

Literature Review: Public Lands Administration in the US

Intro

Public lands and their administration in the US are an interdisciplinary subject, drawing from sociology, forestry, agriculture, environmental studies, recreation, political science, geography, anthropology, psychology, public health, philosophy, planning, and landscape architecture, to name a few (Culhane, 2001). For as many disciplines that are relevant in the work of public lands administration, there are public and government opinions about how the work should be done. Thus, the history of the US is one of its people debating and searching for the proper use of its land.

In the US, the majority of the federal public lands are managed by US Forest Service (USFS), National Park Service (NPS), and Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Each of these agencies is guided by one or more of the environmental management theories that have been in vogue at one time or another throughout American history. What follows is a review of the prevailing philosophies of natural resource management.

Literature Review

Utilitarianism

Andrew Jackson's 1830 inaugural address embodies the prevailing public attitude toward wild lands at the time, making a passionate case for the removal of American Indians and settling of the territories, saying, "What good man would prefer a country covered with forests and ranged by a few thousand savages to our extensive Republic, studded with cities, towns, and prosperous farms." Manifest destiny prescribed the conquering of all that was savage or wild in the American frontier -- the aim being to transform plains into farms, forests into buildings, and remove the indigenous peoples whose ways of life appeared antithetical to the ways of Western living. At the heart of this motive was a disdain for nature stemming from the early days of

Western civilization, during which wilderness was an unpredictable and dangerous place to be feared, and which was much less preferred to the relative safety of developed land (Nash, 1982). If wild lands had anything to offer, it was natural resources as raw materials for the development of the nation. To this end, land managers employed utilitarianism as their philosophy, seeking to maximize the output of American resources. The inverse effect of utilitarianism was a perception of natural resources as inexhaustible (Culhane, 2001), an attitude personified by the stories of the American bison and the Western frontier at large.

Romantic Preservation

It was intellectuals living in cities, not pioneers doing daily battle with the elements, who first saw nature as something to be valued in its own right (Nash, 1982). The Romanticism of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with its appreciation of the chaotic sublime, affinity for artistic and literary depictions of nature, and association of God with nature, paved the way for the unpredictability and disorderly qualities of wild lands to lend themselves to transcendental experiences (Culhane, 1981; Nash, 1982). Romantic preservationists seek to preserve and minimize human intervention on wild lands so that they can be enjoyed and experienced by visitors, inherent wild qualities intact.

Inspired by Ralph Waldo Emerson and transcendentalism, Henry David Thoreau wrote *Walden, or Life in the Woods* in which he seeks a communion with God through his experiences in nature. In *Walden*, he repeatedly espouses the virtues of the “Indian” way of life, admonishes consumerism and touts minimalism, announcing unequivocally that “we can never have enough of nature” (1854, p. 193). Thoreau’s reverent descriptions represent a shift in the nature of people’s relationships with the natural world, from fear and disdain, to awe and respect. This attitude is personified by the mission and work of the National Park Service, which aims “to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and wildlife therein” with the intent of preserving them for “the enjoyment of future generations.” A few decades later, the Yosemite National Park was created as the first national park, withdrawing it from settlement, occupancy, or sale “for the benefit and enjoyment of the people” (S. 392, 1872).

Shortly thereafter, Sequoia and Yosemite were established as the second and third national parks as a direct result of John Muir's fanatically reverent writings during the 1870s to 1890s in which he touts the wild qualities of the Sierra Nevada range in California. Of particular importance were two pieces by Muir commissioned by *The Century Magazine*, with the intent of winning public opinion in favor of preservation in the Yosemite Valley. In "Features of the Proposed Yosemite National Park," Muir advocates for government intervention to protect Yosemite, writing, "Unless reserved or protected, the whole region will soon or late be devastated by lumbermen and sheepmen, and so of course be made unfit for use as a pleasure ground" (1890, p. 667). With this statement, Muir aligns the national park system with the values of romantic preservation, and summarizes the conflict between the environmental philosophies of preservation and conservation.

Progressive Conservation

Simultaneous to the flowering of romantic preservation in the US, a more utilitarian approach to land management was gaining public support. Conservationism was a new take on utilitarianism, with the use of the land's natural resources as a key element, but tempered by moderation. The legitimization of the movement was solidified in 1908, with the Governors' Conference on the Conservation of Natural Resource sponsored by President Theodore Roosevelt. In his opening address, entitled "Conservation as a National Duty," Roosevelt explained, "The occasion for the meeting lies in the fact that the natural resources of our country are in danger of exhaustion if we permit the old wasteful methods of exploiting them longer to continue." Gifford Pinchot, Chief Forester of the USFS at the time, had organized the conference with Roosevelt's support.

With Pinchot's advocacy, the US Forest Service had just been created from the merging of the forest reserves, administered by the General Land Office under the Department of Interior (DOI), and the US Department of Agriculture's Division of Forestry. In his 1910 book, *The Fight for Conservation*, Pinchot emphasized the importance of actively managing the country's natural resources: "We, the American people, have come into the possession of nearly four million square miles of the richest portion of the earth. It is ours to use and conserve for ourselves and our descendents, or to destroy" (1910, p. 5). Pinchot offers conservation as the

only alternative to destruction. The creation of the US Forest Service, under Pinchot's theory of conservation, asserted the importance of government's role in natural resource management.

Environmentalism

Following the ends of both world wars, Americans sought to reconnect with their country through the enjoyment of their public lands (Faber & O'Connor, 1988; Nash, 1982). With the growth of the middle class, the American public had more time for outdoor recreation and a growing drive to escape the urban environment in which they lived and worked. In addition, the middle class increasingly took note of environmental issues beyond those of simple resource consumption -- pollution, nuclear energy, oil and gas issues, and more (Faber & O'Connor, 1988; Nash, 1982). Herein lies the origins of environmentalism, in which the value of lands go beyond utilitarianism and conservation's use for natural resources, and beyond preservation's use for sightseeing and spiritual enlightenment. Rather, the natural world was valued as an ecosystem, the health of which was dependent upon the health of each of its parts, and of which mankind was a part.

In *Public Lands Politics*, Culhane writes that "environmentalists see mankind as an inextricable part of nature... whereas the preservationists' transcendent view of nature sees man as apart from them" (1981). Taking this as the distinction between the two, Aldo Leopold was an early environmentalist. In 1949, Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* detailed a land ethic that "changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it... Man is, in fact, only a member of a biotic team" (1949/1990, p. 240-241). Leopold proposed a new view of the natural world that used science and ethics as the motivation for conservation, rather than the conservationists' imperative to retain the land for resources and recreation (Nash, 1982).

The land ethic also inspired Leopold to advocate for wilderness under a new interpretation, which he proposed in a 1921 *Journal of Forestry* article: wilderness defined as "a continuous stretch of country preserved in its natural state... big enough to absorb a two weeks' pack trip, and kept devoid of roads, artificial trails, cottages, or other works of man." Though a descendent of the ideas of romantic preservation, this was a new kind of

recreation that differed from the tourism often seen in national parks. The ideas of primitivity, solitude, and character-building presented in this article led directly to the creation of the first area devoted primarily to wilderness recreation (Nash, 1982). The concept that the value of the land needn't lie beyond the opportunity for development of personal character was further developed in the "Wilderness Letter," a manifesto by Wallace Stegner that championed the importance of the "wilderness idea, which is a resource in itself" in that wilderness "was the challenge against which our character as a people was formed" (1960). Here we see the uniquely American valuation of wild lands as essential to the nation's self-perception. The Wilderness Act of 1964 was passed shortly after, legally defining and protecting 9.1 million acres of land.

Many environmentalists actively distrusted government and its role in public land management (Culhane, 1981). Where progressive conservationists had trusted bureaucracies of technical experts, creating numerous government agencies to administer public lands, environmentalists believed these agencies to be at least sympathetic, if not in collusion with, the utilitarian interests that sought to exploit the nation's natural resources (Culhane, 1981). In 1975, Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* depicted the fictional story of the use of sabotage to prevent and protest the development of the natural environment in the Southwest. Inspired by Abbey's novel, the Earth First! organization formed and began taking direct action in the style of the book's characters, which they dubbed "monkeywrenching." Though at times provocative, direct action is frequently employed by environmentalists as a style of citizen participation (Mason, 2018a). In response to growing pollution and growing public interest, other, less extreme forms of citizen participation in the rising environmental movement also appeared around this time, such as the first Earth Day in 1970.

Administration

With the establishment of the US Forest Service (USFS) in 1905, the National Park Service (NPS) in 1916, and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in 1946, came the task of managing and administering the lands. The creation of public lands have been guided by various national attitudes towards natural resources, wilderness, and lands, which affect each agency's administration.

Even in the days of the General Land Office (GLO), which later merged with the US Grazing Service to create the BLM, the difficulties of administering public lands -- with its various stakeholders, often opposing interests, and multiple use mandates -- created issues that warranted study. Howard H. Dunham's *Government Handout* examined the GLO and concluded that, though the agency failed to achieve its goals during 1875-1891, its failure was largely the fault of Congress for failing to expand the agency's staffing despite growing obligations (Gates, 1942).

Similarly, Herbert Kaufman's 1960 book *The Forest Ranger* examined five district rangers of the US Forest Service, aiming to understand the underpinnings of the USFS organizational culture, and how agency consistency was achieved despite the remoteness, distance and other variations in the ranger districts administered by these rangers. Kaufman notes that the rangers embody "voluntary conformity," behaving exactly "as their superiors would direct them to if their superiors stood looking over their shoulders, supervising every detail," (Kaufman, 1960/2006) even while they were enacting complex directions from the Washington office, adapting them to their district's unique situation (Tipple & Wellman, 1991). In doing so, district rangers embody Behn's guidance for public managers as leaders -- articulating their agency's purpose, keeping it focused on its mission, and exercising leadership (1998).

Yet, the task of administering public lands has only grown in complexity since the environmental movement began in the 1960s and 1970s, and more recent research examines these changes. In "Herbert Kaufman's Forest Ranger Thirty Years Later," Tipple and Wellman compare the complexity of the US Forest Service when Kaufman wrote *The Forest Ranger* in 1960, to the USFS of the 1990s. The change in public attitude toward environmental issues precipitated a wave of legislation¹ which demanded that public lands be managed for a greater number of resource types and higher yields than when they were created (Tipple & Wellman, 1991). These policies were accompanied by legislation outlining administrative processes, notably the National

¹ The Wilderness Act of 1964, The Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the Wild and Scenic River Act of 1968, the Clean Air Act amendments of 1970 and 1977, the Clean Water Act amendments of 1972 and 1977, the Endangered Species Act of 1973, and more.

Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 and the Northwest Forest Plan of 1993, both of which grew the bureaucratic demands of public lands employees (Tipple & Wellman, 1991).

This growth in policy complexity has been accompanied by a growth in the complexity of public participation in public lands and natural resource administration. Tipple and Wellman note that district rangers are increasingly being asked to shift from the Forest Service's original mission focus on efficiency and economy, to the new public administration style, requiring responsiveness and representativeness (1991). With the rise of environmentalism has come increasing public participation (Lawrence & Deagen, 2001; Tipple & Wellman, 1991). The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), in particular, has allowed the public to participate in a formal process of review and feedback for the natural resources management decision-making process (Irland, 1975). NEPA and other similar policies have allowed federal land management agencies to climb higher on Arnstein's ladder of participation, perhaps landing on ladder rung five, Placation, in which citizens may advise but not decide matters of policy. Previous models of management placed power largely in the hands of "technical experts" (Culhane, 1981). Although this shift greatly complicates the work of public lands administration (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999; Tipple & Wellman, 1991), it allows commonly disenfranchised groups to have a voice in the decision-making process (Arnstein, 1969). The difficulty of governance through the consensus, or even just involvement, of its citizens, is well-documented, and environmental issues are a popular example of particularly tricky situations with multiple stakeholders (Cooper, Bryer, & Meek, 2006; Irland, 1975; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004).

Beginning in the 1980s, Aldo Leopold's understanding of the ecosystem grew into a new model, termed biodiversity, in which the relationships among members of an ecosystem were perceived as more intricate and complex than ecologists had originally perceived. To this end, land managers were increasingly asked to manage their units as an ecosystem, rather than as multiple disparate resources (Nelson, 2017).

In the 2000s, public opinion on natural resources and environmental concerns became an increasingly partisan issue. Members of the Bush administration aligned themselves with the conservationists' philosophies, after which the Obama administration worked to advance preservationist and environmental legislation (Nelson,

2017). The conservationist attitude of members of the political right also manifested as a call for the privatization of public lands. Those who call for privatization do so with a deep mistrust of government, believing that governance by federal bureaucrats “thwarts accountability [and] fiscal discipline” (Davis, 2018, p. 137). And yet, government requires trust (Behn, 2001). Effective management can’t be accomplished without the trust of its citizens.

Current Research

The conflicts inherent in public domain are many: competing social and economic interests by stakeholders (including both conflicting values and conflicting facts); as well as contradictory and often vague legislative mandates² (Irland, 1975). Current research aims to examine these conflicts, aiming to resolve them through deeper understanding.

In their 2010 journal article, “Attachments to Special Places on Public Lands: An Analysis of Activities, Reason for Attachments, and Community Connections,” Eisenhauer, Krannich, and Blahna examine the phenomenon of the “special place” to which people’s connections goes beyond the rational. Eisenhauer et al. assert that the rational explanations for conflict don’t account for the entirety of the public’s passion around the management of public land. Examining the concept of “substitutability,” which aims to find alternative destinations for visitors who are barred from accessing areas of land due to management decisions, they conclude that the idea of substitutability fails to take into account the potential for people’s non-rational emotional attachments to specific areas. Rather, special place attachment should be taken into consideration by managers when making decisions about public lands.

McBeth and Shanahan perceive the conflicts surrounding public land management to be rooted in policy marketing, proposing a macro-level theory of framing in which policies are marketed to stakeholders. As a case study, they examine the stakeholders invested in the management of Yellowstone National Park, asserting that many of the cultural differences among stakeholders, though likely preexisting, are guided and exacerbated by

² Both the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act of 1960 and the National Park Service mission statement are cited by Behn as being ambiguous and contradictory (1998, 2001).

interest groups, media, and elected officials, who use language and labeling to market public opinion to citizens, often creating wedge issues that divide voters.

Scholars studying public administration today see collaboration as a potential strategy for conflict resolution, and it has increasingly been institutionalized in legislation and planning processes (Mason, 2018b). Public land administration has also been bit by the collaboration bug (Davis, 2018). Collaboration offers an opportunity to both address decision-making obstacles and diversify public involvement. In environmental management, collaborative partnerships take the form of Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) -- a model which views community involvement not as a hindrance, but rather as an opportunity to improve upon centralized, top-down approaches (Gruber, 2010). The Key Principles of CBNRM, as laid out in Gruber's synthesis of CBNRM research, overlap to a great degree with the key characteristics for collaboration, as described in Kania & Kramer's examination of collective impact. Strikingly, the Malheur Refuge and its surrounding lands has been cited by scholars as a model of conflict-resolution among stakeholders, prior to its occupation by non-local activists (Davis, 2018; Walker, 2018). A rancher local to the Malheur area summarized the benefits of CBNRM and collaboration at large, saying, "To me, what is important is that the refuge has really listened and taken a more collaborative approach. Automatically that helps build better relations with the community" (Davis, 2018, p. 179).

Expanding upon the ideas of CBNRM, Agrawal and Gibson suggest a focus on institutions, rather than vague "communities," asserting that CBNRM will be better served "by focusing on the multiple interests and actors within communities" (1999, p. 629). By accounting for differences among individual actors in communities, CBNRM can effectively capture the viewpoints of diverse stakeholders (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999).

Future Research

Historical literature covers the rationale behind each of the American federal public land agencies and their administration styles. More recent literature recognizes the complexity of the varied and often opposing interests of stakeholders, and begins to expand upon the idea of inclusiveness by way of citizen participation.

Furthermore, scholars begin to examine the roles of diverse stakeholders through new lenses, including the macro-level theory of framing presented by McBeth and Shanahan, and the emotional attachments that people form to land.

However, these models don't quite expand into studying the disenfranchisement of minority groups with regards to public lands. Many federal public land agencies aim to increase the diversity of visitors to federal public lands, and yet the barriers to minority groups are not fully understood. Minority groups may not partake in recreating on public lands for reasons of culture, lack of access, tokenism, perceived legal threat, perceived physical danger, and more. Further, groups may be recreating on or otherwise enjoying public lands in ways that differ from current outdoor recreation norms. These questions could also be applied to the public servants doing the work of public land administration -- how can federal land management agencies recruit, and, perhaps more challenging, retain a diverse workforce that is representative of the American public?

Finally, the topic of public lands, colonization, and access rights as it relates to American Indians is of particular interest and could be further explored. Are these places not "special" to them, or is a "special place" only considered when the community has representatives in positions of power to advocate for their interests? How can the conflicting interests of those who indigenous to the nation be reconciled with the current governance?

Conclusion

The history of federal public lands administration and the history of environmental issues in the US are thoroughly intertwined. American public lands, representative of the nation at large, are both fraught and blessed with a wide and varying population of stakeholders whose diverse interests often create conflict. Yet the literature depicts a workforce, and citizenry, who are flexible and often willing to compromise. Through much of American history, progressive ideas about natural resource administration, though they may not be immediately accepted, and though the path to acceptance may be fraught with conflict, are eventually embraced by the public at large. Thus, despite a propensity for conflict, public land management continues to move forward with the latest theories of environmental management.

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