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## Mountains Without Handrails: Reflections on the National Parks

Sally K. Fairfax

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## BOOK REVIEW

### NATIONAL PARKS

MOUNTAINS WITHOUT HANDRAILS: REFLECTIONS ON THE NATIONAL PARKS. By Joseph L. Sax. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1980. Pp. 152.

*Reviewed by Sally K. Fairfax\**

Joseph Sax has written such a stimulating volume on the philosophy of recreation management that it seems ungrateful to criticize. Rarely in academia, and almost never in the leisure field, is such a fine mind so engagingly and systematically turned to such an invigorating discussion. The basic conflict which Sax describes in *Mountains Without Handrails*<sup>1</sup> pits mass or mechanized recreation against simpler more contemplative pursuits, which he characterizes as "ethical" recreation. The familiar dispute between hikers and trailbikers or between anglers and motorboaters becomes, in Sax's hands, a stimulating exploration of the human spirit. Sax is precise, entertaining, and even poetic as he weaves a rich tapestry of Chris Bonington,<sup>2</sup> Yvon Chouinard,<sup>3</sup> John Rawls,<sup>4</sup> and Jose Ortega y Gasset<sup>5</sup> into the more familiar Olmstead-Muir-Thoreau preservationist materials. His arguments are reasonable and compelling; with such magnetic leadership, one is unavoidably drawn to his conclusion that encouraging ethical recreation ought to be the goal of public park management.

Much of Sax's scholarship, however, is sadly misdirected. Outside of the National Parks, the ethical versus mechanical recreation conflict that he explores is a very small subcategory in recreation policy. On the vast majority of public lands, most obviously those managed by the Bureau of Land Management and the United States Forest Service, recreation is but one of a number of "multiple uses" which must be accommodated. Recreation competes with mineral development, timber management, livestock grazing, and a rapidly diversi-

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\* Associate Professor, College of Natural Resources, University of California, Berkeley, California. B.A. Hood College; M.A. New York University; M.A., Ph.D. Duke University.

1. J. SAX, *MOUNTAINS WITHOUT HANDRAILS: REFLECTIONS ON THE NATIONAL PARKS* (1980) [hereinafter cited as *MOUNTAINS*].

2. C. BONINGTON, *EVEREST THE HARD WAY* (1976).

3. Chouinard, *The Climber as Visionary*, 1 *ASCENT* 6 (1969).

4. J. RAWLS, *A THEORY OF JUSTICE* (1971).

5. J. ORTEGA Y GASSET, *MEDITATIONS ON HUNTING*.

fyng array of commodity and amenity-oriented pressures. The major shortcoming of Sax's effort is that his focus on different approaches to leisure activities fails to deal with recreation as part of the larger world of multiple-use land management. Except on a very small category of lands, the conflicts—mechanized *and* ethical—which constrain recreation are those associated with balancing “multiple uses.”

Before complaining ungraciously about what is missing from the volume, however, one ought to pay proper respect to the analysis that has been provided. Sax recognizes the inadequacies of the typical preservationist position in natural areas policy arguments, and he reexamines their viewpoint to provide it with a more candid public face and a legitimate claim to leadership. The preservationists' oft-stated concern for ecological disruption is not, Sax argues, the sole or even the main reason they oppose the use of off-road vehicles or snowmobiles. Pretending otherwise merely creates the misimpression that preservationists care more for trees than for most people—especially those folks who like “autotouring and other types of so-called urbanizing recreation.”<sup>6</sup> Sax would have his confreres be more candid and admit that, although they care deeply about human existence, they are elitist to the extent that they are more concerned with telling people what they *ought* to want rather than with supplying the confining experiences of mechanized recreation which Americans seem to demand. Sax follows Olmstead and argues eloquently that we ought to want complex, unfamiliar experiences and personal, independent responses to the natural world. Such “engagement with nature,” Sax argues,

provides an opportunity for detachment from the submissiveness, conformity, and mass behavior that dog us in our daily lives; it offers a chance to express distinctiveness and to explore our deeper longings. At the same time, the setting—by exposing us to the awesomeness of the natural world in the context of “ethical” recreation—moderates the urge to prevail without destroying the vitality of what gives rise to it: to face what is wild in us and yet not revert to savagery.<sup>7</sup>

This is “a prescription for man in society rather than a rejection of society,” Sax argues.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, as he describes it, it leads to a preservationist posture that does more than simply deplore and reject mechanized leisure activities. Reflective recreation should not

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6. MOUNTAINS, *supra* note 1, at 51.

7. *Id.* at 42.

8. *Id.* at 43.

become our only leisure activity, but "we should develop a taste for it, and . . . stimulating this appetite should be a primary function of the national parks."<sup>9</sup>

This analysis envisions a spectrum of leisure activities which might include Disneyland, downhill skiing, as well as Sax's own preferred backpacking and flyfishing.<sup>10</sup> Sax does not contend that park lands, being the major site for ethical recreation, ought to be maintained in totally pristine condition. His conception of appropriate recreation policy would permit wary urbanites to venture gradually into increasingly uncontrolled natural settings, accumulating necessary skills and confidence as they go.<sup>11</sup> Thus, a significant component of Sax's program for ethical recreation is to encourage access "designed to provide an introduction for those who are deciding whether they want to come back for more."<sup>12</sup>

Sax's argument is neither unfamiliar nor unexpected. Much of the volume is, after all, simply a recasting of the familiar recreation philosophies of Olmstead and others in the context of reflections from devotees of ethical recreation: hikers, backpackers, rock-climbers, and anglers. In fact, Sax has previously explored similar territory in his much discussed article in *Natural History*.<sup>13</sup> *Mountains Without Handrails* is the author's application of his philosophical exegesis to strengthen the arguments of preservation advocates in current policy debates.

This effort succeeds to a considerable extent. Both his critique and his restatement of contemporary preservationist rhetoric are so well argued that it is easy to lose sight of the fact that Sax is not making an empirically based case for ethical recreation. At bottom, he is simply asserting that ethical recreation is better than push-penny. He does more than convince nonbelievers; he trims the confusion and annoying self-righteousness from the preservationist position. Because he is trying so explicitly to edit and improve the preservationist image, Sax generally avoids the self-serving dichotomies—

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9. *Id.* at 61.

10. In one confusing analysis, Sax strongly criticizes United States Forest Service regulations which explicitly define a spectrum of opportunities which he, himself, seems to advocate. *Id.* at 100-01. This seems to stem from the apparent emphasis in the regulations on creating an opportunity for the *illusion* of an experience rather than the experience itself. Some might consider this nitpicking.

11. *Id.* at 79 nn.96-100.

12. *Id.* at 79.

13. Sax, *America's National Parks: Their Principles, Purposes, and Prospects*, 85 NATURAL HISTORY 57 (1976). The full collection of Sax's writings on national parks and other issues is analysed in Tarlock, *Book Review: For Whom the National Parks*, 34 STAN. L. REV. 255 (1981).

noble backpackers and vulgar snowmobilers—that frequently flavor preservationist rhetoric.

Sax's analysis is convincing because he focuses on human experiences rather than paeans to nature. The idea of evolving taste that underlies his policy prescriptions draws Sax away from denegrating the low end of the spectrum. Perhaps because he is relatively detached from the pull and haul of specific political controversy, Sax is free to lure and educate the Winnebago set rather than attack their pleasures and their morals. However, in discussing the other (high) end of the spectrum, even Sax can occasionally be silly. "The fly-fisherman," he gushes, "simplifies his tools in order to reduce power over his experience. The consumer-recreationist does precisely the opposite."<sup>14</sup> Anyone exposed to the technology of suburban angling manifest in the pages of Orvis' or L. L. Bean's catalogues will conclude that Sax is employing poetic license or selective perception.

This shortcoming is not, however, a fatal impediment to the volume's potential policy relevance. Sax has advanced and clarified preservationist thought by articulating a philosophy that provides both a set of goals and a guide to reasonable compromises. Thus, he has, without reducing the traditional appeal or imperatives of the preservationist position, provided a well-reasoned argument for its application in a vastly expanded range of recreation issues. Sax is primarily concerned with enhancing opportunities for a particular kind of recreation experience, rather than with promoting nonuse. His concept of public recreation is not dependent upon the increasingly inapplicable "preserve it now or it's gone forever" rhetoric of wilderness advocacy. Therefore, Sax has not locked himself into the oddly dichotomized world<sup>16</sup> that many preservationists appear to inhabit. His theory applies to management of the untrammelled wilderness, but it also gives provocative criteria for recreation management in both urban or developed natural areas. He is not forced, once a decision to build a hotel has been made, to simply grump about desecration of sacred nature. Having lost the first round, he can use the same fundamental concepts that led him to oppose the hypothetical hotel to give advice regarding the nature of the hotel, which will further his original goals.

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14. MOUNTAINS, *supra* note 1, at 75.

15. *Id.* at 1-2.

16. Fairfax, Book Review, 8 ECOLOGY L.Q. 583, 593-94 (1980) (B. FREIDAN, THE ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION HUSTLE (1979)).

Hence, the assertion that public policy ought to encourage and maintain opportunities for ethical recreation provides important criteria for management of all kinds of recreation resources, even when it is recognized as an assertion of values rather than an empirical truth. However, in "unbundling" (to use Sax's most unfortunate term) the public land management conflicts so as to identify recreation conflicts as the key policy choice, Sax has limited himself to an unnecessarily narrow sphere.

The first component of narrowness in Sax's analysis is in the field of recreation policy. In spite of the broad potential of his philosophizing, Sax is so deeply tied to the National Park Service concept that he obscures the idea of ethical recreation as generally applicable. He does not deal with recreation in conflict with other potential benefits of public resource management, and he fails to discuss the heritage of other, non-Park Service institutions in ethical recreation.

Serious problems become apparent when Sax muddies the water on what constitutes a national park. He begins with the notion that, the subtitle notwithstanding, the book is not about the Park Service as a whole, or the categories Congress has used to diversify National Park Service holdings. He notes that "the official 'national park system' is a melange of parks, . . . monuments, . . . recreation areas, . . . lakeshores, . . . seashores, as well as numerous historic sites and other miscellany,"<sup>17</sup> only some of which concern him. Sax focuses, instead, on "the general question of how we ought to want to use our high-quality natural areas held in public ownership."<sup>18</sup>

Confusing this broader emphasis, Sax features National Park Service concepts and terminology throughout the volume. His discussions on the institutional history, ideology, and vernacular are all oriented to the Park Service. For example, early ideas about recreation emerge through Sax's description of Olmstead's efforts to minimize tourist kitsch around Niagara Falls, and allow nothing of an "artificial character" to interfere with the visitors' response to the scenery.<sup>19</sup> Sax's conclusions are also explicitly directed toward

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17. MOUNTAINS, *supra* note 1, at 115-16 n.2.

18. *Id.*

19. In a curious passage, Sax writes that "Olmstead is not a name that leaps immediately to mind when one thinks of national parks." *Id.* at 18. True, Olmstead is neither Mather or Muir, and certainly not Pinchot; but Olmstead is widely heralded as the author of the poetic, if problematic, statutory language which established the Park Service in 1916, 16 U.S.C. §§ 1-18(f) (1976), and he is frequently recognized as a major figure in early park history and management.

the National Park Service, although he does add, literally as a parenthetical, "and other bureaucracies that manage nature reserves."<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, Sax extends his argument to non-Park Service administered natural areas. He asserts that much of the discussion is applicable to the United States Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and state parklands as well.<sup>21</sup> The problem with his effort is that much of what Sax says does not apply to state lands or federal resources which, unlike the Park Service, are administered under a "multiple use" mandate. If he had wanted to include those resources, he would have been required to address a much broader range of resource allocation concepts and conflicts than the ethical versus mechanized recreation issues that he covers so elegantly.

Sax's argument is so explicitly developed in the Park Service context that other public land managers may tune out. Indeed, other agencies at the federal and state levels would appear justified if they respond to Sax's efforts by believing that they have been unfairly criticized. For example, he repeatedly uses examples of alleged United States Forest Service mismanagement without having supplied any introduction to the multiple-use matrix in which Forest Service recreation programs are developed. The agency's mission and history are dismissed with a single aside: "the Forest Service, which traditionally played an entrepreneurial role in facilitating recreation development on national forest land,"<sup>23</sup> as Sax inveighs against treating recreation issues in terms of public demand rather than developing appropriate public goals and philosophy.

That the Forest Service might take offense at such treatment is relatively unimportant. Sax has, more significantly, seriously distorted the issues surrounding public recreation when he discusses them exclusively in terms of conflicts between and among recreationists. That is a large part of the story for the Park Service but quite a small factor in conflicts over Forest Service and most other public lands. If Sax wants the preservationist argument to be valid for areas not already explicitly designated for recreation and to agencies not exclusively charged with preservation and enjoyment, he must broaden his concept of the conflict. For good or ill, all publicly owned high quality natural areas are not dedicated exclusively or even primarily to recreation. The spectrum of interests competing

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20. MOUNTAINS, *supra* note 1, at 104.

21. *Id.* at 115-16 n.2.

22. *Id.* at 105-06, 108.

23. *Id.* at 68.

for a piece of the public's resources contains a diverse group of commodity users, together with an equally diverse collection of noncommodity users. The mechanized versus ethical recreation conflict, to which Sax directs his full attention, is but a small subset of the problems, both for recreation advocates and for land managers.

Although the narrowness of Sax's approach to recreation is frustrating and potentially misleading, setting recreation in the broader arena of multiple-use management would not resolve the basic problems with Sax's exclusive interest in recreation issues. Sax has converted the traditional preservationist dogma, with its reverence for pristine nature that gives few criteria for choice once the purity is lost, into a position from which one can constructively comment on a broad range of recreation issues. What is missing is precisely what Sax promised at the outset: a comment on the management of high quality natural areas. This, and not a better understanding of recreation issues, however bold the improvements may be, is what is sorely lacking in public land management today. In telling us in such exhaustive and morally loaded detail how to manage the lands we have already decided ought to be preserved—*i.e.*, in some sense withheld from commercial development and dedicated to human enjoyment and refreshment—Sax has both ducked and, by implication, trivialized the issues he sought to clarify. He has, one is forced to conclude, nothing to say about nonrecreation lands. The problem with overlooking the other categories is not simply that he did not discuss the lands and issues that are particularly interesting, but that he has failed to give any moral or philosophical basis for using natural areas gently when they are *not* dedicated to recreation. There is no argument that one could, for example, recreate or be emotionally restored in land areas not dedicated solely to that purpose. Sax makes no suggestion that the morality he embraces and the human beings he develops in the proper recreation setting will have anything to say about nonrecreation uses of high-quality natural areas.

Bringing preservationist thought to fruition in National Park Service policy is a frustrating task, one which becomes more urgent when that agency builds yet another visitor center, road, hotel, or interpretive display in places we have loved as we ourselves first encountered and understood them. In that context, Sax's book is useful and important. I suspect that National Park Service policy is directed more by political necessity and budget politics than by a failure to understand the philosophy that Sax develops, but that



suspicion is an inadequate basis for not reading or enjoying the book. It is disappointing, however, that its context is too narrow for such a fine mind, such a persuasive writer.