


Origin stories matter. They speak to values and ideals, even when their truth is more mythical or aspirational than literal. Yellowstone National Park’s origin story has popularly been recounted as an original American idea (“America’s best idea,” in fact) that was celebrated and copied around the world. Such a claim, however, ignores the broader context that led to Yellowstone’s establishment—and the establishment of other national parks around the world.

These three books result from an inclination among historians in many fields to ask questions about transnational, international, world, or global history. They are part of historiographies that are already well established in the fields of environmental and conservation history, and they join other works that critique public lands from indigenous perspectives. However, transnational park history historiography itself is still relatively new (all three cite Ian Tyrrell’s 2012 article, “America’s National Parks: The Transnational Creation of National Space in the Progressive Era”) but appears likely to grow. Public historians interested in environmental and conservation history—not to mention national parks and public lands—will find many ideas and examples worth considering in these books. So will historians interested in how public institutions are shaped by the interplay of local, national, and transnational factors.

These works, especially the two compilations, show that the question of who was first in the national park game still has some currency, but that scholarship has
largely moved beyond rehashing the US origin question. All three books convincingly disprove the notion that the United States alone created the idea of a national park, instead providing ample evidence that it has been created and amended (and amended again) through ongoing transnational and international processes. The idea of Yellowstone as the original, and exemplary, park still has currency, but it has lost much of its lodestar luster. Over the past century and a half, there has not been one fixed concept of a national park in the United States, let alone in the rest of the world. Even the International Union for Conservation of Nature’s efforts to systematize categories of protected lands have not led to uniformities around the globe.

What these works do especially well is demonstrate that the creation of national parks and other federally protected lands around the world have generally reflected primarily local and national philosophies about parks, conservation, and nature and only secondarily models gleaned from other countries. American national park models have thus been influential in various places and at various times, but so have those of other countries. Although the authors analyze how their topics fit into broad frameworks and networks, the importance of the local recurs as a theme. National, transnational, and international ideas may be influential, but parks are still rooted in specific spaces. The concept of borderlands and frontiers is another thread that runs through these works, as are the roles played by imperialism and, later, decolonization.

The “national” part of national parks remains important even while asking questions about transnational connections and contexts. Collectively these authors provide numerous examples of how national parks can reflect who is—and, importantly, is not—considered part of the nation, the larger imagined community that resides within a nation-state. They also provide concrete examples of how nations and nationalism have varied at different times and places. For example, several essays demonstrate how some national parks—either at their founding or as they have adapted to changing political, social, and cultural mores—have attempted to reflect a vision of nationhood that is inclusive rather than exclusive. Additionally, several scholars, as a result of their expertise in environmental or conservation history, have asked questions about transnational scientific communities that have shaped national parks. The evidence that they have found is some of the strongest proof that the “Yellowstone model” (even accounting for diverse interpretations of it) is not the norm around the world.

In Creating Wilderness, Patrick Kupper argues that the Swiss national park idea, rooted in scientific research, conservation, and strict protection, provided a new, viable alternate to the American wilderness-plus-recreation model. He begins his book (originally published in German in 2012) with an argument against 1872 as the origin point for the national park idea. Kupper instead argues that the turn of the twentieth century was the key moment, with the rise of an international conservation movement consisting primarily of individuals from European and European settler societies. (Ian Tyrrell also argues in favor of this timeline.) Kupper demonstrates that the inspiration for the Swiss National Park, founded in 1914, drew upon
the idea of Yellowstone; however, he contends that the actual plans involved a “deliberate reinterpretation of the American national park idea” (3).

Kupper superbly analyzes the contexts, individuals, organizations, and politics that led to the establishment of the Swiss National Park. He then moves forward in time to evaluate how the park’s administration worked in practice over subsequent decades. The goal of “freely developing nature” turned out to be impossible for a variety of reasons, and Kupper shows how scientific research in the park gradually shifted from the 1920s to the 1990s (220). Readers interested in early twentieth-century Swiss conservation (especially its international connections), the bureaucracy of setting up a new national park (particularly one based on a new, science-focused national park idea), and theoretical ideas about the constructed nature of national parks and wilderness will find reward in this work.

Civilizing Nature, a work that Kupper edited with Bernhard Gissibl and Sabine Höhler, provides a series of essays on national parks from Mexico to Malaysia. Like Creating Wilderness, it is part of The Environment in History: International Perspectives series. The selection of essays emerged from a 2008 conference held at the German Historical Institute in Washington, DC. In their introduction, the editors describe national parks as “transnational parks: globalized localities that owe their establishment to transnational processes of learning, pressure, support, and exchange” (2). The thirteen essays that follow endorse this thesis. The book meets its aim of moving conservation scholarship in a new direction by providing analysis of the “national” (and not just the “park”) part of national parks.

The book is organized into three sections. The first addresses the “civilizing” nature of national parks. The essays in this section examine national parks’ connections to exploration, imperialism, and colonization. Karen Jones analyzes Yellowstone’s role in the birth of the national park movement and the ways that changing cultural, scientific, and environmental ideas shaped Yellowstone’s early management practices. Melissa Harper and Richard White analyze the early creation of national parks in four British settler societies (United States, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand) and show that ideas were more likely to be borrowed transnationally as park systems (not just parks) were established. Caroline Ford writes that nature protection in French colonies—especially in Africa—was based on scientific ideas, particularly the model of the botanical garden as a laboratory. Jeyamalar Kathirithamby-Wells investigates how the incongruous establishment of a national park in colonial Malaysia ended up fitting into the context of the country’s postcolonial democratization and nation building. Gissibl examines how ideas about nature conservation have been transferred between continents, using East Germany and former German colonies in eastern Africa as examples.

The second section of Civilizing Nature focuses on how nature has been nationalized and territorialized. Kupper provides a shorter version of the argument developed in Creating Wilderness. Anna-Katharina Wöbske analyzes how the League of Nations and the United Nations promoted the preservation of heritage, helping universalize the idea of a common human heritage as well as the idea that this
heritage could partly be safeguarded by national parks. Brad Martin examines indigenous environmental activism, specifically how the Inuvialuit built “transnational political relationships that helped challenge the imposition of universalist conservation practices” during the creation of Canada’s Northern Yukon National Park (158), while Etienne Benson compares efforts to radio track large carnivores in the United States (Yellowstone) and Nepal (Royal Chitwan). In so doing, Benson shows how this research challenged ideas about national park boundaries and the nature of wilderness.

The third section addresses how nature has been categorized on various levels, including the national and international, and how these levels have interacted. Emily Wakild contends that the establishment of Mexico’s national parks resulted from revolutionary social and political reforms, plus transnational networks (especially in forestry). Henny J. van der Windt describes how the Yellowstone model initially had little appeal in the Netherlands because of the lack of American-style “wilderness” and an aversion to overt nationalism, but the model was later adapted both there and in Dutch colonies. Michael Lewis studies how Indira Gandhi’s policies seemed poised to prioritize “a people-centered approach to environmentalism that put social justice at its core” in India; however, the system of national parks and tiger reserves that was created hewed closely to international national park and environmental ideas (224). Finally, Carolin Firouzeh Roeder analyzes how the intersection of empires, networks, and nations over the longue durée led to the creation of a national park in the Republic of Yugoslavia (now part of Slovenia).

Like Civilizing Nature, the excellent book National Parks beyond the Nation, edited by Adrian Howkins, Jared Orsi, and Mark Fiege, also emerged from a symposium. This one took place at Colorado State University’s Public Lands History Center in 2011. The title of the volume frames its essays as responses to the charge that national parks are “America’s best idea.” Many of the essays do address that topic in part, but their strength lies in not spending needless time fighting this paper tiger. Instead, they offer a nuanced look at the ways that American park ideas, especially Yellowstone, have or have not animated discussions in other countries, as well as how national park ideas have operated at “local, national, transnational, and international scales” (8). For instance, the editors’ essay about Mount Rainier National Park (Washington), Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument (Arizona), and an abortive effort in the 1960s to create a national park of sorts in Antarctica demonstrates how park ideas have interacted at these three different levels.

The book is organized around three themes: origins, ideas, and boundaries. Alan MacEachern’s essay charts the early relationship between Canada’s Dominions Parks Branch (est. 1911) and the US National Park Service (est. 1916). Theodore Catton analyzes how New Zealand’s national parks drew in part on American ideas, but also on the country’s British Commonwealth and bicultural (Māori and Pākehā) identities. Wakild, one of three scholars whose work appears in both edited volumes, looks at how the interplay of international scientific communities and the exploration of national frontiers led to the establishment of national parks in...
Argentina, Brazil, and the United States. Kupper analyzes how national parks have been used as scientific research sites, how science has been used in national park management, and how transnational scientific networks have affected research in parks.

The second section of National Parks beyond the Nation focuses on how some international templates for national parks have faced challenges in particular regional and national contexts. Jane Carruthers demonstrates how the national park model in South Africa has faced challenges in the country’s democratic era, due to South African national parks’ association with apartheid. Steven Rodriguez argues that Indonesia’s national parks failed to meet their conservation and development goals because the park model chosen represented only elite, not popular, interests and values. Chris Conte’s essay about conservation in Africa’s Great Rift Valley argues that ideas about nature and wildness popularized by National Geographic have been detrimental, because they treat locals as interlopers and threats to nature, rather than integral parts of it.

The third section is about boundaries. Karen Routledge argues that transborder grizzly bear issues in Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park have operated at multiple levels (national, regional, and local) and have required balancing scientific knowledge and public perceptions. Ann McGrath compares how Uluru (previously called Ayers Rock) in Australia and Devils Tower in the United States have gradually included more control by indigenous peoples (much more so in Australia than the United States). She argues that the relationship between colonizers and colonized (the latter of which often includes indigenous peoples) should be understood as transnational. Mark Carey draws on examples from Peru and the United States to contend that media accounts about climate change say more “about popular perceptions of parks and the relationship between people and nature” than they do about science (259). He writes that the depictions of nature as static (in both countries), locals as passive victims of climate change (Peru), and the division of nature from culture (United States)—and, as a result, parks from their surrounding communities—hinder efforts to develop effective climate change adaptations. Also in this last section, Josée Drummond analyzes how Brazil’s 1979 overhaul of its park system drew on national priorities, international nongovernmental organizations, and various national park models—and how this led to the creation of a park system that represented all of Brazil’s ecotypes.

Drummond concludes his essay with a memorable simile: “In the Brazilian context, national parks, ‘America’s best idea’ . . . became something like the stone in a stone soup—it is present, but it is not the main course” (228). Paul S. Sutter chooses a different metaphor, arguing that there is much to be gained by “decentering, even provincializing” the United States’ role in the history of protected lands (284). These comparisons are crucial to today’s historiography: at times, Yellowstone and the US National Park System are important, but the scholarship is more interesting when it moves past automatic consideration of them as the origin point for all national parks.
These three books demonstrate the value of approaching national park histories in new ways, whether the history is from above or below, or framed from a local or transnational perspective. Above all, these works show how writing about national park origins can shed new light on the societies in which we live. Park histories provide excellent opportunities to examine how local communities and national identities are tied to transnational exchanges of ideas, particularly those related to science and conservation. The editors of these works express optimism about continued research into transnational national park history, as well as the future of national parks. In addition to enjoying these fine books, one can look forward to the conversations and future scholarship they will inspire.

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