H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

William C. Tweed. *Uncertain Path: A Search for the Future of National Parks.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010. 248 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-26557-8.

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Published on H-Environment (January, 2011)
Commissioned by David T. Benac

The Future of "America's Best Idea"

Americans, historian Roderick Nash once argued, invented the national park idea and have supported national parks for over a century.[1] Evidence can be found in countless television specials, such as Ken Burns's documentary series *The National Parks: America's Best Idea* (2009), and by numerous magazine articles that legal scholar Joseph Sax explains are "all more or less entitled 'Are We Loving Our National Parks to Death?"'[2] Anyone who doubts that this show of enthusiasm translates directly into political support can ask former congressman Newt Gingrich how he fared in the mid 1990s when Republicans proposed selling numerous national parks to reduce the national deficit.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, William C. Tweed argues that the national parks are in jeopardy because the ideas that built the park system and its public support have lost their credibility. The central problem, he argues, is that the National Park Service promises, and the American people expect, that the national parks will preserve pristine natural landscapes in an unchanging state, even though a growing body of scholarly literature demonstrates that change, both anthropogenic and nonanthropogenic, is inevitable. In *Uncertain Path: A Search for the Future of National Parks,* Tweed challenges the National Park Service to rethink its mission, identity, and public outreach: "If national parks are to survive in any significant form, their mission and management goals must be redefined, and that redefinition endorsed and accepted by the American public.... Nothing less will succeed" (p. 186). The new mission, he argues, will need to account for change and help the agency educate the public to understand and appreciate it.

For Tweed, this challenge is personal. He spent over three decades working for the Park Service, and he remembers telling visitors that "[t]heir children and grand children ... would be able to enjoy the parks in a condition unchanged from the one enjoyed now" (p. 3). What is more, he has spent almost half a century hiking in the High Sierra and has a deep passion for its ongoing preservation. In *Uncertain Path,* Tweed draws on both professional and personal experience, weaving them together in his account of hiking 240 miles from Tuolumne Meadows in Yosemite National Park to the Giant Forest in Sequoia National Park.

The three body chapters–"South from Yosemite," "Kings Canyon National Park," and "Sequoia National Park"–are organized by the progress of his hike, beginning in a cloud of diesel fumes at the entrance to Yosemite National Park. This initial description of getting into the park and getting a wilderness permit, which Tweed likens to renting a car, is just one of many stories that hint at the ironies of wilderness recreation. The real strength of these chapters comes from Tweed's thoughtful reflections on the park experience and from his ability to weave together descriptions of the Sierra landscape, amusing and sometimes self-deprecating stories about life on the trail, and the human histories connected to these landscapes. And he uses the narrative trajectory of the trail quite skillfully to hold these threads together.

First, Tweed provides rich descriptions of the Sierra landscape, and anyone who has hiked in the Sierra will recognize the features that he describes. He passes through deep glaciated valleys and across cold, rushing streams; he traverses snowfields on mountain passes that exceed twelve thousand feet; and he travels through wide-ranging forests, from gnarled whitebark pine at tree line to giant sequoias sheltered at lower elevations. Along the way, he describes a variety of flora and fauna that change with elevation, aspect, and soil type. Anyone who has hiked in the Sierra will feel at home in Tweed's narrative, and those who have not hiked in the Sierra will receive a compelling invitation.

Second, Tweed offers a host of interesting sto-

ries about the people that he meets along the trail. From seasoned backcountry rangers who live in tent cabins and novice hikers with broken equipment to auto tourists driving in air-conditioned comfort through Devil's Postpile National Monument, he encounters people with wide-ranging motivations, expectations, and preferences. Some of these encounters encourage him, but others leave him puzzled or distressed. For example, after meeting a man who once hiked the John Muir Trail's 212 miles in a record five days, seven hours, and forty-five minutes, Tweed worries about the rise of ultra-light, fast-paced hiking: "how many of the superlight hikers who fly by me," he asks, "are engaged in the landscape and its significance?" (p. 107). And after seeing racial diversity among auto tourists at a national monument, he laments the fact that "wilderness remains tied to one segment of the population" (p. 30).

Third, in what is probably *Uncertain Path's* most significant contribution, Tweed uses the landscape features and names to integrate a significant amount of national park and wilderness history into the narrative, and for this, the book should be required reading for everyone who gets a backcountry permit for the High Sierra. From Lyell Canyon to Mather, Muir, and Pinchot passes, official place names memorialize many of those who have defined the national park and wilderness ideas, and hikers would do well to study this human history along with the natural history of the landscape. What is more, many places in the High Sierra hold personal and professional memories for Tweed, revealing a great deal about the contemporary challenges of park and wilderness management.

With such a rich mix of material, the book is engaging, and those interested in the Sierra or in backcountry travel will find much to enjoy in *Uncertain Path.* Nonetheless, the book is in some ways overly ambitious, leading to a significant disconnect between Tweed's main argument about the Park Service mission, advanced primarily in the introduction and conclusion, and the narrative account of his hike that fills the book's body chapters.

At the beginning and end of the book, Tweed argues that the main problem for the Park Service is that it promises to protect the biophysical elements of the parks from change, thereby making a promise that it cannot keep. This promise, he explains, rests on two myths that are central to the national park and wilderness ideas: the myth that North America was a pristine landscape at European contact, "untrammeled by man," and the myth that the Park Service can protect these landscapes from anthropogenic change. Tweed tackles these myths in a few places throughout the book. In an official wilderness area, for example, he discovers evidence of significant human impact by Native Americans; he demonstrates, as many environmental historians have documented, that nature and human culture have been intertwined in North America for millennia. And further down the trail, as Tweed walks through the remains of a forest fire, he reflects on a recent study that links anthropogenic climate change to shifting patterns of wildland fire. If this study is correct, he notes, no terrestrial landscape can be shielded fully from human modification. Both of the founding park myths, he argues, are misguided: "Anthropological and historical research have demonstrated the bankruptcy of the Virgin Continent worldview, and numerous ecological studies suggest that humanity has modified the planet so profoundly that *natural* results … can no longer be expected to result inevitably from attempts to perpetuate or mimic natural processes" (p. 67).

At the beginning and end of the book, then, Tweed tackles historical and ecological questions that have received significant scholarly attention in recent decades. While he acknowledges a vast body of research, he does not engage it in a sustained way, and this will limit the book's use in a classroom context. To redefine the Park Service goal of preserving "nature," he draws primarily on the conclusion on the poet Gary Snyder, and to rethink ecological protection, he refers to the work of an ecologist and friend Nate Stephenson. For all of the good material these sources provide, they do not provide a sufficient foundation on which to build prescriptions for park and wilderness management, and this limits the value of Tweed's new proposed mission statement for the Park Service: "The purpose of said parks shall be to preserve wildness, and as much as possible of the rich biological and cultural heritage of this planet, in a manner that will allow for the sustained and respectful enjoyment of these resources by present and future generations" (p. 206).

The burden of laying a new foundation for park and wilderness management then falls to the body chapters of the book, but here Tweed emphasizes a somewhat different set of concerns. In fact, the challenge or concern that occupies Tweed most during his hike is not biophysical change but societal change and how it will affect support for the national parks in two important respects. First, he expresses deep concern that interest in wilderness recreation, and the outdoors in general, has waned significantly in recent years. "Why aren't [young people] here?" he asks, speculating that they have "an al-

most infinite variety of entertainments, many of them electronic and indoors.... Television and the Internet offer forms of indoor mass entertainment that seem particularly attuned to the human psyche, and they have captured enormous amounts of our optional time" (pp. 37, 174). Tweed agrees with Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods* (2005), "that contemporary American children of almost all classes and backgrounds have much less connection to the natural world than their forbearers did. We have separated children from nature ... both by providing them with engaging alternatives like television and the Internet and by convincing them that the natural world is dangerous" (p. 175). If it is true that television, the Internet, and other technologies are robbing the parks of support, then the primary challenge the Park Service faces is not its misguided promise to protect nature from change.

Tweed also expresses deep concern about the changing values of park and wilderness users. He discusses the long-standing tension between what he calls the two sects of wilderness travel: those who carry their own gear and those who use livestock. In the end, he defends both approaches so long as each group respects the rules of wilderness travel, and he reserves most of his critical attention for the new generation of wilderness users who are motivated by physical challenge rather than by the opportunity for contemplation–what Frederick Law Olmsted called the exercise of one's contemplative faculty. Proponents of the Wilderness Act of 1964, Tweed explains, argued that setting aside wilderness areas demonstrates respect for the earth and provides opportunities for escape, beauty, and peace. As noted above, the author worries that many wilderness users have abandoned these motivations entirely: "In our entertainment-driven culture, especially among younger users, wilderness has become not so much a place to find quiet reflection as a playground for physical and mental testing. How far? How fast? How high? Does all this activity fatally compromise wilderness? Perhaps not, but it does change it" (p. 113). Responding to this change is critical for Tweed, who writes, "We must reinvigorate the perception that wilderness is an antidote to contemporary urban culture. We must market this perspective because other points of view are sold daily to all who will listen. If we fail, the critical mass of political support that has created and sustained these places could easily be lost" (p. 116). Tweed's concern is important, but once again, this is a different problem from the Park Service's view of what is and isn't natural.

Disconnect between the body chapters and the introductory and concluding chapters may reflect Tweed's dual perspective as a wilderness enthusiast and a former Park Service historian and ranger. As the former, Tweed sees the need to build support for wilderness protection and extend the benefits of wilderness recreation to "contemporary urban culture." To advance this goal, he would have done well to make it more prominent in the introduction and conclusion and to draw on some of the figures in park history who have reflected on social and psychological value of natural scenery, most notably Frederick Law Olmsted and his 1865 report *Yosemite and the Mariposa Grove.* The introduction and conclusion, by contrast, seem to reflect more of Tweed's perspective as a Park Service employee and the tension he felt within the agency's mandate, mission, and culture. It is the Park Service, after all, that must develop an operational definition of "natural" landscapes and processes. Additional engagement with research literature would have helped him substantiate his overarching thesis more effectively and taken some of the burden off of his central narrative.

In the end, *Uncertain Path* provides a rich and engaging account of hiking the John Muir Trail and the High Sierra Trail through the Sierra Nevada mountains. It takes the reader on both a physical journey and a historical journal through the development of the national parks. At the end, Tweed reflects, "I came out of the High Sierra, some 240 miles and thirty days later, richer in many ways. I found in the high country, as I always have over the decades, great beauty and moments of inner peace. I also found profound change: in biology, in technology, in hiking styles, in management, in society, and in myself" (p. 207). This is perhaps a more accurate description of the book than Tweed's initial quest to "make sense of traditional national parks and wilderness in a twenty-first century context" (p. 4), and at this level *Uncertain Path* will benefit a wide audience that has interests in the Sierra, in wilderness recreation, and in the national parks.

Notes

[1]. Roderick Nash, "The American Invention of National Parks," *American Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (1970): 726-735.

[2]. Joseph Sax, *Mountains without Handrails: Reflections on the National Parks* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1980).

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Citation: James Skillen. Review of Tweed, William C., *Uncertain Path: A Search for the Future of National Parks.* H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. January, 2011.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31538

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