

Introduction

Driving through the Lamar Valley of Yellowstone last month, binoculars on the seat beside me and hoping to catch a glimpse of one of the now numerous wolves in the region, I could only imagine what the place might have looked like without the road that had conveniently brought me there. What might it have been like to walk to this place? Of course, even in the presence of the road, the view to the south, opening as it did across willow and aspen stands in the low drainages and upwards to the rocky slopes beyond, certainly *looked* like a wilderness.

Even so, if Yellowstone National Park is a wilderness, it had to be made into one through great political effort and expense. The history of the reserve, recognized as the crown jewel in the United States park system and a model for conservation everywhere, is in fact a testimony to human ingenuity, activity, and intervention.

Native American people had occupied and utilized the area in and around Yellowstone for ten thousand years prior to the park's establishment, clearing land through the use of fire and blazing trails across the landscape. Indeed, native hunting pressure probably served to concentrate the elk, antelope, and other animals that made the site so attractive to Anglo-Americans who later occupied the land. Native hunting pressure probably also allowed complex riparian ecosystems of aspen and willow to thrive. Removing these very human influences – those of the Shoshone, Bannock, Blackfoot, Flathead, Nez Perce, Utes, Crows, Piegans, and Paiutes who had helped to *produce* the very conditions later Americans would covet as “natural” – was an essential first step towards producing a wilderness.

This painful (and indeed violent) irony was not the only one. In much the same way, the establishment of the park coincided with the period in which the last gray wolf, prehistoric resident of the region, was shot dead. The absence of these predators, however, until their reintroduction in the mid-1990s, in no way kept most people from imagining Yellowstone as a “natural” system. Similarly in the late 1950s, when elk populations exploded, largely as a result of the absence of wolves, park personnel culled the herd, shipping animals to other ranges or simply shooting them. In the late 1960s outcry brought the practice to a halt, as the public was repelled by the apparently “unnatural” practices of the park's caretakers.

The banning of fire from the park, a dominant policy for many years, follows a similar history. This historically dominant practice gave way to management where natural fires were allowed to burn. The long suppression, followed by a dry season,

led to the summer of fires in 1988 that still stands as a hallmark for “nature’s wrath” in the popular press.

The removal and reintroduction of the wolves, the culling and protection of the elk, the abolition and return of fire, indeed the very establishment of a “wilderness” reserve from a sacred hunting and living space, are all human acts. They are, moreover, political ones. Each decision and counter-decision is born of bureaucratic incentives, economic pressures, and the changing power of rangers, legislators, hunters, concession companies, hoteliers, ranchers, visitors, environmentalists, and scientific experts in an ongoing struggle. Yellowstone is an expression of political power both in its very existence, as well as in the specific distribution of species across its landscapes. Nor are the political, economic, and ecological stakes in this struggle trivial. The livelihoods of tens of thousands of people, the power and budgets of large government agencies, the fate of rare and endangered species, and the environmental characteristics of tens of thousands of square miles all hang in the balance.

As I pulled the car over to the side of the road and stopped to watch the ridgeline, I kept thinking about all that *struggle* hidden behind the quiet vista. Yellowstone, it seemed, is a political project with contradictory mandates. The park is designed to produce elk for the regional hunting economy while producing wolves for scientists and environmentalists, and to produce open range for wildlife reproduction while producing vistas for visitors who travel thousands of miles to see bison and bear. No wonder its history is marked by a chaotic seesaw, which in one moment slaughters animals and the next moment protects them and in one instant suppresses fire and the next allows it. To be sure, in order to explain the current environment of Yellowstone, its species distribution, its forest cover, its water drainage patterns, there is simply no way to ignore the pounding political rhythms that thrum behind the visible backdrop of trees and snow-capped mountains.

But there is something more. The environment actually produced in this apparently endless struggle, the one I looked out on through the window of my rented SUV (sports utility vehicle), is by no means the one that any of the parties to the fight might have ever predicted. Burned landscapes are clear of over-mature lodgepole pines we typically associate with the area, and are dominated instead by brush and grasses in a surprising patchwork. The wolf population, now well in excess of 100 animals, includes individual packs larger than those seen for more than a century, defying the predictions of even the most optimistic biologists. Elk populations continue to fluctuate with effects on local vegetation that remain unclear, especially in light of the possible confounding factor of climate change.

So even amidst the countless cabins and hotels, the paved all-weather roads, and the concrete concessions that mark this very human landscape, complicated ecological interactions create a world of unintended consequences and surprises defying even the most careful political assessments or predictions. The system continues to stubbornly present new challenges for managers and new conditions for political wrangling. In a curious way, political actors create the ecology of Yellowstone, but not the Yellowstone of their own choosing.

This book is an effort to address that tension. By introducing political ecology, a field that seeks to unravel the political forces at work in environmental access, management, and transformation, I hope to demonstrate the way that politics are