

Chase, Alston, 1986. Playing God in Yellowstone: The destruction of America's first national park. Atlantic Monthly Press. 446p. \$24.95.

This book in the short time since its publication has caused considerable controversy and is sure to cause much more. It is for the most part, a very readable book, however it is written in a style that is confrontational and is laden with value judgments. Even the chapter headings, e.g., Killing Animals to Save Them, An Environmental Ideal and the Biology of Desperation, Gumshoes and Posy Pickers, are a sarcastic characterization of a given situation.

The book is divided into three main parts. The first deals with The Range and The Wildlife and discusses the wildlife management problems associated with Yellowstone. Emphasized are the historic control of predators and whether or not the wolf continues to exist in the park, the various attempts to manage the elk populations, and the arguments over grizzly management. Of the two chapters on bears, one is largely a revision of material that appeared in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1983, the second a duplicate of the article that appeared in a recent edition of *Outside Magazine*. The latter has been extensively critiqued by the Yellowstone Park staff.

The next section entitled The Rangers deals with the power structure and hierarchy of the NPS and the role politics and management play in decision making. The focus of one chapter is on the repeated attempts to establish the Grant Village complex at Yellowstone. The final section is a philosophical treatment entitled The Environmentalists. It includes such "strange chapters" as The Hubris Commandos and The California Cosmologists.

I found the final section rambling and disconnected from the rest of the book. I am not sure I understood it all or that I cared to. I felt it added little to the book. I think the author is on safest ground and most insightful when dealing with the problems of the NPS science program as a whole, as in The Rangers. I feel that many scientists and resource managers will concur with his characterizations of the roles that rangers, scientists, and interpreters have in the NPS.

Chase, as am I, is a staunch admirer of George Wright, and reflects on the potential influence this individual might have had if he had survived. Whether

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the opinions attributed to Wright are accurate, is however, hard to judge. He writes that Wright was "appalled" to discover that the government made no attempt to administer parks along scientific lines, and that he made another "discovery" that control of predators was common in parks. The point that the NPS secretly controlled predators in the 1930s is made repeatedly, when in fact that policy was widely acknowledged and its efficacy was being publicly debated e.g., National Parks Association (1924). In fact Fauna No. 1 (Wright et al. 1933 pp. 48) argued for continued coyote control in Yellowstone.

Throughout the discussion of The Range and Wildlife chapters, there seems to be only one way of looking at things, only one truth. This may be one of the book's greatest weaknesses. Chase strongly argues the premise that predators are important in controlling ungulate populations. Clearly this is a concept that is yet to be resolved. However, rather than treat it objectively, he vilifies Yellowstone scientists and others for ignoring this principle. Any studies which showed that some populations might be resource limited, (he particularly picks on Caughley [1970]) are referred to as "tantalizingly incomplete." Chase further implies that the adoptions of park policies have often been timed to coincide with political rather than biological necessity.

He accuses Yellowstone researchers of misinterpreting the writings of others to enhance their own objectives, such as in speculating on historic elk populations in the park. In fact he is guilty of the same. For example he implies that Houston (1982) maintained that elk had lived specifically on the Yellowstone plateau in numbers for millennia, when in fact Houston states: "Archaeological data show that elk have been present in the Yellowstone *area* for millennia" and that "Elk could not have occupied most of the Yellowstone area until about 12,000 years Bp . . ." (Houston 1982, pp. 23, 10).

Although many inaccuracies occur in the book, e.g., referring to George Hartzog as Secretary of Interior and implying that no individuals in the Rocky Mountain Region are under Research-Grade Evaluation, it is not my intent to dwell on specifics. I think Chase has done a good job surveying the literature pertinent to the subject. I don't think his scholarship is as good in his personal interviews. I got the distinct impression that he only included comments from those people whose opinions fit his own preconceptions and that he did not necessarily follow up on the validity of such comments even when they were controversial. This problem is compounded by the fact that some of the most damning comments come from interviewees whose identities are withheld. I also had the impression that he has had conflicts with certain personalities at Yellowstone and his association with these individuals has unfortunately colored his perceptions of all national parks.

In the final analysis I enjoyed immensely reading the book. Even with its many problems, I came away feeling that he had in many instances clearly identified some nagging problems in the NPS science program. Some of these problems are obvious, others are such that they often take an outsider to see. Some beg an answer; others are solvable. For these reasons, even if it makes you mad, I recommend reading it.

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