IS SUCCESS SPOILING OUR NATIONAL

BY PAMELA WEINTRAUB

Is success spoiling our national parks?

Environmentalists, tourists, business people and government officials have been grappling with that difficult question for over twenty years. Today, with more people visiting national parks than ever before, experts claim that overuse may permanently destroy some park areas.

Most Americans now live in suburbs and cities. And the proportion of the population living in built-up areas increases each year. So does the need to "get away" and find relief in nature.

Last year 283 million visits were made to our national parks. Large numbers of these visits were made to such famous parks as Yosemite, Yellowstone, and the Grand Canyon. The number of individuals who vacationed in the U.S. parks in 1978 was nearly double the number of vacationers in the parks during 1968.

Some areas, such as the Redwood National Park in California, or newly formed national monuments in Alaska, get relatively few visitors. These parks survive with little trouble. They will provide Americans with areas of beauty and solitude for generations.

But other well-known parks have become vast recreational centers with supermarkets, swimming pools, hotels, bars, and banks.

Corporations — called "concessionaires" by park officials—operate tourist attractions ranging from gift shops to golf courses in the parks. In order to be profitable, these attractions require a heavy stream of customers. And to maintain a steady stream of customers, the concessionaires are tempted to add conveniences and attractions. The greater the number of visitors, the greater the demand for facilities.

In the end, tourists who want to enjoy such splendors as forests, waterfalls, and meadows are often faced with the same "urban" problems they tried to leave behind.

According to Armond Sansum of Yosemite National Park in California's High Sierras, "people are being fooled." Yosemite park officials try to portray an atmosphere of natural beauty, but "in the height of the season there's no way to avoid congestion."

Yosemite has a full-time hospital with three doctors and a dentist. It also has a luxury hotel that ranks with some of the most famous in the world. There are nightclubs, traffic jams, and campgrounds with wall-to-wall tents.

"You can't have a natural setting if you're trying to administer to at least 15,000 people consistently all summer long," Mr. Sansum stated. "Movement of traffic and trucks to bring in food and take out garbage would just razzle-dazzle you. This park has reached the breaking point."

Mr. Sansum explained that Yosemite is special. That's because so many scenic wonders are located right in the park's valley—an area that takes up only seven square miles.

While the entire park occupies an area the size of Rhode Island, few visitors explore the vast regions outside the valley itself. It is in the valley that most problems occur. And in the busy season, problems can be many and varied.

One recent Yosemite crime report listed 2 manslaughters, 5 rapes, 36 assaults, 622 robberies, and 465 traffic accidents...in a single day!

The natural environment in Yosemite Valley is being "overtaxed," Mr. Sansum said. "Years ago the birdlife in the valley was so abundant that it woke people up in the morning. These world-famous birds, known as the 'Yosemite Chorus,' aren't heard anymore, ever."

Mr. Sansum added: "The deer herd that occupied the valley in the summer several years ago numbered in the hundreds. Today no more than a dozen deer are left."

Deterioration in Yosemite, like that in other famous parks, is caused by "people and the pressure of development."

"People love to come to Yosemite," Mr. Sansum pointed out. "And in their intensity to visit it they're loving the place to death."

Einar Johnson, chief of management at Redwood National Park, attributes part of that facility's success to the fact that little money has been spent on "concessionaire development" within the park. The few people who visit Redwood find enjoyment in backpacking, hiking, bird-watching, and camping.

But the thousands of people who visit such internationally known

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Yosemite Falls. Photo by Ansel Adams • In the Valley at Yosemite, National Park Service Photo

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spots as Yosemite, Yellowstone, and the Rocky Mountain National Park find it all too easy to indulge in "urban pastimes." And that could mean the downfall of any natural area.

Today, many parks have reached unprecedented pollution levels. In Yosemite, for example, a new, $6-million sewage system can't even meet California's quality control standards.

Each day, one and a half million gallons of sewage are pumped through pipes to an area 16 miles away. And five truckloads of garbage must travel to a landfill spot 38 miles down the road.

In addition, water levels often get so low that officials could find it hard to extinguish a fire in any one of Yosemite's 1,200 permanent or seasonal buildings. Fighting fires there now means removing water from underground wells. And that deals yet another blow to the fragile environment.

Thomas Wilson, spokesperson for the National Park Service in Washington, DC, says that "many park visitors think that it's entirely appropriate to have a nice lodge or cafeteria. I don't think there's a problem for someone seeking solitude," Mr. Wilson says. "The national parks have plenty of it. Crowds are annoying, but no one is forced to remain in crowded areas."

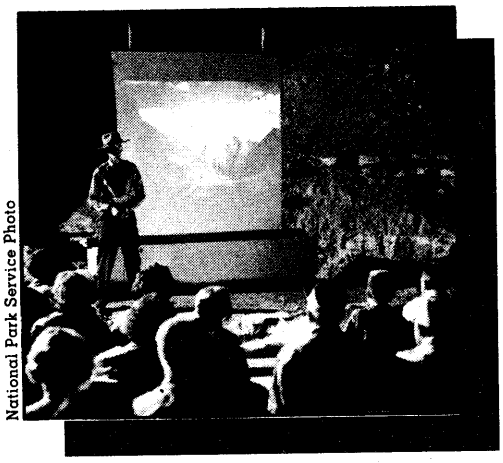
Parks officials have learned from mistakes made in the past. In recent years, the numbers of cabins and campsites at Yellowstone have been significantly reduced. And cars have been banned from many parts of stunning Yosemite Valley. An experimental system of "advance reservations" will limit the number of visitors allowed to stay in parts of Yosemite, the Grand Canyon, and Sequoia National Park campgrounds overnight.

According to Mr. Wilson, one answer to the popular parks problem is to encourage people to visit newer, lesser-known regions.

Lawrence Quist, National Park Service director for the Western Region, agrees. Ninety-five percent of the people visiting Yosemite go to the valley, he says. "If those people went into the back country they would find all the peace and quiet they could possibly want."

But many experts feel that such attitudes are idealistic ways of ignoring real problems. The fact remains that most people still flock to Yosemite Valley, Yellowstone, and the Grand Canyon, leaving a trail of ecological destruction and pollution behind.

One solution to the problem may lie in a proposed management plan for Yosemite National Park. The plan, if adopted, would serve as a model for all parks suffering similar environmental ills.



National Park Service Photo

Informative films, lectures, and displays make visits to National Parks more meaningful for many visitors.

Proposed new management methods were approved by Yosemite officials in late February, 1979. And those proposals are being discussed in Washington DC, now.

The proposals call for removal of all "luxuries" from within the park. Use of private automobiles in the park would be discouraged. An expanded shuttle bus system would take its place. Activities and services not directly related to the park's natural resources would be reduced. This means that tennis courts, night clubs, and recreational equipment stores would either be eliminated or moved outside park boundaries.

There will probably be opposition to the plan from the park concessionaires and from many visitors. Very many people will want to keep the "entertainment center" and "comfortable wilderness" aspects of Yosemite Park. And there may be pressure on National Park System officials and Congress to block funds for the new management approach.

But, as Mr. Sansum has pointed out, a park cannot be all things to all people. It can offer vast amusements for thousands, or it can provide the public with boundless natural wonders so rarely found in ordinary life. But it can't do both.

Or can it?

Some conservationists say that parks may have gone too far and too fast in serving too many people with the wrong thing. Other people contend that since nature lovers who want solitude can still find it in our nation's parks, popular areas of the parks should give visitors the attractions they want.

Success has certainly changed America's most famous parks. On one side we have visitors who want entertainment on their vacations and most of the conveniences of home, and corporations who make profits by providing those attractions. On the other side we have "true nature lovers" who simply want to "view uninterrupted vistas in any direction across a meadow."

In the middle, there's the city person who desires to "get away from it all" in relative comfort. According to many park experts, the experience waiting for this average visitor hinges upon the way particular parks are managed.

There's another point to consider. Our national parks are not just for here and now. They are a natural heritage to be preserved and passed on to our children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren... and countless generations to come. SW