

Preserving Yellowstone's Natural Conditions

SCIENCE AND THE PERCEPTION OF NATURE

By James A. Pritchard

A book review by Ryan Monello

Park managers, biologists, and other students of conservation generally recognize that some of the most visible management policies in the National Park Service are a direct result of issues that arose in Yellowstone National Park during the 20th century. In *Preserving Yellowstone's Natural Conditions*, James Pritchard provides the reader with a well researched chronology of these events in a novel and unbiased manner. As a resource specialist considering the effects of natural regulation in my own park, I highly recommend the book to anyone interested in or dealing with National Park Service management issues.

On the surface, the core of the book is focused on wildlife management policies in Yellowstone and the scientific, political, and social pressures that brought them about. These issues include ungulate management and the development of the natural regulation paradigm, the struggle to create a more natural bear population that eliminated assured viewing opportunities, terminating pelican control being practiced under the guise of fisheries management, and the creation of a free-ranging bison herd without supplemental feeding and husbandry techniques. Yet the real theme and interesting side of this book lies in the repeated stories of the struggle for the nation's first national park to become more natural, in both the management techniques and overall conditions.

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Not surprisingly, Pritchard uses the origins of the park and the ensuing bison and elk management issues to set the stage for the book. At first glance, I imagine any park manager might hesitate to pick up such a book, for these are clearly two of the most well-known topics in the National Park Service. But Pritchard goes well beyond simply describing a history that took place over 100 years ago. He clearly presents the mind-set of the managers: how the fear of bison and elk extirpation shaped management decisions of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and were crucial in bringing about the current abolition of hunting in almost all national parks, early predator control policy, and artificial feeding practices. This leads to an excellent overview of not only the biology associated with elk and bison management in Yellowstone, but also a general understanding of how politics and external forces can affect Park Service management.

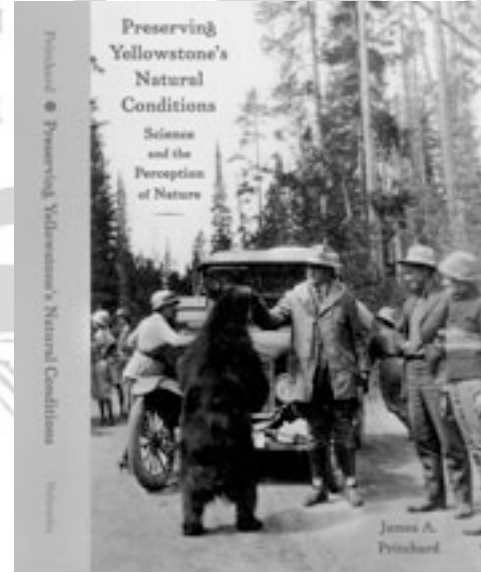
Pritchard, an adjunct professor of landscape architecture at Iowa State University, also has a keen ability to relate important park episodes in an accurate manner that is not driven by a par-

ticular viewpoint. One of the most often quoted but misunderstood sources in the scientific literature is the Leopold Report (i.e., *Wildlife Management in the National Parks*), which Pritchard sums up in one of the most accurate statements I have read: “Today the Leopold Report is remembered not for its record [the elk herd] was necessary” (p. 211).

The important role that science can and has played in Yellowstone with respect to various park policies is also clearly shown in this book. Pritchard lays out good motivation and a solid reasoning for managers to rely on well done science to develop park policy and appropriate management decisions—especially with

controversial issues. When Newton Drury, the director of the Park Service in the 1940s, was revitalizing an argument to end bear feeding in Yellowstone, he relied on the support of numerous scientists. Conversely, when science is distorted the resource can be threatened. This was the case in Yellowstone when studies indicated the necessity of destroying pelican eggs to protect fishery resources.

Because Yellowstone set the precedent for so many policies in the National Park System, there is a danger that after reading the convincing arguments set forth in this book one may assume that what was good for Yellowstone (e.g., natural regulation) is good for the parks in general. Pritchard does acknowledge the need for active management at times (p. 306), but overall gives a general impression that vigorous management action within a park is equivalent to an unnatural approach. This is not necessarily the case. (Although I certainly agree that unless the scientific evidence and reasoning is especially compelling, a “hands-off” approach is often more appropriate with regard to non-endangered, native species in parks.) Compare the elk scenarios of the Northern Range in Yellowstone with those of Rocky Mountain National Park. The former has an intact predator base, a large hunter harvest, and a largely intact winter range. The latter has no



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major elk predators, minimal hunter harvest, and a winter range that is largely developed. What works for one may not necessarily work for the other. Given that the book often engages in a Servicewide discussion, I think this point could have been made more clearly. However, I will be the first to admit that this is a relatively minor and finicky point given the excellent read and understanding of timeless issues that *Preserving Yellowstone's Natural Conditions* provides.

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*Preserving Yellowstone's Natural Conditions:
Science and the Perception of Nature*

By James A. Pritchard

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