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The Future of the National Parks: Recreating the Alliance Between Commerce and Conservation

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Natural Resources Law Center

Occasional Papers Series

THE FUTURE OF THE NATIONAL PARKS:
RECREATING THE ALLIANCE
BETWEEN COMMERCE AND CONSERVATION

by Professor Robin Winks
Randolph W. Townsend Professor of History
Yale University

Keynote address at conference on
External Development Affecting the National
arks: Preserving "The Best Idea We Ever Had"

Natural Resources Law Center
University of Colorado School of Law
September 14-16, 1986



**Natural Resources
Law Center**

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Edited Transcript of Keynote Address at Conference on
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**THE FUTURE OF THE NATIONAL PARKS:
RECREATING THE ALLIANCE BETWEEN COMMERCE AND CONSERVATION**

by Professor Robin Winks

I am delighted to be here, for it is a return home. Even so you who are Coloradans will know that people who live on the Western Slope do not look upon the Eastern Slope, which is part of Wall Street, as precisely home. When I was growing up in Delta County, people would say that they were going to take a trip east, and I assumed they were going to Chicago; it turned out that they meant, perhaps, Sterling! Still it is nice to be back in Colorado, and it is good to be among a number of old friends who are in the audience, all of whom have outgrown the confines of their youth.

Those confines created for them and for me both parochialism and curiosity. I wish to explore briefly four ways in which parochialism may still, for some of us, impact upon the future of our national parks. Along the way I will backpack a few related observations as well.

The greatest threat to the national parks, to my mind, is the ignorance of the public, including the ignorance of many who themselves are parks professionals and think themselves well informed about national parks. This is a conference on national parks. Yet there will be many people here who are unaware of many of the units within the national parks system or who confuse the national parks with the national forests, with BLM land, with any of a variety of recreational areas. I had a call just yesterday from the American Recreational Association, asking for a copy of my talk, and I told them I would not be speaking on recreation. But surely so they said since your talk is about national parks. And I said no, national parks are not "about" recreation. (I will return to this point in a moment.) Here the central point I wish to develop is that the United States possesses a national park system, 335 units of a systematic expression of the nation's culture, a system unknown anywhere else in the world.

All of us have subjects that make us angry. I get angry when I meet a dedicated conservationist who has the notion that Pike's Peak is a national park, or who refers to the Garden of the Gods National Park or talks about Glacier National Monument and shows no sense of the hierarchy within the system or of which agency is managing what. This is a conference about the national parks. To my mind that means it is a conference about the National Park Service, which means it is about the Department of

the Interior. It is not a conference about conservation broadly or recreation even narrowly.

Ignorance then is, I think, the greatest threat to the national parks, because very few people, even those who are dedicated to the idea of preserving the out-of-doors, have a clear concept of who administers what, to what principles and for what purpose.

Just a week ago, I read a piece in which a conservationist (and I believe myself to be a conservationist, so I do not use the word negatively) declared that what we really have to do is to see to it that there are a number of areas preserved "in the way that God intended." I always get a little nervous when I meet anyone who knows what God intended, and I particularly get nervous when a conservationist knows what God intended because I rather think that God intended that I too should be on the landscape, though what this conservationist surely meant was land free of human beings. Human beings are part of the ecology too. Human beings are part of the divine plan. National parks were not created to diminish human beings but to educate them. It is not true that human beings need to be kept away from our great natural heritage. They themselves are part of that heritage.

We live in an intensely competitive, intensely commercial society. Our metaphors are either the metaphors of commerce or

of sports. We either strike home runs or we strike out. We say "good job" rather than "well done." It would be good for all of us concerned with conservation to remember from what source our language comes, that we are a competitive and a commercial people, and that we all must work within the American idiom.

One also hears that what we most need is many more national parks. I say to you that we do not need many more national parks. We need much more conservation, much more preservation, many more recreational areas, many more units of the national park system, but it does not follow that these units need be national parks. There are other levels of responsibility for providing for the American public. There are state and municipal parks as well as a variety of other federal instrumentalities to provide for recreational needs. The national park system is unique and it should not and must not become a dumping ground for every favorite recreational activity, for abandoned railway engines and clogged industrial canals.

Now having offended just about everyone present in some way, let me turn to the fundamentals. Any national park system is, in effect, to an historian, a means of gaining entry into that in which a culture takes pride. National parks are not created by accident; they are created by choice, by the hard work of many people, as we well know. If there is to be a Great Basin National Park or a Tall Grass Prairie National Park, they will

come through hard work by many dedicated individuals. Since success is not an accident, each unit tells us a great deal about the political process of any society. I have studied national parks in something over 100 countries, this being one of the best ways for the historian to gain access to the question of how a people perceive themselves. What do they, a people, choose to preserve from their past as historical objects and of their present as natural landscapes and thus how do they project their past to the future? History is, in truth, about the future and not the past.

We think of ourselves as a people beginning to face a crisis of crowding. (Revisiting Boulder, as I have just done, I am amazed at its growth, though most of the growth to my eye looks quite attractive. When I think of the parochial little town to which I went to university in 1948, I think it can not hurt that I can now get Vietnamese and Thai food, when the most exotic thing you could do in 1948, coming over from the Western Slope to Boulder, was to get some spare ribs at a little restaurant near the railroad track.) The United States reached in the census of 1980 almost the density per square mile that England reached in the year 1600. That is to say, by the standards of industrialized societies we are just entering the 17th century. That does not mean that we have much time. We don't. Americans like space. Nonetheless, I think we have to understand ourselves in the context of the world national park movement and not merely in

the context of ourselves. He who knows only his own nation knows not his nation. One can only grasp that which is unique about a people if one has compared their sense of pride with the sense of pride of a variety of other nations.

To repeat, the unique factor in the American national park system is that it is truly systematic. It represents a conscious inventory of units--natural, archeological, cultural, historical --which reflect the finest of the American experience, and it is essential if it is to remain systematic, that it not be denatured by being turned toward a variety of recreational systems. The greatest mistake that the U.S. National Park Service ever made was to permit the inclusion of a series of National Recreational Areas; I long for the time when there will be a National Recreational Area Administration that will take all the powerboat enthusiasts away and put them into a different administration which fully understands the pleasures they take from creating a wake upon a lake created by an artificial dam. The national park system should be of the best, and it must be protected. Simply because we have recreational needs, we must not use this system to serve those needs. We must find another means to serve those needs, and we must protect the systematic splendor and the historical integrity of the national park system.

There are, after all, a variety of tiers to our understanding of what we take pride in. Each state, presumably, has a

state park system--historic sites as well as natural areas, and plenty of places to put power boats--from which one can get a sense of what that state takes pride in. Not long ago I had occasion to examine the Missouri state park system, which in my view is one of the finest in the United States, along with those of other midwestern states. In earlier days the midwest could not rely upon the presence of the National Park Service, and therefore the midwest created a superb system of state parks, whereas the interior western states lagged far behind because they could depend on the federal government (against which they then complained for not permitting appropriate "recreational use" on the land) while the states did nothing whatsoever to create for themselves appropriate lands in state hands.

(Arriving for this conference, I visited two of Colorado's state parks. Colorado has a very long way to go before its state park system is a reflection of what Colorado takes pride in, or so I hope, since the two units I visited are scarcely worthy of pride.)

The West has always shown a bit of hypocrisy, something of a double standard. Westerners are very inclined to take pride in the beauty of their landscapes, as if they personally created the mountains that surround them, as though it were the citizens of Boulder who created the Flatirons out of concrete. The West

often left the task of preserving the beauty the West praised to Easterners and to the federal government. Today, at long last, Montana and New Mexico have truly representative systems of state parks; Colorado and Wyoming even yet do not.

Because we have a systematic system of national parks, we are far ahead of the national park system of any other country in the world. We have surveyed the variety of subjects in which we should take pride and we have endeavored quite consciously to demark a unit of the national park system to represent that pride. To be sure the system is not complete; it will never be complete.

The cutting edge of our national park system in the future is not going to be where it was in the past; it is going to be in historical units. Today, when you count those 335 units, virtually half focus on history, because history is constantly changing. We do not know what units we will need in the future. Perhaps we should have known twenty years ago that we would need a Woman's Rights National Historical Park, but we did not. We could not have known that we would need a Man in Space National Historical Park. We can not anticipate what the future needs of the system will be at the historical cutting edge. Still, if it is not a complete system, it is systematic, and we must not destroy that sense of systematic assessment of ourselves, of what we take pride in, of who we are and therefore of what we would

like to be, that is embraced by our park units.

Still, the system can mislead. Should an outsider sponsored by Steven Spielberg suddenly arrive from another planet, it would appear to that alien that we must be preoccupied with our military past. Take all the historical units of the park system plus all of the national historic landmarks, and you will find that the number dedicated to the military and the number of military posts in our National Park System is amazing. (National Historic Landmarks are administered by the National Park Service. I have visited something over 1000 of the landmarks.) The number of great masonry forts and coastal fortifications, of Revolutionary and Civil War battlefields, (no Mexican War battlefield has ever been found that is adequate) is staggering. Are we fundamentally a military people? That is how any outsider would read us if they looked solely to our National Park System at this time.

The park system is systematic, but quite incomplete. How many units of the national parks system have been dedicated to cultural figures? Take literature: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, yes. Eugene O'Neill, yes. Edgar Allen Poe, yes. Walt Whitman, no. Herman Melville, no. Henry James, no. Ernest Hemingway, no. It is not as though the major figures of the American literary tradition do not have sites at which they can be commemorated; it is that we simply have not focused on

the cultural side of the completion of our system. Or think of a great American artist. Would you think of Augustus St. Gaudens first? He is the one artist represented in the national park system. Or might you not think of Gilbert Stuart first? He is not in the national park system.

Why do I recite all of this? To make clear my second point: that the national park system is a product of political reality. It is a product of Congressmen and Senators who want to commemorate great moments of the past in a non-controversial way. We can all celebrate a great military victory. It is difficult to know whether one should celebrate Walt Whitman since it is now suspected that he was gay. He believed in the "barbaric yap"; he was a voice of the people. Whitman was one of the greatest American poets, but every effort to create a Walt Whitman national historic site has ultimately been blocked.

Do you want to build a broad constituency for the national park system? Do teenagers today care about any one of the figures that I have just named to you? Will the generations of the future be excited by something called the Richard Nixon National Historic Site? Possibly. Legislation requires that we create one, in any case. But what of popular culture? What of the icons before which millions have stood in wonder? Should we not have national historic sites to Elvis Presley and Walt Disney--both of whom have had far more impact on international

affairs, both of whom have influenced external developments, far more than many of the individuals we commemorate within our park system.

The largest sector of our society not biographically commemorated in our park system is commerce and business. I think business is a creative art, too. Why is there no Henry Ford national historic site? Is Henry Ford in some way less important than William Howard Taft? Why is there no national historic site to Anheuser Busch, or to the great wine industry of California? Why is there no historic site to the business side of the aircraft industry, which we recognize only in the Wright Brothers Memorial in North Carolina? We recognize the Wrights' science, but we do not recognize, as Calvin Coolidge told us "The business of America is business." Coolidge was no Philistine: he was a shrewd man. The business of America is business, and it is because business has produced a high standard of living, that the nation can afford the luxury, as it enters the 17th century, of preserving vast tracts of land that most societies can not afford to preserve, simply because they are needed to sustain the populations. It is because of, and not despite, our economy that we are able to have the most systematic national park system in the world.

It would be well if we tried to understand how this park system came out of American productivity, efficiency and competi-

tion, as an aspect of American democracy. If we are to preserve our park system, to strengthen and expand it, we have to understand the need to recreate the 19th century alliance between commerce and conservation.

The majority of conservationists I know are intensely anti-tourist. But in many parts of the world tourism has led to conservation. In Papua New Guinea the nation has preserved several aspects of the landscape and areas of indigenous architecture precisely because western tourists want to go to see for themselves the traditional places of the highlands. Like all Third World societies, Papua New Guinea is being transformed. Its leaders readily admit that the only reason they have preserved even the little they have is because western tourists are fascinated by seeing traditional society in traditional architectural environments. It is the tourist dollar that has made that preservation possible. It is not the tourist dollar that has destroyed those areas.

Of course, too much tourism is a threat to parks anywhere. Even so, tourists are not enemies. Tourists are not to be equated with vandals. Tourists often are the people who create the economy by which many national parks have been made viable.

The English have created national parks in the midst of areas already heavily populated. England is the country we will

soon have to imitate as our own population density increases: the Pine Barrens in New Jersey and Big Thicket in Texas, both National Preserves, are indicative of a move toward the English style national park unit, yet our national park professionals have not focused on or studied the English national park system with any care. It is a superb national park system that fosters an awareness that human beings are part of the ecology too. This is my third point.

One of the greatest mistakes that the U.S. National Park Service ever made was at Buffalo National River, when the service forgot that human beings were part of that ecology and moved them out. We too are as worthy of preservation as the grizzly bear. We too, because we are historical figures and history occurred on those landscapes, should be preserved. Yellowstone is not only a great natural reserve, it is an historical park, in which significant historical events occurred. History is not alone about humans; the grizzlies have a history, too. To try to remove the reality of human or grizzly historical events is rather like trying to rewrite the great Soviet encyclopedia.

We have to build new constituencies for the national park system. Once there was a widespread national constituency, and many people shared my strong belief that the national parks are great cathedrals to the American system. I still sense an emotional tingle when I pass the sign which tells me I am

entering a national park property, a sign that proclaims the National Park Service, Department of the Interior. Somehow I feel that though the land may be precisely the same as that just outside the boundary, it is somehow finer, that it is being managed better, that it will be preserved longer. There have been in the past, and there still are, millions of Americans who share that feeling, that as they come into the national parks they are experiencing something that is part of themselves and represents the best within them.

Yet, we as conservationists and environmentalists and national park enthusiasts, often cut off some natural constituencies. I have already suggested that we have tended to cut off the popular culture constituency. National parks prefer Bach and Beethoven to rock music. Well, our culture agrees. I have never yet seen a motion picture in which one sees soaring mountains with rock music in the background. Vivaldi, perhaps. Somehow our culture suggests that Mozart is what the outdoors requires. But there are a great number of urban bound people who do not respond, either to the music or to the empathy represented by that kind of conceit.

We have, in particular, in the last few years most consciously cut off a substantial element within the business community. I do not believe that business by and large is an enemy of the national park system. I believe certain businessmen

and a few businesses are enemies without doubt. I believe certain sectors of the economy, especially in the energy field, may well be. But the answer is not warfare but education. The answer is in building constituencies. The answer lies in leading people to take pride in themselves and to see the parks as a projection of themselves, whatever their occupation may be.

I have belonged to virtually every preservation group in the United States. The requests pour in and I write the customary \$25 check. I get more newsletters than it is conceivably possible to read--the Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society, the Audubon Society, the In-Holders Association, the National Parks and Conservation Association, the Association to Protect Old Forts, the Underwater Archeology Salvage Association, the Association for the Protection of County Courthouses, the Society for the Protection of Carnival Merry-Go-Rounds, the Historical Preservation Association, the American Association for Local and State History, the American Historical Association, the Civil War Battlefield Roundtables, the Revolutionary War Battlefield Groups. (There are, I believe, no roundtables to the Mexican War, which I find illustrative of our attitude toward that war, appropriately enough I must say.) I am a member of the Barometer Society and the Old Thermometer Society, of the Old Map Collectors Society, and the Railway Preservation Society. You name it, I join it.

But what really disturbs me is that I seldom encounter a person who calls him or herself a conservationist who really is aware of a threat to, say, the Adams mansion in Quincy, Massachusetts. And I seldom encounter an historical preservationist who is aware of the threats to Yellowstone. I would contend that if you are not aware of both you are neither a preservationist nor a conservationist. The person who knows only the natural world and not the historic, or the person who knows only the historic and is afraid of the natural world, is betraying the interest he thinks he is serving. We have to create an alliance of all of these groups or we will be blind-sided.

While those of us who think of ourselves as conservationists and preservationists pursue the question of whether the Everglades will survive, we may not give a single thought to whether an important cabin inside Olympic National Park is being torn down. I think we have to look at it all, we have to be holistic. We have to care about the totality of our environment, historical and natural, if we are to resist the incursions on that environment.

Let me give you one small example of the alliance between commerce and conservation. I am currently writing a biography of Frederick Billings, a president of the Northern Pacific Railroad. Born in 1823, dead in 1890, Billings came out of Woodstock, Vermont. After graduation from the state university

and becoming a lawyer, he moved to California in 1849. Though Billings went out with the '49ers, he had the great wisdom not to dig for gold, but to be literally the first lawyer to hang out his shingle in San Francisco. He knew that there would be far more money to be made from litigating claims than from competing for them.

By the time Billings was 30 years old he was a millionaire. He owned the Montgomery Block, which was the largest building by far in San Francisco. When he owned great chunks of land all over California, he began to do what he really wanted to do: as early as 1853 he said that the day was coming when California would be "a greater nation than France," part of the United States, the most populous and richest of all the states. We must protect it now, he said. He was one of the very earliest to see Yosemite Valley as a preserve. It was Billings and a business partner, Trevor Park, also of Vermont, who hired Carleton Watkins, the first great photographer of the Yosemite Valley, to take the photographs which began to stir Congressional interest in the Yosemite.

Billings wanted to make money; of course, he wanted to make money. He was a business man, a real estate developer. Yet he hoped to protect part of the San Francisco waterfront because he said it was too beautiful to develop. He worked to set aside Calaveras Big Grove. He worked on what became Big Basin Redwoods

State Park. But for reasons of health he moved back east and in due course became president of the Northern Pacific. Soon Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks were created by the alliance between commerce and conservation, between the railroads, their tourists, and those who saw the need to protect nature.

Time and time again, as the Northern Pacific line was being built through Montana, and as the spur line was planned from Livingston to the borders of Yellowstone, Billings wrote to the surveyors, saying in effect, do not damage the resource, the day will come when the company will make far more money by taking people to see the beauties of the far west than we will ever make from wheat, cattle or minerals. Here was a person who made his fortune and retired to Woodstock, to help preserve that singular New England community for the present generation, who saw that his profit dollar could be spent in a way that would benefit himself, and would benefit his community, his railway brethren, and the nation.

Too often what one hears today is a strident divisiveness in which a Secretary of the Interior, now gone, could talk about environmental extremists--a rubbishy statement--while environmentalists would speak about the business community as if it were the enemy, a no less rubbishy statement. What we have to do is to create once again Frederick Billings' sense of alliance. Do

we forget that Stephen Mather and Horace Albright were businessmen? Do we forget the interest that some of the early founders of the national park system had in borax in Death Valley? Do we forget the ways in which some of the most championing Secretaries of the Interior were themselves significant business figures?

In recent years we have tended to forget that people like Frederick Billings, or Fred Harvey in the Southwest, were often responsible for the promotion of the interest that led to the constituency, that led to the excitement, that led to the preservation. There are trade-offs, of course. Many feel that the risk is not worth it. But I suggest that in the future we must reexamine those risks to see if there are not ways to recreate the alliance between commerce and conservation.

This conference is met to inquire into ways in which impacts on the "best idea we ever had" can be remediated through the law. For some time now I have served on Yale's committee for its undergraduate program in environmental studies. It may horrify professional scientists to discover that one can graduate from Yale with a B.A. in Environmental Studies and never dissect a frog, but you can not graduate without having studied History. Nor should one graduate without having studied law, because the battle to defend the national park system in the future is going to be among lawyers, between men and women who understand the way in which our political system is embedded in our history, between

those who understand history. This does not mean that I am in any sense suggesting that the physical sciences are not equally important. Such advice would be divisive too. But there must be an alliance between the disciplines. It must be understood by law schools and forestry schools that they must talk to each other. Of course, today they do. And the front line of the future is going to be in the law schools.

Each society comes to the problem of how best to celebrate itself in different ways. Recently I was in Zimbabwe. There they have, I think, solved a problem that we are not quite yet mature enough to solve. The Rhodes-Matopos Hills National Park, dedicated to Cecil Rhodes, symbol of a hated imperialism, is perfectly preserved. In the capital city of Harari, once Salisbury, Zimbabweans have taken down the great statues of Rhodes, Jameson, and Salisbury himself, and removed them. Why should any civil servant in an independent country have to pass daily by such symbols of the past? But unlike most countries of the world, Zimbabwe has not destroyed those symbols; they have been set up on the grounds of the national archives. Zimbabweans have said, this too part of our past, part of our history, and it is over.

American society has not yet achieved the ability to systematize that which it dislikes, to admit to the human fallacies of its history. Where in the system that tells

us about ourselves are the units that tell us of what we should take shame? Where is Wounded Knee? Where is Beecher's Island? Where is the Slave Trade National Historical Park? Some economic historians argue that the slave trade was the second most important economic factor in the United States between 1800 and 1820. We are not quite yet a mature enough people to celebrate even Henry Ford, let alone the slave trade. When the day comes that our system of national parks is truly systematic, and those of you here who are lawyers will protect us in the creation of units that will celebrate the totality of our history rather than merely that which a given pressure group, usually patriotic in intent, would like to celebrate, then we will have achieved true national maturity.

There never will be a time when the national parks will not be impacted upon by the realities of the society that creates them. It is no less divisive for a conservationist to ignore the reality of public events broadly than it is for those who are concerned with historical preservation and those for natural and scenic preservation to make no common cause. Our society is changing enormously. The day will come, perhaps in just twenty years, when one third of our population will speak a language other than English. What are we doing to adjust? Do we know what those who speak Spanish must take pride in? Unhappily it is true that conservation and preservation--though not environmentalism--have tended to be dominated by males, by members of the

charter groups, by those who place narrow definitions on what they mean by "our" society.

Yesterday I had lunch with a good friend in Denver who professed to be a great friend of the parks. I asked him if he had been to Acadia. No, he really didn't think the coast of New England had much to do with what he perceived to be the great national parks. I asked him whether he had been to Alaska. Well, no, that was rather far. I asked him whether he had been down to Big Thicket, and he said certainly not. He doesn't like Texas very much. I thought about my educated friend, a professor at a distinguished university, and I thought about the regionalism of America. What has made this country strong in the past is our regionalism. What has made us strong is that most of us have roots in a region, that we take pride in that region, that we think of ourselves as Coloradans or Virginians. A sense of healthy competition between the regions will continue to make us strong, but in the parks movement, if it is to be systematic, we must think nationally. Every person who claims to be a friend of the national parks must defend every unit of the national park system equally, otherwise divisiveness will defeat us. The impacts of social change, political divisiveness, economic uncertainty, will sweep aside whatever intellectual convictions we have about what it is that we are celebrating, what it is that we thought in the past we took pride in, whatever it is that we hope to preserve for the future.

We must think more than nationally, we must think comparatively as well. Here lies, tossed upon the table, my fourth point. To think comparatively means that one thinks internationally. Those who live next door to Rocky Mountain National Park and care that it be preserved must care just as much that the national parks of Tanzania or Kenya be preserved. And if you do not, then frankly, I do not think you see the future.

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