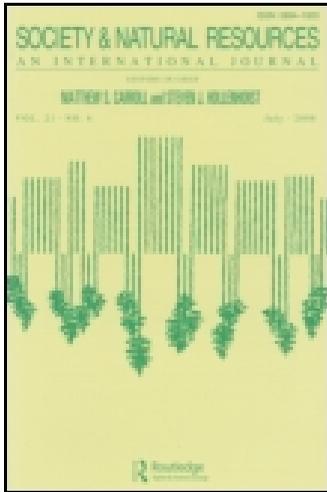


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John Schelhas ^a

^a Southern Research Station, USDA Forest Service , Athens , Georgia , USA

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Book Review

Ross-Bryant, Lynn. *Pilgrimage to the National Parks: Religion and Nature in the United States*. New York: Routledge, 2013. 307 pp. \$125.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-415-89380-0.

Reviewed by **John Schelhas**
Southern Research Station
USDA Forest Service
Athens, Georgia, USA

The social space of national parks in the United States is complex and ever-changing. Lynn Ross-Bryant's book takes us on an impressive and well-documented tour of the complex meanings of national parks, the ways that park visitors experience and enact these meanings, and how both of these have changed from the birth of the national parks to the present day. Ross-Bryant considers the multivocal and contested ways that U.S. national parks function symbolically to crystallize narratives of nature and nation and help people place themselves in these cultural worlds. These symbols are dynamic, and while there may be one dominant voice at any particular time, there are also always other voices that influence the developing story. The national park story in the United States has developed through both official and vernacular cultures, with important roles played not only by park managers, but also by artists, explorers, entrepreneurs, politicians, and scientists. Visitors to the parks—pilgrims, in Ross Bryant's analysis—both honor and contest the values and beliefs enshrined in the national parks as pilgrimage sites. As the parks are both constant and changing, visitors can reenact their grandparents' national park experience while at the same time forging their own. National parks can be seen as sacred spaces: places set apart, where normal boundaries are lifted and where people can experience new ways of being. The process is not only about voices and ideas, but also about the material dimensions of the pilgrimage event and its context. Environments shape stories, and stories shape human perceptions; the pilgrimage performance is itself constitutive and not simply representative of preexisting meanings.

Ross-Bryant tells the story of the U.S. national parks through this cultural lens. National parks arose near the end of the era of Western settlement and the beginning of industrialization. As the West became accessible and new means of travel developed, the parks became America's version of Europe's Grand Tour. The parks represented America's cultural independence and preserved evidence of the image that American civilization was built out of nature itself. Nature was seen through a European aesthetic of the sublime. One became a good citizen by seeing and experiencing God in nature. Parks enshrined both an unchanging nature and American dedication to progress; they embodied national unity while facilitating individual experience. Yosemite was first protected at the end of the Civil War, a national symbol for a divided country. Both artists and scientists, ranging from Albert Bierstadt to

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Josiah Whitney, shaped the way it was perceived by the public. Native Americans were evicted because they neither fit with the sublime image nor were they believed to be able to appreciate the sublime, while entrepreneurship in the new protected area ran wild. Yellowstone was home to the origin myth of the national parks, “The Campfire Story,” a debate between private enterprise and the public good that was presented in a formal pageant in the parks until 1963. Art works, scientific reports, and photographic essays created an appreciation for what was first seen as a horrific and demonic arid landscape of geysers. The new parks were to be preserved, but preservation also promoted development, providing visitors with the experience of “roughing it” from the rustic comforts of newly constructed accommodations.

The next cultural iteration presented encompasses the “See American First” campaign, the Grand Canyon as sacred American shrine, and Glacier National Park as a setting for frontier reenactment. Tourism in the West was associated with America’s greatness and God’s blessing, accompanied by a desire to recover something important to the country that had been lost with the settling of the frontier. The chasm of the Grand Canyon represented a great unknown, and scientists, artists, the railroads, and interpretations of the canyon’s ancient inhabitants combined to create an intelligible lens through which tourists would view and value this geologic marvel. The farming Native Americans of the Grand Canyon were less threatening than other tribes and were nostalgically appropriated in the name of nationalism. Tourists took home souvenirs made by them, while also engaging in outdoor activities from their luxury accommodations. In contrast, conquest of natives and contestation over resources were front and center in Glacier National Park, with eviction of Native Americans more obvious than it was in other parks. Removal of the Native Americans and protection of the park’s wildlife enabled visitors to reenact the frontier experience and find rejuvenation from the weakening effects of industrial life. Native peoples were denied the right to use their traditional resources, but, as in the Grand Canyon, were on display as primitive embodiments of our ancient past.

The founding of the National Park Service (NPS) in 1916 solidified the “See America First” idea, and the national parks officially became the representative cultural sites of America. The national park idea, presented as a fundamental contribution to American character, education, and productivity, was a counterpoint to utilitarian conservation. Ross-Bryant suggests that at this point the national parks most closely represented national pilgrimage sites. The parks represented democratic virtue of what was seen as an extraordinary country built out of an extraordinary land by extraordinary people, and provided Americans with opportunities to reenact elements of this mythology. Initially, this could only take place on lands that were otherwise useless, because lands that proved economically useful generally ceased to be part of national parks. Eventually park lands were presented as useful in other ways, valued as vital to the health, efficiency, and prosperity of the nation and for providing a spiritual center to the nation. Dramatic pageants (ritual enactments of “historic” national park events), viewing of wild animals, and encounters with representations of historic Native Americans were enlisted to tell this story. With the post-World War II economic boom and increasing automobile tourism, the national park pilgrimage became more heterogeneous as the NPS increasingly provided tourists with the personal freedom to create their own rituals of park visitation.

With the advent of the wilderness and environmental movements of 1960s and 1970s, a vernacular discourse began to challenge the official discourse, and the

NPS effectively lost control of the national park narrative. The wilderness discourse, which arose out of the conservation community and popular views on “ecology,” argued that the NPS had not protected the parks undamaged from human use. Science became more important in park management as a means to restore nature and to develop ways to provide enjoyment to future generation while reducing human impact. The wilderness movement also had a spiritual component that addressed issues of meaning and value; the human place in nature and the significance of place and people in America were thus redefined. New forms of pilgrimage developed that emphasized the interconnectedness of humans and nature, for example, environmental education and wilderness tourism.

In spite of these changes, the new national park narratives and the wilderness movement tended to either ignore native people or view them as noble savages, rarely acknowledging that they had planted crops, killed animals, set fires, and fully inhabited the lands that were now national parks. Yet over time, new narratives developed that allowed more diverse roles for people in nature. At the same time, the strict boundaries between the sacred space of the national parks and the everyday landscape of human activities began to break down as ecological interactions between parks and surrounding lands became more apparent. Larger ecosystems beyond park boundaries, such as the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, became enlarged national park sacred spaces that acknowledged this reality, and the creation of new national parks in Alaska pushed this trend further. The Alaskan landscape was multivocal, representing to the American public, on the one hand, stark beauty, abundant wildlife, and freedom to explore, and, on the other hand, endless economic possibilities through mining, trapping, and petroleum. Furthermore, many Alaskan parks were sites of traditional resource use and had been established on the heels of the Alaskan Native Claims Settlement Act. Consequently, Alaskan parks were managed in new ways that both enshrined these cultural values and provided for subsistence use of natural resources. Over time, diverse human stories emerged throughout the parks, ranging from the history of African American cavalry units in Yosemite, to Japanese artist Chiura Obata’s woodcut prints of Yosemite landscapes, to ubiquitous examples of native peoples’ use and shaping of landscapes. Although science was increasingly important in national park management, in the face of these complex human stories it was unable to provide answers to questions of value (although science itself, as practiced in the parks, was often distinctly value laden).

Over time, parks came to have multiple meanings and values, and thus Ross-Bryant brings us to the current era with the question of whether unbounded, changing, multivocal spaces can still be pilgrimage sites, and the challenge of how the national park narrative can be transformed to tell these new stories and express these new values. The historical portion of the book demonstrates how, in park history, cultural shifts have been creative moments in which combinations of culture, art, science, and park management have brought about new meanings for the parks and new forms of pilgrimage. In any present moment, cultural and ecological patterns are not clearly defined, and their future trajectories are unknown. Nonetheless, Ross-Bryant does readers a service with an epilogue that uses the perspective and history of the U.S. national parks as pilgrimage sites to begin a discussion of the cultural role of the parks in the future. Current thinking on national parks is complex and difficult to package neatly. A park is not an island but rather is connected to non-park land. Park ecosystems are dynamic and reflect long histories of human intervention, rather than representing primal states of nature. Parks are places that hold many

stories about humans and nature, some of which are in conflict. Park rangers neither have all the answers nor can they dispel all uncertainties, but rather offer visitors opportunities for their own explorations. Yet the significance and power of pilgrimage sites is that they provide an opportunity to step out of daily life and explore larger ideas and values such as these, and gaps and uncertainties provide opportunities for explorations of new and complex questions of the relationship of humans to nature and American democracy through thought, discussion, and recreational activities.

Pilgrimage to the National Parks has much to offer natural resource professionals, most importantly by providing a broad context in which to understand the role of U.S. national parks in national culture and individual experience. National parks have outsized meaning to the American public, and perhaps also to the global public. They provide a material backdrop for stories about the relationship of humans to nature, and, perhaps more importantly, they provide settings for the enactment of these stories by park visitors in ways that are both culturally structured and inherently personal. For the parks to continue this role, we must understand the complex and changing value of parks that emerges through a broad conversation that includes park managers, artists, scientists, politicians, the media, park users, and more. Lynn Ross-Bryant's excellent book will surely be an indispensable guide as we navigate into this future.