

Introduction

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National parks have always had to strike a balance between two underlying principles: recreation and conservation. Historically, the balance has not been easy to achieve. Recreation and conservation are frequently presented as competing forces, and often there are direct conflicts involved. Yet it is also worth recognising how often these two fundamental components of any national park mission have worked together. The whole purpose of recreation in national parks revolves around their conservation values: the recognition that recreation in a national park is qualitatively different from other forms of recreation, and that what makes national parks different needs to be protected. A national park can no longer fill this role if turned into a crowded playground or even a golf course. On the other hand, conservation of national parks generally recognises that the greatest support for limiting human impacts in national parks has come from a desire to hold on to those special places for recreation, both now and into the distant future. While rationales for national parks have moved from anthropocentric to biocentric ones over the twentieth century, most conservationists themselves are keen participants in recreational activities in national parks.

The relative importance of recreation and conservation in the thinking behind national parks has fluctuated over their 130-year existence in Australia. The professionalisation of national park management in the 1960s coincided with the ascendancy of a conservationist rationale, and as a result the recreational rationale behind national parks was often sidelined. Recreation was seen as less important than, and competing with, scientific management and at worst, certain recreational users were stereotyped as blunderingly inept and environmentally destructive.

The project which informs this book grew out of a recognition that while a lot of research has been done on the ‘science’ of national parks – the animals, the plants, the geology and the issues of management – and much still needs to be done there, recreation has had less attention and we know very little about the recreational uses to which parks have historically been put. How have people used national parks in the past? What feelings of attachment have been inspired by their use for recreation? What impacts have users had and how has that popular enjoyment of the park been negotiated with the parks’ authorities? And where does the balance between recreation and conservation stand in relation to the increasing recognition being given to the presence of Indigenous Australians in national parks on the one hand, and the use of national parks by recent migrants on the other? For generations Aboriginal people have been conserving and living on the land given over to national parks, but they have also had longstanding economic connections to the land that do not sit easily with non-Indigenous assumptions about the purpose of national parks. At the same time, the ways non-Anglo migrants use national parks can often fall outside the particular culturally bound assumptions behind the establishment of national parks: what then are the implications for management?

In 2008 a group of fourth-year history honours students at the University of Sydney took part, with the generous support of the (then) Department of Environment and Climate Change, in a project that sought to answer some of those questions. Each developed a line of enquiry that investigated a particular aspect of the history of recreation in New South Wales (NSW) national parks, undertaking individual research but also drawing on group work and an oral history project developed in association with their honours program. The topics spread across the range of experiences that people, from locals to international travellers, have had in NSW national parks, from the family picnic to the pioneering rock climb, a remarkable range of activities stretching from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries. Some activities have persisted throughout this time: picnicking, bathing, sightseeing (and photography), bushwalking, horse riding, fishing, as well as a range of traditional activities of Indigenous Australians. Gradually new ones –

skiing, motoring, and later, rock climbing, mountain biking, paragliding and four-wheel driving – were added. Despite the variety of recreational uses, what they had in common was the fact that they were all undertaken for enjoyment. They shared a belief that a national park, in providing a natural setting where the impacts of human activity were curtailed, and where, somehow, they could see themselves as getting ‘back to nature’ (though they would disagree about what that might mean), gave the recreational experience a special quality. Both the growing popularity of older recreational activities and the emergence of new ones posed a variety of challenges for those responsible for managing the parks.

The eight chapters that follow are based on the research of these honours students. Richard White’s overview of the origins of Sydney’s first national park provides the historical and international context for the discussions which follow. Ella Barnett investigates how the national park became a setting for ‘romance’ and how nineteenth-century understandings of romanticism applied to nature gave the national park, even into the twenty-first century, an association with romantic relationships. Justine Greenwood addresses the complex issue of regulation in national parks, the ways in which the ‘freedom’ the park promises is constrained by a framework of regulation, and the conflict and contestation that this can bring about. Julia Bowes considers the role of fire in national parks, with a particular focus on users’ attachment to the camp fire. Fiona Howie takes as her subject the provision of amenities which, in a similar way to regulation, treads a fine line between enhancing and diminishing the appeal of ‘nature’. Isobelle Barrett Meyering goes to another extreme – extreme sport – and examines the development of more adventurous forms of recreation in national parks, giving particular attention to rock climbing. Claire Farrugia analyses the various ways in which recreational activity in national parks has been seen as beneficial, teaching people how to be ‘good citizens’, in the belief that an appreciation of nature, gained through innocent enjoyment of the bush, could turn children into responsible adults, working people into useful citizens and immigrants into proud Australians. Finally, Tess Mierendorff discusses the special problems posed by the presence of cultural rather than natural heritage,

places that have historical significance because of the human activity that produced them. Her emphasis is on the built heritage of the park system, commonly known as the 'historic heritage'.

Together, these chapters highlight the diversity of ways in which people engage with protected landscapes. In particular, they shed light on the emotional attachment that so many recreational park users have developed to the park landscape of NSW, and to the activities they enjoy within those parks. We are beginning to understand the nature and extent of the attachment to national parks felt by people who were associated with those landscapes prior to their becoming public land.¹ The attachments which recreational park users form to the same landscapes are no less valid or complex and can also create particular challenges for park management. This book shows that the spectrum of attachments people hold to places, behaviours and objects within parks creates an equally diverse but often passionate spectrum of opinions about how these places and behaviours should be managed.

The chapters in this book focus on the parks close to Sydney, in particular the Royal, Ku-ring-gai Chase and Blue Mountains National Parks. These are among the oldest national parks in the country, and, together with the coastal national parks and Kosciuszko National Park, which also feature heavily, attract high numbers of visitors. We recognise that there is far greater diversity across the NSW park system than is represented in this book: diversity in landscapes, ecosystems, history and recreational uses. However, with a focus on those parks that have had the longest and most extensive histories of recreation, we hope to provide insight into some of the major themes and issues in the history of recreation in NSW national parks.

References

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Veale, Sharon (2001). *Remembering country: history and memories of Towarri National Park*. Sydney: National Parks and Wildlife Service.

¹ Sharon Veale (2001).