical assistance to park projects globally (including park design, construction, and scientific research and management). Such activities were consolidated in and expanded with the creation of the National Park Service’s Division of International Affairs in 1961. As Terence Young and Lary M. Dilsaver explain, with the creation of the new office, “the Park Service quickly experienced a marked


²⁴ On the expansion of protected areas, see IUCN, *Benefits Beyond Boundaries*, 289.
increase in the frequency and scale in its interaction with foreign park agencies.”

The chief partner for the Division of International Affairs was the United States Agency for International Development, which was a primary funder for the agency’s international projects. The scope and extent of this nexus between the leadership of the United States in parks policy and funding for parks projects is one that remains understudied, but important both to understanding the history of the development of international parks policy and specific projects in countries ranging from Costa Rica to Kenya to Nepal.

Although wilderness and national parks in the United States are distinct, these two approaches to protected areas did begin to align more closely in the 1960s and 1970s. Historically, the Park Service had actively manipulated the national parks to improve the visitor experience and resisted wilderness designations. But the 1960s ushered in a shift in management goals, in response to scientific reports, such as the Leopold Report of 1963, that focused renewed attention on managing the parks as primitive landscapes and for their scientific value. These arguments resonated in the 1960s, as the science of ecology gained new authority, concerns about environmental degradation accelerated, and the government took on new responsibilities for environmental protection. As the historian Richard Sellars explains in his history, Preserving Nature in the National Parks, the 1960s marked the advent of a renewed and lasting struggle “by scientists and others in the environmental movement to change the direction of national park management, particularly as it affects natural resources.” In the following decades, the park

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27 On this point, also see Sutter, “The Trouble with ‘America’s National Parks’; or, Going Back to the Wrong Historiography,” 28.

28 For examples of how the agency’s management activities changed, see Stanford E. Demars, The Tourist in Yosemite, 1855-1985; James A. Pritchard, Preserving Yellowstone’s Natural Conditions (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).


service would increasingly manage parks to protect and perpetuate native ecosystem elements and processes — which, to many observers, meant managing them more like wilderness. Thus, this convergence between parks and wilderness management in the United States contributed to a seemingly more coherent parks model worldwide.

One more factor helps explain the potency of the U.S. parks model: it is the belief that the great American national parks were carved from a pristine and unpeopled wilderness. Such a selective remembrance of the history of land acquisition in the United States erased a history of conquest, enclosure, and alienation, which a new generation of historians brought to light in the 1990s and 2000s. But that history was largely missing from narratives of American national parks and wilderness in the 1960s and 1970s — whether advanced from the podium at the 1962 or 1972 parks conferences or in the scholarship of Nash, Runte, and others. In erasing that history, it became possible to cast the national parks tradition not as a product of imperialism or colonialism, with consequences for indigenous peoples and other local groups — as it may well have appeared in many former European colonies in the 1960s and 1970s — but as emblems of democracy, nationalism, and independence. As Swenson has suggested, “during decolonization and in the postcolonial world, the American model might have become even more attractive in order to rid the national park concept of some of its colonial legacies.”

The Second World Conference on National Parks is cited as playing a pivotal role in cementing the United States’s role in the history of parks protection worldwide. The 1972 conference, sponsored by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and the United Nations Environmental Program, was held in conjunction with the centennial of Yellowstone National Park. Delegates to the conference visited the site, at the confluence of the Gibbon and Firehole Rivers, where the national park idea was supposedly broached around a campfire in 1869. And, as Nash recounts in the second edition of *Wilderness and the American Mind*, afterwards “delegate after delegate from around the world rose to credit the United States with inventing the national park.” Although some noted the shortcomings of the U.S. Park System, he explained, they heralded the “visionaries who anticipated human needs for nature and worked to institutionalize wilderness preservation.” It was a point that Runte echoed in his history of the


32 Swenson, “Response to Ian Tyrrell,” 43.


national park system.\textsuperscript{35} It seemed that many delegates to the conference and scholars agreed, the United States deserved credit for forging an approach to national parks and wilderness of international importance; it was a claim that drew little scholarly scrutiny until the late 1990s.

By the mid-1970s, an American model of the national park, predicated on wilderness, had seemingly gained global significance. Indeed, for a generation, both champions and critics of protected areas would point to the significance of “America’s Best Idea” or the “American wilderness model” to protected areas policy globally, even if they disagreed sharply on its significance and consequences.\textsuperscript{36} Yet, even at the Second World Conference on National Parks in 1972, there was evidence to suggest that the history of national parks and protected areas was not so tidy or unidirectional. A cursory glance at the conference proceedings makes clear that for many participants, Yellowstone was a model in name only. As the conference’s very first speaker, Belgian scientist Jean-Paul Harroy, noted, many places may be labeled a “national park,” but “differ fundamentally” in purpose or management from Yellowstone. To understand the history of protected areas, he suggested, required an approach that considered the “diversities of outlook and biopolitical circumstances” of each nation. Instead of feting the Yellowstone model, Harroy’s address was both transnational and comparative in its consideration of the origins and challenges facing protected areas.\textsuperscript{37}

\textbf{Toward a Trans-National History of Protected Areas}

The significance and originality of efforts toward protected areas and parks policy that took place outside the United States has become an area of sustained and innovative research in the past decade.\textsuperscript{38} Much of this scholarship questions the reach of the American model. For instance, Australia can rightly claim to have first used the term “national park” to designate Audley National Park in New South Wales in 1879 —indeed, it turns out Yellowstone was deemed a “public park” not a “national park” upon its creation in 1872. Canada can take credit for establishing the first agency to administer a system of national parks when it established what is now known as Parks Canada in 1911.\textsuperscript{39} Mexico can boast that its forty national parks were more

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{35} Runte, \textit{National Parks}, 166.
  
  \item \textsuperscript{36} Nash, “The American Invention of National Parks”; Conte, “Creating Wild Places from Domesticated Landscapes”
  
  
  
  \item \textsuperscript{39} Ian Tyrrell, “America’s National Parks,” \textit{Journal of American Studies} (March 2012), 46:1, 1–21.
\end{itemize}
numerous than the United States’ thirty parks in 1940.\textsuperscript{40} And many European countries pursued national parks and conservation projects domestically and in their colonies with goals and rationales that were distinct from those of the United States. As Ian Tyrrell has noted, an earlier generation of scholars of national park and conservation history gave little attention to international efforts toward protected areas and when they have, it has been “only to tell a story of American leadership and global dissemination of the American model of a national park idea.”\textsuperscript{41} Setting aside the export model of parks history not only reveals the variety of related ways that different nations have pursued national parks and protected areas, it also suggests that in some instances, the United States’ parks policy has tracked, rather than led, international trends.

Mexico’s burst of parks development in the 1930s demonstrates the diversity of approaches to national park protection even in North America. In the 1920s and 1930s, the United States engaged Mexico in a joint effort to create an international park spanning the United States-Mexico border near present-day Big Bend National Park in Texas. That project ultimately failed, however. United States officials saw the failure as the result of recalcitrance on the part of their Mexican counterparts. But the historian Emily Wakild makes clear that that it was not so much that Mexican park officials were uninterested or unable to commit to an international park; rather protecting such a remote, scenic, and wild landscape in northern Mexico did not align with Mexico’s approach to national park protection. Mexico’s national park program grew rapidly in the 1930s, as the Mexican leadership worked to achieve the social goals set forth in its Constitution of 1917, including advancing education, supporting unionization, and redistributing land to rural dwellers. This political context imparted a distinct set of social priorities and geography to Mexico’s national parks movement. In the 1930s, Mexico’s leadership saw national parks as democratic, popular spaces available to “rural farmers, scientific bureaucrats, and urban workers.”\textsuperscript{42} To realize this goal, Mexico focused on protecting lands closer to urban areas, managing the lands both for their protection and resource use, and oftentimes forging compromises that kept landowners on their lands, rather than pushing them off (as was customary in the United States national parks). As Wakild notes, “overlooking the ways in which individuals and their governments have conceptualized national parks runs the risk of reifying conservation as an easily transferable, universal concept rather than as a contested and pliable notion that requires social significance and cultural understanding.”\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{40} Emily Wakild, “Border Chasm: International Boundary Parks and Mexican Conservation, 1935–1945” \textit{Environmental History} 14:3 (July 2009), 455.

\textsuperscript{41} Tyrrell, “America’s National Parks”.

\textsuperscript{42} Wakild, “Border Chasm,” 457.

\textsuperscript{43} Wakild, “Border Chasm,” 455. For a fuller development of these arguments, see Emily Wakild, \textit{Revolutionary Parks: Conservation, Social Justice, and Mexico’s National Parks, 1910-1940} (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011).
National parks also proliferated in Europe during the early twentieth century. Some countries adopted a parks model similar to that of the United States. Sweden, for instance, created its first park in 1909, striking a balance between tourism and nature protection. But other countries, such as Germany, Italy, and Switzerland pursued approaches that were distinct from either those in the United States or Mexico. As one American parks enthusiast noted in an investigative trip to Europe in 1928, the concept of the national park had a different meaning in many European countries. Often, the creation of parks was led by scientists who prioritized scientific research and education. As the historian Patrick Kupper has demonstrated, Switzerland was particularly influential in advancing a science-based approach to parks protection. At its start in 1909, the vision for a Swiss park was that of the Swiss Natural History Society, which was a forerunner to the Swiss Academy of Sciences, and the Swiss League for Nature Protection, which raised funds to purchase and lease land for the mountainous park in eastern Switzerland. This park — conceived of by scientist and initially funded through private donations — was then handed over to the Swiss federal state in 1914. Although the parks movement appealed to Swiss nationalism, much as did the American and Mexican parks movements, the guiding rationale behind the new Swiss park was a policy of complete preservation, Totalschutz. That approach made scientific research the park’s main objective and gave priority to restoring previously grazed, logged, and otherwise degraded lands to their natural state. Specifically, the park’s founders dismissed the goal of recreation — which they believed was overemphasized in the United States — and instead called for non-intervention in the parks’ natural processes: it would be an outdoor laboratory where nature could regain its equilibrium. Carl Schröter, a Swiss professor of botany, envisioned a “grandiose experiment to create a wilderness.”

Europeans pursued similar projects, often on a grander scale, in their colonies. Richard Grove argued in his seminal work, *Green Imperialism*, that the development of modern environmentalism can only be fully understood by considering how it was manifest in the colonial state. The example of the Parc National Albert in the Belgian Congo suggests the already complex, transnational exchange of ideas and practices important to protected areas in the interwar years. In 1919, two American scientists, John Merriam and Fairfield Osborn, Belgian scientist, Victor van Straelen, and King Albert of Belgium, discussed the possibility of “creating vast nature reserves in Africa” which would be “protected from human influences and used for large-scale, systematic scientific studies.” King Albert, who had visited the United States parks, acted on this vision in 1925, when he created a gorilla sanctuary in present day Rwanda and Burundi, which van Straelen oversaw initially. The park was distinguished by sharp restrictions on access and the emphasis on scientific research, patterned after the Swiss

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This approach to protected areas gained broader significance in 1933, when European colonial powers and South Africa signed the 1933 London Convention for the Preservation of Flora and Fauna. That agreement emphasized the importance of “preserving” nature through the creation of “national parks, strict natural reserves, and other reserves within which hunting, killing or capturing of fauna, and the collection or destruction of flora shall be limited or prohibited” throughout Africa. By 1950, European powers had set aside protected areas in the Belgian Congo, South Africa, Malaysia, Sierra Leone, Madagascar, Uganda, Kenya, and Togo, among other colonies. In most cases, the pastoralists, farmers, and others who lived on or relied upon these lands for their subsistence were displaced in the name of colonial conservation and nature protection.

Nature protection even became a focal point of political activism for scientists in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. Between 1928 and 1933, Stalin’s revolution from above aimed to consolidate political control over the Soviet Union through sustained efforts toward collectivization, industrialization, and the elimination of civic opposition. It was a brutal period in Soviet history, when police terror permeated daily life, particularly for intellectuals perceived as hostile to the regime. In this context, Douglas Weiner explains in *A Little Corner of Freedom*, “nature protection emerged as a means of registering opposition to aspects of industrial and agricultural policy while remaining outwardly apolitical.” While scientists gave voice to their concerns regarding Stalin’s Five-Year Plan, at considerable peril and with little success, scientists found more security and influence in drawing on the language of science to position themselves as the dogged defenders of Russia’s system of *zapovednikis* (nature reserves). Much like the scientifically minded Swiss approach to nature protection, *Totalschutz*, the *zapovednikis* were established as pristine, self-regulating, ecological communities. And even as they challenged the Stalinist state, by couching their opposition in the apolitical language of science, Russian scientists succeeded both in guarding their autonomy and defending a system of nature reserves. In a repressive regime, Weiner explains, efforts toward nature protection became a small “archipelago of freedom.” Although often threatened by development, by 1960 the system had grown to twenty-two reserves protecting some 4.2 million hectares — an expanse the Soviet scientists acknowledged fell short of similar systems in other countries, but which a represented significant victory in the face of the persistent threat of resource development and political persecution.

These examples all suggest that to fully understand how different countries attempted to resolve some of the formative tensions in nature protection — such as balancing tourism and scientific research, local and national interests, democracy and authoritarianism, or preservation, conservation, and, restoration — it necessary to set aside the export model of the American national park, and consider nature protection as a product of colonial power, national imperatives,

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47 *Convention Relative to the Preservation and Fauna and Flora in Their Natural State* (1933).

and transnational exchanges. Such an approach not only challenges the singular importance of an export model of the American national park, it can also enrich understandings of American national park history as well. In the 1930s, for instance, the U.S. National Park Service engaged in a halting and, ultimately, unsuccessful turn toward scientific management in the national parks. This effort can be attributed to John Merriam, who was keenly aware of the more scientifically minded efforts to protected areas that had gained momentum in Europe and its colonies, in part through his work on Parc National Albert in the Belgian Congo. His efforts contributed to the development of educational programs in the U.S. national parks, a study of the park fauna conducted by George Wright in the early 1930s, and a proposal to the National Park Service for the “establishment of research reserves in the national parks.” Notably, when the agency’s leadership took up the science reserves proposal, it was with reference to the Swiss model of Totalschutz. Despite these efforts, the U.S. Park Service remained committed foremost to managing the parks for public enjoyment and American scientists remained deeply divided over their role as political advocates. But this debate in the United States over the scientific importance of national parks and, later, wilderness areas, can only by fully understood in the context of more successful efforts to advance these goals in Europe and its colonies.

Even if these American scientists did not succeed in reorienting the National Park Service in the 1930s, working with their counterparts in Europe and elsewhere, they did succeed in forging an international framework for nature protection that would have lasting significance. As Patrick Kupper has argued, the Swiss national park and related efforts in other European nations and colonies, formed the “bedrock of early attempts to establish a global network of protected areas.” In 1913, the Swiss hosted the first International Conference for the Protection of Nature in Bern. While the work of that group was cut short by World War I, the Swiss rekindled the project after World War II, hosting meetings in 1946 and 1947 which led to the formation of what became the International Union for the Protection of Nature and Natural Resources in 1948, which has become the leading international organization for the stewardship of parks and protected areas globally. It was renamed the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources in 1956, bringing together government representatives, scientists, and non-governmental organizations and advocates in the shared goal of the “preservation of the entire world biotic community or man’s natural environment.” Toward that goal, it has promoted the transnational dialogue around protected areas, through publications, sponsored exchanges, and a series of world conferences on the National Parks. In its early decades, the


50 Kupper, “Science and the National Parks: A Transatlantic Perspective on the Interwar Years,” 64.

IUCN was dominated by scientists, park managers, and government officials who gave limited attention to social dimensions of protected areas. In the early 1980s, however, as the creation of parks, wilderness, and other protected areas expanded in developing countries, the IUCN became a focal point for a burgeoning set of concerns and frustrations over the social implications of protected areas, especially in developing countries.

**The Critical Turn in Studies of the National Parks and Wilderness**

With the publication of an essay titled, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in 1995, the historian William Cronon took public a critical turn in studies of parks and wilderness that had begun in the late 1980s. The article, which focused on the United States, aimed to provoke reflection and debate on the basic assumptions that underpinned the place of wilderness in American environmental thought and advocacy. In Cronon’s view, Americans had come to idealize wilderness as a pristine, unpeopled, and ecologically valuable — an antipode to modern civilization and its ills. But, as Cronon explained, wilderness was not simply a “pristine sanctuary” or a retreat from modernity; it was “quite profoundly a human creation.” In the United States, wilderness was a product of a culture that was beholden to a romantic view of sublime nature and entranced with the myth of the western frontier. “The removal of Indians to create an ‘uninhabited wilderness,’” explains Cronon, “reminds us of just how invented, how constructed, the American wilderness really is.”

It was a construction that historically had held sway amongst urban tourists and wealthy sportsmen, and, more recently, amongst environmentalists and scientists, who did the most to champion parks and wilderness. By idealizing pristine nature, minimizing the social consequences of nature protection, and drawing attention from other environmental issues, Cronon warned, “wilderness poses a serious threat to responsible environmentalism at the end of the twentieth century.”

Cronon’s essay dumped a bucketful of water on the campfire around which Nash, Runte, and other celebrants of the American tradition of national parks and wilderness had circled for a generation. Since the 1960s, to the extent that scholars focused on wilderness or parks, they had largely celebrated their merits, rather than questioning their implications. That had begun to change in 1989, when Ramachandra Guha published an article arguing that wilderness protection was a uniquely American phenomenon with problematic implications for the developing world.

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52 Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” 69, 79.


54 Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” 81. See also a roundtable of responses to Cronon’s essay in *Environmental History* 1 no. 1 (January 1996), 7-55.

55 Guha, “Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique.”
In quick succession, philosophers Baird Callicott and Holmes Rolston III, scientists Reed Noss, Arthuro Gómez-Pompa, and Andrea Kaus, geographer William Denevan, and activist Dave Foreman, among others, set out a series of affirmations and critiques of the wilderness idea. By the mid-1990s, a new generation of American environmental historians, influenced by scholars such as E. P. Thompson and James Scott, began to reconsider the origins of national parks in the United States, giving new attention to the consequences for Indians and local communities. When Cronon’s essay was published in 1995, both as a scholarly article in an edited collection and as an abridged essay in the *New York Times Magazine*, such revisionist arguments began to draw wider attention. The insights that emerged from this debate — scientific, philosophical, and historical — formed a powerful moment of reckoning for proponents of parks and wilderness, both among academics and environmentalists.

For all of its insights, however, “the great new wilderness debate” was framed foremost as a reconsideration of the American wilderness ideal and, to a lesser extent, its consequences when exported abroad. Indeed, most of the excerpts and essays in the 1998 edited collection *The Great New Wilderness Debate* focused on North America. But many of the concerns that animated the debate in the United States had already become a staple of policy discussions at the IUCN, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and other international policy arenas and were emerging as central themes in a new generation of scholarship focused on the consequences of conservation policy in other parts of the world. The seeds of this critical turn in debates over protected areas were apparent in 1982 at the Third World Congress on National Parks in Bali, Indonesia. It was the first time the conference had been held in a developing country. And the very first sentence of the Bali Declaration signaled a shift in the politics of protected areas. It read, “WE, the participants, in the World National Parks Congress, BELIEVE that: People are a part of nature.” While emphasizing the threat to ecological processes and natural ecosystems, calling for the preservation of species diversity, and recognizing the importance of scientific research, the declaration also emphasized that protected areas had to be managed with attention to “economic, cultural, and political contexts” and must ensure “local support” through measures such as education, collaborative decision-making, revenue sharing, and access to resources.

Since the mid-1980s, the IUCN had become a hotbed for discussions regarding the social dimensions of protected areas. Although social scientists had been included in international discussions over national parks before then, their contributions most often focused on macro-

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56 These responses and more are included in the collection, *The Great New Wilderness Debate* (1998).


level issues, such as the threat population growth posed for the establishment and management of protected area policy — not the micro-level issues important to the designation and management of individual parks and their social consequences.  

Starting in the late 1980s, as social scientists — geographers, anthropologists, sociologists, and historians — began to consider the assumptions and implications of protected area policy, they began to challenge the methods and goals advanced by the scientific community and international conservation organizations, such as the IUCN. Those efforts opened up a new set of questions that unsettled the assumptions and politics important to protected areas: What were the implications of conceptualizing nature as pristine wilderness? How had local people and communities been affected by protected areas? How did local people rely upon resources in and around protected areas? Was the disregard for local peoples a product of the political authority claimed by ecologists, conservation biologists, and other scientists? What were the paradoxes of trying to protect and manage wild nature? It was these questions that shaped the critical turn in studies of parks, wilderness, and protected areas, in the United States, the international community, and other countries in the 1990s and 2000s. It is worth considering two of the most important lessons that emerged from this debate: the fallacy of pristine nature and consequences for and role of local communities in protected areas.

One of the lessons of this critical turn in studies of protected areas is that even the wildest of landscapes have long histories of human use. As the geographer William Denevan has explained, the “pristine view” is a cultural “invention” made possible in North America by the demise of Indian populations.61 But what appears wild cannot be fully understood without considering activities such as burning, grazing, hunting, and early industrial activities, which have shaped the ecological compositions of the landscape for centuries.62 The historian Mark Spence argues in Dispossessing the Wilderness, that “uninhabited wilderness had to created before it could be preserved.” Well-known parks such as Yellowstone, Yosemite, and Glacier were established while still inhabited by Indians who relied on these lands for their homes, their subsistence, and their culture. Yet, in each park, Indians were later forced out by the U.S. government. “Generations of preservationists, government officials, and park visitors have accepted and defended the uninhabited wilderness preserved in national parks as remnants of a prior Nature,” Spence explains. But to do so “forgets that native peoples have shaped these environments for millennia.”63

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63 Spence, Dispossessing the Wilderness, 5.
The myth of pristine nature has been less pervasive in Europe. This was true in the case of the Swiss National Park, where scientists emphasized the importance of restoration. The historian Marcus Hall also makes this point in *Earth Repair*, a comparative study of the culture of land restoration in the United States and Italy. As he explains, the Italians did not view the Alps as an unpeopled wilderness at risk of human destruction. Instead, Italians saw the mountain landscape as a product of layers of history and culture — agriculture, grazing, and logging had helped maintain the stability of the mountain landscape. While “Americans see nature as the keeper of their Rockies,” Hall argues, the “Italians see culture as the keeper of their Alps.”64 But Europeans were prone to fall prey to the pristine myth in their colonies. In the case of Guinea, for instance, James Fairhead and Melissa Leach explain in *Misreading the Landscape* that colonial French conservation policies were founded on the assumption that the region’s islands of forest surrounded by savannah represented “the legacy of a natural ‘climax’ vegetation remaining within an otherwise abused landscape.” In fact, villagers, through seasonal agricultural practices and day-to-day disposal of waste and water, had created the conditions from which those forest patches sprung.65 Seemingly wild forest patches were artifacts of local human habitation.

Such misconceptions played into domestic preservation initiatives in former colonial states too. In India, when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi announced Project Tiger, an extensive program of protected areas aimed at protecting India’s iconic predator in the 1970s, she too appealed to the ideal of pristine nature. She urged Indians to recognize the “ecological value of totally undisturbed areas of wilderness.”66 In the 1960s, South African environmentalists — in this case, led by white women who were members of the National Council of Women of South Africa — protested the clearing of Dukuduku forest. They described the forest as a “true climax forest” and a rare example of undisturbed coastal forest left in the province. Yet, Dukuduku was hardly such as a pristine landscape. As the historian Frode Sundnes explains, although the forest was little populated, it “had an important place in the rural economy and land use of Zululand in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.”67 Archeological and written evidence suggests that the

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forest was used for refuge, settlement, cultivation, and extensive grazing. But, between the 1930s and 1970s, locals were moved from their ancestral homes as a result of forestry, conservation, and military policies. As a result of the displacement and subsequent forestry policies, the forest’s ecological composition changed — prompting calls for its preservation.

The strategy of moving people from protected areas in the name of nature preservation is what Dan Brockington has described as “fortress conservation.” The assumption has often been that nature will best maintain values, such as stability or wildlife conservation, if insulated from people. But historians have demonstrated that this approach often resulted in local resistance that undermined goals for protected areas. This is the second key lesson of the critical turn in studies of protected areas. For instance, at Mkomazi Game Reserve in northeast Tanzania, where thousands of villagers and their cattle were evicted to protect the park’s wildlife in the 1980s, villagers continued to rely on park resources: they grazed cattle on park lands and hunted park wildlife. The story is similar at Arusha National Park in Tanzania and Amboselia National Park in Kenya, where hunting of large mammals were persistent concerns. And at Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve in India, villagers scheduled for relocation as part of reserve management, “simply lost the incentive to use the forest sustainably.” To park managers and scientists, such continued use of park resources, for grazing, fuelwood gathering, and subsistence, represented violations of park policies and threats to management goals. But, as the historian Roderick Neumann explains in *Imposing Wilderness*, such illegal activities should instead be understood as representative of a determined, local peasant resistance. In his study of protected areas in Tanzania, he argues, “The ‘crime’ of poaching is not a crime at all, but a defense of subsistence, and the ‘real crime’ is that park animals are allowed to raid crops with impunity.”

Although it is little recognized, such resistance was important even in Yellowstone in the early 1910s; Karl Jacoby’s *Crimes Against Nature* details how local whites resisted federal regulations that banned hunting and subsistence practices in the new park. In this respect, Yellowstone prefigured later conflicts over protected areas, but in ways that the usual celebratory narratives rarely acknowledged.

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69 Brockington, *Fortress Conservation*.


72 Karl Jacoby, *Crimes against Nature*.
That local resistance could undermine protected area goals would not have been a surprise to park officials in the 1960s and 1970s; the threats posed by pastoralists and poachers were active topics of debate at international park conferences. What would have surprised park officials, were the instances in which the removal of local people undermined, rather than bolstered, ecological management goals — not because of local resistance, but because local subsistence activities contributed to ecological stability and wildlife diversity. A basic tenet of ecology during the twentieth century was the value of protecting habitat and guarding it from human disturbance: this was true in the 1920 and 1930s among wildlife scientists, ecologists in the 1950s and 1960s, and conservation biologists in the 1980s and 1990s.\(^{73}\) In the case of Bharatpur in north central India, which was prized for its migratory waterfowl, cattle and their owners were ousted in the early 1980s. In the decade after the ban was enacted, bird diversity dropped, rather than recovered. Without sustained grazing, weeds had taken over much of the park, reducing both food and habitat for migratory waterfowl. The historian Michael Lewis explains, “in the absence of intense use, a few ‘weedy’ plants were destroying the park as an open wetland habitat so well-suited for birds.”\(^{74}\) That example demonstrates a point the biologist Arturo Goméz-Pompa and anthropologist Andrea Kaus have made in the context of Latin America. In numerous instances, local peoples “have managed, conserved, and even created some of the biodiversity we value so highly.” In some cases, achieving conservation goals, such as maintaining habitat or protecting species, depends on the presence of “human cultural traditions,” not their absence.\(^{75}\)

Without diminishing the injustices that have accompanied the establishment of protected areas, however, it is worth noting that many of those historical studies pinned the blame for such ill social consequences on a U.S. model of national parks, predicated on wilderness, both domestically and as an export to other countries. In the case of the United States, Carolyn Merchant has suggested that the Wilderness Act “reads Native Americans out of the wilderness and out of the homelands they had managed for centuries with fire, gathering, and hunting.”\(^{76}\) Mark Dowie, a well-regarded investigative journalist, did much to popularize such claims. Surveying protected areas globally, he argued that protected areas have resulted in the displacement of millions of “conservation refugees” worldwide. Indeed, he claims, the scale of such displacements is of the same magnitude as displacements attributed to more familiar activities, such as civil wars, famines, or large-scale development projects. But, Dowie argues, much like Merchant, that in the case of conservation refugees, the root cause was an American “preference for ‘virgin’ wilderness.” That viewpoint, he suggests, “value[s] all nature but human


\(^{75}\) Goméz-Pompa and Kaus, “Taming the Wilderness Myth” in *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, 299.

nature, and refused to recognize the positive wildness in human beings.”

Further research will likely complicate such broad generalizations. With protected areas numbering in the tens of thousands, there is much work to be done consider the scale, trend, and different manifestations of displacement. Some scholars, for instance, have suggested that such evictions have been less common in Latin America than elsewhere in the world.

It is also worth considering how such claims might be change in the context of a more comparative, transnational approach to protected areas that gives more attention to historical context, agency to local peoples, and the complexity of transnational exchanges.

For instance, in most cases, there are numerous factors — apart from “wilderness” — that have contributed to or legitimated the displacement of local peoples from what are now protected areas. This is the lesson from Ted Binnema and Melanie Niemi’s study of the aboriginal Stoney and the creation of Banff National Park in Alberta. As they explain, the Stoney were pushed out of the park by sportsmen and conservationists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century who feared that Stoney hunting activities threatened the long-term yield of big game in and around the park. In Binnema and Niemi’s assessment “aboriginal people were excluded from national parks in the interest of game (not wildlife) conservation, sport hunting, tourism, and aboriginal civilization, not to ensure that national parks became uninhabited wilderness.”

The story is similar in the case of the Dukuduku forest in South Africa. As Sundnes argues, it was not a “preservationist vision” that explains the origins of the forest reserves, restrictions on local access, and displacement of native peoples. Rather, it was the British colonial government’s practical and economic concerns for managing the forest and game for “sustainable yields,” which was modeled on the Indian forestry tradition.

And, in the case of the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, debates over protecting both native interests and new protected areas in Alaska demonstrate how Native Americans actively deployed the concept of “wilderness” to ensure their continued access to homelands and subsistence resources they had depended upon, particularly in the face of outside resource development.

Such examples offer two useful reminders: First,

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80 Sundnes, “Scrubs and Squatters,” 287.

in many instances, displacement had been driven by multiple factors, which may be related to, but cannot simply be attributed to, a transcendent wilderness ideal. Second, while often unsuccessful, indigenous and local peoples have, at least in some instances, played an active role in defending their interests and shaping the creation of protected areas policies.

The lasting contribution of the critical turn in studies of protected areas in the 1990s was to draw attention to significant and understudied social consequences of protected areas. Considered against a transnational backdrop, it becomes clear that the great new wilderness debate centered in the United States in the 1990s formed a part of a broader, critical turn in the politics and discussions of protected areas internationally that began in the 1980s. This critical turn both contributed to and drew upon new discussions surrounding the creation of and goals for a broader array of protected areas that aimed to mitigate between social and conservation goals in the 1990s and 2000s.

From Parks and Wilderness to “New Paradigm” Protected Areas

One of the most immediate consequences of the critical turn in studies of protected areas was to open up a breach between social scientists and conservation-minded scientists and activists. For instance, Ramachandra Guha, who helped jumpstart the social critique of parks and wilderness in 1989, narrowed his critique to focus on conservation biologists in 2006. He described conservation biologists, who eyed the protection of vast tracts of unpeopled wilderness, as scientific crusaders who had laid claim “the same territory — uncultivated parts of the globe that are covered with what one group of scientists defines as ‘forest,’ the other as ‘wild.’” In advancing conservation in the name of biodiversity protection, Guha warned, the “biologist” had become a new force of imperialism disenfranchising local and indigenous peoples. Guha was not alone in highlighting the role of scientists, often working in concert with both governmental and non-governmental international conservation organizations, in advancing conservation policies that ignored local environmental knowledge, alienated local peoples from lands and resources they had depended upon, and commandeering local lands for a global goal of protecting biodiversity.

Some within the conservation biology community were quick to defend the essential role of strictly managed protected areas in protecting biodiversity. Jon Terborgh, a leading tropical ecologist and conservation biologist, published Requiem for Nature, which argued forcefully against efforts to weaken protected areas to advance sustainable development. John Oates in Myth and Reality in the Rain Forest warned conservationists away from falling for the myth that local, traditional, or indigenous peoples are conservationists. “On the contrary,” he argues,

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“wherever people have had the tools, techniques, and opportunities to exploit natural systems they have done so.” And, in 2006, two scientists, Harvey Locke and Philip Dearden, challenged the growing role of social scientists at the Fifth World Parks Congress. They reasserted the driving concerns of conservation biology — “Preservation of all components of biodiversity can only be attained if some areas are kept largely free of human alteration” and “[s]trictly protected areas where nature rules are needed” as the fundamental goal of protected areas. The advocacy of Terborgh, Oates, Locke, and Dearden were consistent with what some scholars had described as the resurgence of an authoritarian approach to conservation.

But focusing on the stand-off between social scientists and conservation biologists draws attention away from the most dynamic arena of protected areas policy since the 1990s: efforts to designate protected areas and establish protected areas policies that can mediate between the social consequences and conservation goals of protected areas. Such efforts to foster more socially concerned and participatory approaches to protected areas policy have been a sustained topic of discussion at international conservation policy meetings since Bali in 1982. And as conservation scientists Ashish Kothari, Philip Camill, and Jessica Brown explain, “community-based conservation is now a central part of the prescriptions emanating from global institutions or forums such as the Convention on Biological Diversity and the IUCN.” These efforts have been advanced by the activism of indigenous and local peoples, the concerns of conservation practitioners and scholars, and the heightened attention to the rights of indigenous peoples internationally. In addition to efforts within conservation organizations, the United Nations adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007, which strongly affirmed the rights of indigenous peoples to their lands for their spiritual, subsistence, and conservation values. Some conservation officials are already envisioning a world where “displacement based conservation will be consigned to the dustbin of history.” A wide array of protected areas has been developed over the past several decades that aim to advance such goals: communal reserves in Peru, community conservation areas in Nepal, community conservancies in Namibia, and indigenous protected areas in Australia, for example.

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89 David Barton Bray and Alejandro Velazquez, “From Displacement-Based Conservation to Place-Based Conservation,” *Conservation and Society* (2009), 7 no. 1, 11.
There is much work to be done to study the creation, management, and consequences of these “new paradigm” protected areas created since the early 1980s. Consider the Annapurna Conservation Area, set aside in Nepal in 1986, which is a magnet for trekkers to the Himalaya. The National Trust for Nature Conservation, which oversees the area in Nepal, describes three goals for the area: conserve natural resources, foster sustainable social and economic development, and develop appropriate tourism. Notably, the trust describes Annapurna as a protected area rich in both biological and cultural diversity, citing not only the species it protects, but celebrating its 100,000 residents representing five different cultural and linguistic groups. Revenue from trekkers supports management of the area.  

Or, consider the community conservancies in post-apartheid Namibia. The state government gave ownership of wildlife — including black rhinoceroses, elephants, and lions — to local community groups in the 1990s. Livestock farmers manage working landscapes that include cattle and predators. The success of these programs — they now number sixty-four — means Namibia’s community conservancies has expanded to exceed its national parks in size, creating new habitat for endangered species, lessening poaching, and rewarding locals with jobs and revenue from tourism (particularly fees from trophy hunting).

While still new, these approaches have been evolving since the 1980s, and their origins, successes, and failures are ripe for historical study. But doing so means asking new questions: What historical antecedents to such approaches have been overshadowed by the historical focus on parks and wilderness? How have these new protected areas emerged as a product of local, national, and international contexts and priorities? What is the nexus between the priorities and policies developed at the international level and the practices in particular communities or regions? How effective are these protected areas in comparison to more traditional parks and wilderness areas? How are local peoples engaged in the creation and management of these areas: are they stakeholders, rights holders, or property owners? Which models of participatory engagement have been most successful? It may seem that posing these questions represents a geographical shift toward the Global South and away from places like the United States in the study of protected areas. Although that may be true, this shift also offers an opportunity to reconsider the scope of protected areas studies in the United States as well. Just as scholarship on colonial conservation contributed to the critical turn in wilderness debates in the United States in the 1990s, U.S. environmental historians have an opportunity to draw on these “new paradigm” approaches to better understand protected areas in the United States too. For instance, collaborative conservation programs at the local level have gained momentum in places like Maine to Oregon in recent decades, but such programs remain understudied. As historians


engage such approaches, examples such as the Namibian community conservancies may be even more illuminating than the scholarship on national parks, such as Yellowstone or Yosemite.

**Conclusion: Transcending Boundaries**

Some scholars have argued that environmental historians have invested too much effort in studies of wilderness, national parks, and protected areas. In the case of wilderness, David Stradling has suggested, “what is truly ironic is that environmental historians have worn so many paths through the wilderness while there is so much work yet to be done in places where humans are not just visitors.” What such assessments miss is that wilderness, national parks, and other protected areas can only be understood in relation to the larger political, social, and ecological contexts that give them meaning. Examining the history of protected areas is not a flight from such realities or issues that concern people. To take a transnational approach to protected areas, as this essay suggests, means grappling with issues such as the legacies of colonialism and post-colonialism, the evolution of international governance, the politics of science, the interface of international aid and conservation, contests over human rights, and the enfranchisement of indigenous peoples.

If the critical turn in studies of protected areas in the 1990s highlighted the social consequences of parks and wilderness, there is now an urgent need for historical studies that can contribute to our understanding of efforts to advance more inclusive, socially just, and ecologically resilient approaches to creating and managing a wide range of protected areas. As environmental historians turn to this challenge, there is one lesson they can draw on from conservation science: protected areas are not islands. Often, studies of protected areas have been hemmed in by boundaries — scholars have told stories about how protected areas come to be, rather than considering how protected areas have functioned. But reconsidering how protected areas are products of and constituent parts of broader landscapes — ecological and social, local and transnational — and how those relationships affect the long-term success or failure of such protected areas can yield useful insights. Two recent studies, less concerned with the social consequences of protected areas, suggest how analyses that deliberately transcend the boundaries of protected areas can advance understandings of how protected areas function in a broader context.

This is one of the core contributions of *After the Grizzly*, Peter Alagona’s study of protected areas and species conservation in California. By examining endangered species debates through the politics of place in California, Alagona makes clear, first, how contentious creating such protected areas can be and, second, that setting aside protected areas alone does little to guarantee the long-term viability of endangered species. In the case of the California condor, saving wilderness in the 1950s and 1960s failed to slow the birds decline, for the threat was not

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93 For instance, my history of wilderness politics in the United States focuses on the establishment of wilderness areas. Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness*. 
simply habitat loss, it was poisoning from lead, cyanide, and DDT the animals ingested when foraging on carrion on surrounding lands. A controversial intensive captive breeding program began in the 1980s with the capture of all surviving wild condors; by 2010, the number of animals returned to the wild was ten times greater than those captured. Or, consider the case of the Kit Fox, a species thought to be native to rural areas of California’s central valley. The animal surprised scientists by thriving in a most unlikely place: the streets, parks, and backyards of Bakersfield, California. Although kit foxes may need better habitat, Alagona explains, scientists and conservationists also need a better understanding of “what constitutes habitat for species such as this and how different kinds of habitat areas—from wilderness to rangelands, farms, oil fields, and even cities—can contribute to the goal of recovering endangered species and integrating them into the broader cultural landscape.”

Robert Wilson’s study of the Pacific Coast flyway, *Seeking Refuge*, makes a compelling case for analyzing protected areas as hybrid landscapes, as much produced as preserved. Wildlife refuges in the United States were intensively managed to provide forage for migrating birds: in the 1930s and 1940s, for instance, that meant planting, irrigating, and applying insecticides and pesticides (including DDT). The goal was to attract birds to refuges and away from agricultural fields — where they destroyed crops and frustrated farmers. What makes Wilson’s study particularly illuminating is that instead of being organized around protected areas — their creation, management, and problems — the analysis follows the birds. In doing so, Wilson demonstrates how the analysis of protected areas can and must be woven into other landscapes, both physical and social, at local, regional, and transnational scales. Local debates over the consequences of waterfowl for agricultural lands drove the turn toward intensive management of the refuges. To undertake that management, refuge managers adopted agricultural techniques and technology from neighboring commercial farms. The Great Depression created an opportunity for both land acquisition and restoration, supported by a national constituency of sport hunters. But even as federal agencies coordinated such acquisitions, their efforts were informed by new research studies that revealed migratory patterns along long-distance flyways that reached from Asia to South America. Water for the new refuges hinged on competition with growers and cities. And, ultimately, it was the wastewater from an agricultural regime with an international market — California’s Central Valley — that has sustained the refuges and the migrations that depended upon them.

Although the boundaries of protected areas may appear clearly marked on a map, as Wilson argues, “in reality, these were messy boundaries regularly transgressed by not only birds, but water, pesticides, weeds, insects, and other aspects of the nonhuman world.” Both of these studies demonstrate how following processes across these boundaries can yield new insights into the consequences of protected areas, both good and bad. This approach offers an important

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model for historical studies of “new paradigm” protected areas as well. It is not just nonhuman nature that has been navigating across the boundaries between protected areas and surrounding landscapes. As integrative approaches to protected areas have taken hold, humans have been crossing these boundaries more frequently too. Historians need to consider how these different groups of people — indigenous peoples, local residents, land managers, international conservation officials, scientists, and tourists — have contributed to new forms of protected areas that reflect their varying commitments cultural autonomy, biodiversity protection, economic growth, and respect for human rights. While both Alagona and Wilson spell out dire challenges for habitat and species protection — particularly in a world beset by climate change — their analyses also reveal unanticipated successes of wildlife thriving in intensively managed landscapes. We need more stories about how communities have both struggled and thrived in intensively conserved landscapes too. That means historical analyses not just of how protected areas came to be, but analyses that consider the extent to which protected areas have contributed to and drawn upon more sustainable landscapes that are both ecologically productive and socially just.