

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Theodore R. Catton. *National Park, City Playground: Mount Rainier in the Twentieth Century*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006. 236 pp. \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-295-98643-2.

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National Parks and Urban Communities

In *National Park, City Playground*, Theodore R. Catton traces the relationships between the National Park Service (NPS), Mount Rainier, and local municipalities over the history of Mount Rainier National Park. Upon establishment in 1899, Mount Rainier National Park became America's fifth national park, joining Yosemite, Sequoia, and other wilderness acreage in the West. Mount Rainier is a popular destination for hikers and nature enthusiasts; it is also an icon amid the Tacoma and Seattle, Washington, skylines. Catton frames his narrative around the competing uses of urbanites for Mount Rainier in terms of recreation and exploitation. City boosters integrated Mount Rainier into projects to enhance the city residents' morale. Mount Rainier's story demonstrates the great affection that people have for natural places, and their belief that the federal government is an appropriate steward for future generations.

National Park, City Playground begins with an overview of the region and the coalescence of local communities' support for the protection of Mount Rainier. Catton continues with a detailed look at the stakeholders who organized to lobby Congress, a coalition of local preservationists and professional organizations. Residents of Seattle and Tacoma visited the park, making it a local destination for urbanites wishing for outdoor activity. Significant attention is provided to infrastructure development, such as roads and trails, to open the park to a broader constituency. Catton also demonstrates the ways that private companies' desire to profit from national parks poses challenges to park management. Tim-

bermen, poachers, and others have consistently threatened the park's natural setting. A bump in park development came with the organization of the NPS in 1916. NPS park managers had the strength of federal law behind them to work with stakeholders, choose partners, and choose new directions for park visitors to explore. But citizens, too, had federal law to support their position on wilderness management. The Great Depression and the Civilian Conservation Corps, mountain infantry exercises, hotel and camp relocation, and other topics demonstrate that the history of Mount Rainier is a rich one.

Catton's book provides substantially more context and detail than his administrative history prepared for the park in 1996. I was sorry that the first chapter of the administrative history—a culturally diverse historical context for the settlement of the Mount Rainier region—is not better developed in the book. The result leaves the impression, and I do exaggerate to make the point, that a national park begins when the federal government says so, and that the failure to acknowledge a park's diverse prehistory smooths the invisibility of those who came before. Furthermore, the administrative history, as a result of that first chapter, acknowledges the probability of cultural resources in the park. Catton's new book, in contrast, focuses on natural resources and their management. Mount Rainier may be a "nature park" in the NPS dichotomy of natural versus cultural designations, but it struck me as odd that human waste disposal and snow removal enter the discussion where past human activity

does not.

NPS administrative histories offer opportunities for authors to make strong arguments for the future of national parks. Their writers become experts in the inner workings of the park as they have developed over the long-term—in this case, since the late nineteenth century. They are well positioned to make recommendations for a park that will reach a wide audience as a result of publication. But Catton's book left me wondering: what would he recommend the NPS do next for Mount Rainier? What struggles does he anticipate the park administration facing, based on its history? And why are these issues important for the American public to know?

Catton keeps close to his subject rather than place Mount Rainier within a broader context of the history of conservation and preservation in the United States. On the one hand, this means that the narrative stays well

on track in outlining the facts and issues at stake. On the other hand, readers miss out on the significance of Mount Rainier within the historical trends that have shaped the NPS and America.

National Park, City Playground is clearly written, free of jargon, and accessible by professional and nonprofessional readers. It would be useful in classrooms as a case study of national park development, the issues facing federal government in working with municipalities and invested groups, natural resources management, recreation and backcountry planning, and the complications of private/public pressures on the NPS. It offers urban planners a case study in the significance of natural landmarks in city projects and as a marker of local identity. It also provides urban historians with an approach to understand the matrix of competing interests. Overall, Catton provides a useful contribution to our understanding of the National Park Service.

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