

# Uncertain Path

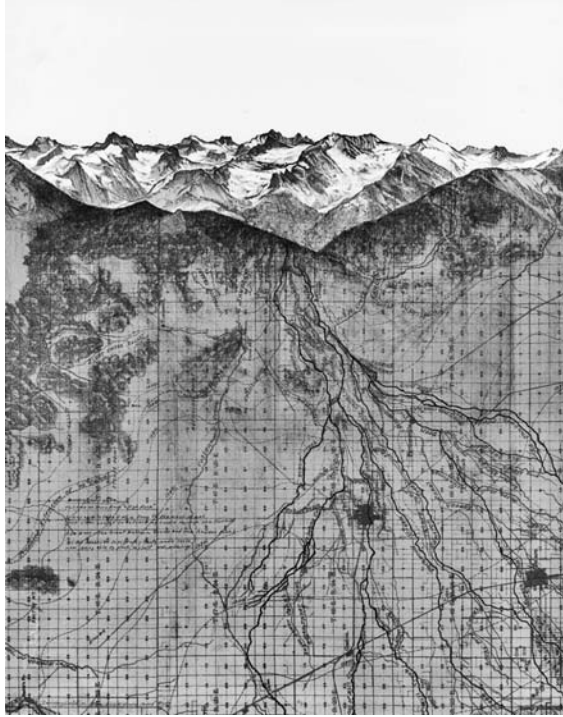
A SEARCH FOR THE FUTURE OF NATIONAL PARKS

WILLIAM C. TWEED

FOREWORD BY JON JARVIS, DIRECTOR, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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*Uncertain Path*



Artwork by Matthew J. Rangel, from his suite of original prints *a transect—due east*

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*A Search for the Future  
of National Parks*

William C. Tweed

With a foreword by Jonathan B. Jarvis,  
Director, National Park Service



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## CONTENTS

*Foreword*

*ix*

Introduction

*1*

1. South from Yosemite

*5*

2. Kings Canyon National Park

*53*

3. Sequoia National Park

*119*

4. National Parks in the Twenty-first Century

*183*



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*Notes*

209

*References*

215

*Acknowledgments*

221

*Index*

225

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## FOREWORD

In the complex world of natural resource preservation, asking the right questions is the first step, and author William Tweed has done this well in the pages that follow. Like the iconic John Muir, Tweed hiked the High Sierra of California and found that the “very stones seem talkative and brotherly.” Tweed listened closely. His hearing refined by a lifetime of National Park Service experience as a writer and interpreter, he heard a disturbing undercurrent in the voice of the wilderness. His trek through the forests, and his evenings under an inverted bowl of stars, allowed him to ponder the future of these sacred places and the challenges facing their steward, the National Park Service. Unlike that of Muir, though, Tweed’s view was informed by a body of science that indicates all is not as natural or as healthy as it appears. As Aldo Leopold has said, “The penalty of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds.”

How will the stewards of what the filmmaker Ken Burns so aptly called “America’s Best Idea” address the alterations produced by climate change that we are seeing even now? Already we are witnessing

increased fire intensity and the lengthening of fire seasons in the great parks of the West. The namesake ice sheets of Glacier National Park are receding and disappearing at a record pace. Rain events at Mount Rainer have shifted from spring to fall and have increased flooding of major entrance roads. Sea-level rise threatens years of restoration work at the Everglades. As climate change is, at least in part, anthropogenic, the paradigm of allowing nature to rule the parks is no longer viable.

Significant challenges threaten our parks, but I remain convinced that the national park idea, the concept that they were set aside for all the people, for the parks' preservation and enjoyment by future generations, is more valuable today than ever. Over the last hundred years of national park management, the definition of "preservation and enjoyment" has evolved. In the early days, we manipulated the parks with a heavy hand, removing predators and suppressing fires. As a result of people like the pioneering scientist George Melendez Wright asking the hard questions, today we are bringing back the gray wolf, and wildfires burn routinely in many parks. These changes in our management have been not only accepted but also embraced by the public, as people flock to Yellowstone to see wolves and calmly prepare their meals in the Kings Canyon campgrounds while a fire burns along the ridge above.

I believe we are on the cusp of another such evolution. Prone to cautious conservation, the National Park Service sometimes lags in response to new science, new ideas, and new paradigms, an attitude that historically has often protected the parks from the whipsawing of political and special interest agendas. Now, as the parks face new challenges, we must again move forward, albeit with great care. If we rush into a new paradigm of manipulative park management based on a new set of human values, rather than those of nature, we

risk a competing push from those who contend that, since the parks are already altered, we may as well manipulate them to produce greater economic value. That said, it is time for the agency, aided by scientists and public input, to address the current challenges to its fundamental tenet that the parks must preserve all their resources “unimpaired” forever for the enjoyment of all.

I recently hiked along the rim of the Grand Canyon after a summer monsoon. The smell of desert sage hung in the air, and the low sun backlit misty mesas. The canyon has survived millions of years of change, and its magnificence remains. Now the challenge before us is to see the world with nature and humans intertwined, and to recognize that the survival of all species, including our own, depends on cooperation and collaboration at the ecosystem scale.

Pulling together stories from the past, present, and future, this book speaks to the importance of our national parks and wilderness areas, places that have long served as bully pulpits from which to sound a clarion call for individual and societal action. In a changing world, these unique places remain more valuable than ever. For more than a century, our national park system has helped define our nation, and in the early years of the twenty-first century, that role remains undiminished. I see the national park system as a key leader in meeting the challenges that face all of us in this new century. We must not lose the core values, authenticity, and public trust that have made the parks so special.

*Jonathan B. Jarvis*  
*Director, National Park Service*

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# Introduction

This book explores the history, current status, and likely future of the ideas that underlie and define our national parks. In the pages that follow, I outline why the national park idea as we know it, a veritable covenant between national park managers and the American public, is collapsing and will need to be redrawn.

The book came into being as a personal attempt to reconcile what I believe to be a growing contradiction between several intellectual traditions. History, the discipline in which I was trained long ago, teaches the inescapability of change; national parks, the world in which I chose to invest my working life, promise exactly the opposite: that the places and living things we care about can be preserved intact and essentially unchanged forever.

I should note at the onset that the pages that follow focus primarily on only one part of our nation's national park system, a subset I define as "traditional" national parks. By this I mean the grand wild-land parks of the American West, places like Yellowstone, Yosemite, Sequoia, Rocky Mountain, and Mount Rainier. The national park

idea as we know it grew out of these landscapes, and to the American public these iconic locales still define the national park dream. To understand these parks, I believe, is to understand both the founding vision and the troubled current state of the national park idea.

Like any mission-based public institution, the agency that manages our national parks, the National Park Service, must cultivate public support if it is to survive and prosper. Public support has always been based on the agency's idealistic mission. Since the service's establishment in 1916, it has promised two things—that the resources of the parks will be preserved “unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations,” and that the parks themselves will be available for public enjoyment.<sup>1</sup> The mission defined by these phrases has evolved in many ways over the succeeding ninety-plus years, but it has changed little over the decades as far as the public is concerned.

Much has been written about the apparent contradiction between preservation and enjoyment in national parks. Despite decades of argument by those who would see the parks more developed as playgrounds, the law reads clearly on this point. Enjoyment must be managed so as to not damage the parks.<sup>2</sup> There is no contradiction here.

Instead, the problem lies within the legal mandate to conserve the parks in a way that leaves them “unimpaired.” The agency has wrestled throughout its history with what this means and has more than once redefined its goals in light of scientific discoveries. Deeply embedded in the concept, however, is the promise that things will not change. Many within the agency know that this is not possible, and a close reading of the bureau's *Management Policies 2006* will disclose sections dealing with how to respond to change. But—and this is what counts—the promise to the public has always been that the

national parks will be preserved intact, just as the National Park Service Organic Act of 1916 promises.

I know this to be true because I was one of those who regularly made this promise. I worked for the National Park Service for more than thirty years, serving over the years as a park naturalist, historian, public information officer, and park planner. Most of this time was spent at Sequoia and Kings Canyon, the two great national parks of the southern Sierra Nevada of California. Countless times over those decades, I explained to park visitors, park neighbors, writers, reporters, park partners, and anyone else who would listen that the mission of the National Park Service was to preserve the parks “unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” Their children and grandchildren, I promised, would be able to enjoy the parks in a condition unchanged from the one enjoyed now. The message, which I often presented as a covenant binding the parks and the American public, almost always found acceptance. Everyone wanted to believe in the national park dream. Not one person ever asked me if the bold promise was actually possible. People should have.

In my last years with the Park Service, I wrestled with the growing disconnect I sensed between the public promise of national parks as islands of stability and what I knew instead to be true. Even as I assured the public that the dream remained intact, I knew change was coming, and that it would come with an intensity and inevitability that would sweep away much that is treasured. This sense of impending change came from multiple sources. Scientists told me that profound biological change had already begun. The very biological assumptions that the parks were based on were no longer true. To make the point even more clearly, other disciplines provided similar messages. Environmental historians challenged long-held beliefs about



the origins of the landscapes we treasure. Demographers regularly identified significant and unsettling social changes that threatened political support for the parks. The more evidence I sought about the inevitability of change, the more I found.

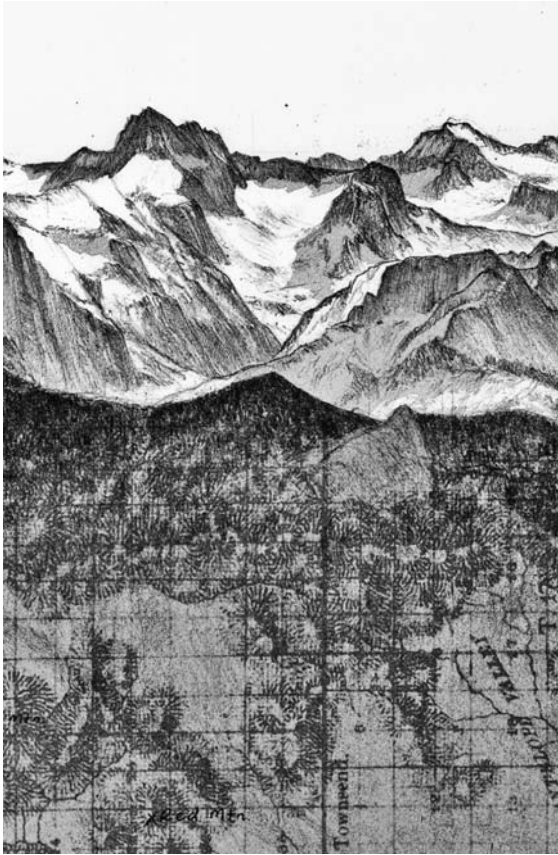
I left the National Park Service in 2006. I did so not just because the stories I had so often told no longer always felt true but also because I believed I could do useful work for national parks from the outside. After I left the agency, I set out to search for a new future for national parks. I knew that on such a quest I would also have to consider the concept of designated wilderness, a mid-twentieth-century offshoot of the national park idea. I did this as a friend of national parks, but also as a critic. My quest would be to see if I could make sense of traditional national parks and wilderness in a twenty-first-century context.

I also decided to take a long walk.

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ONE

## South from Yosemite



Artwork by Matthew J. Rangel, from *a transect—due east*

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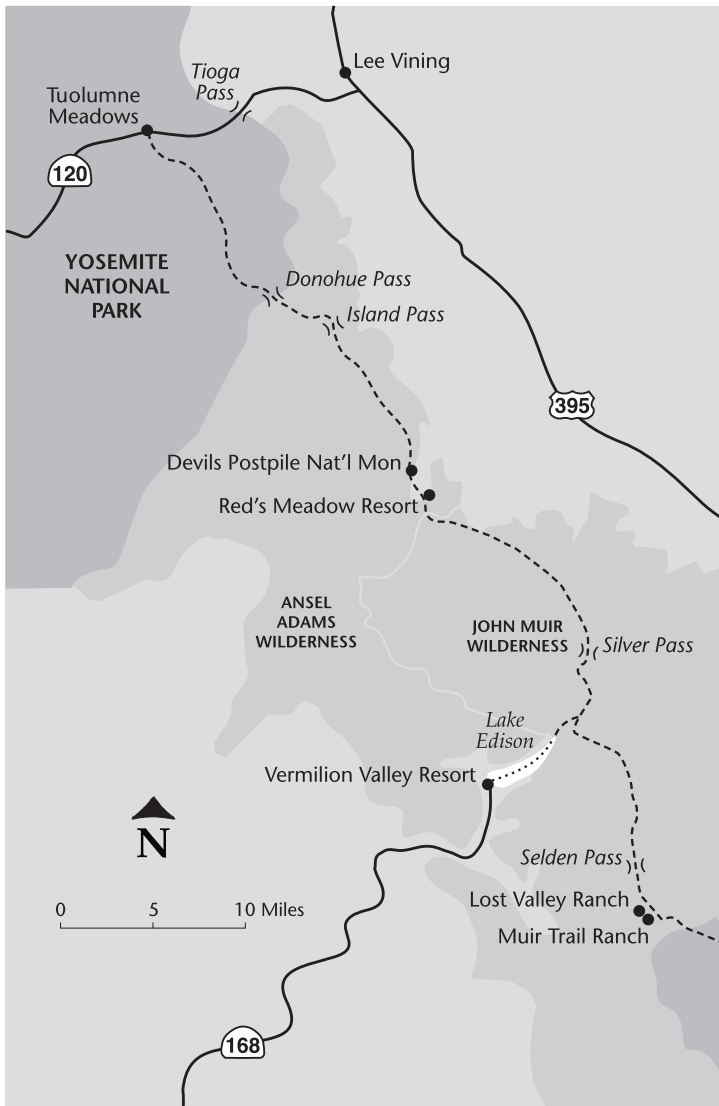
I may be surrounded by wilderness, but the line of cars in front of me stands nearly as motionless as the scenery. One hundred yards ahead, on the exact crest of the Sierra Nevada, a guide from a large tour bus is negotiating business details with a park ranger who occupies a small wooden toll station in the middle of the highway. The rest of us wait. We ignore the scenery. Instead, we watch the bus, looking for some sign that it has finished its business and is ready to move on into Yosemite National Park. Exhaust fumes from a dozen waiting vehicles mingle with the low morning light. Finally, the guide re-enters the bus, and the door seals shut. With a belch of diesel smoke, the coach lumbers down the highway into the park, its passengers safely protected within its air-conditioned, tinted-window confines. I pull up to the Tioga Pass entrance station. "Welcome to Yosemite National Park," voices the ranger when I show my national park pass. "May I please see some identification?"

A few minutes later, my wife and I are circling in the wilderness permit office parking lot at Tuolumne Meadows, looking for a space. On this mid-August Sunday, vehicles fill every defined slot as well as all the easy places to double-park. On our second circuit of the lot, our luck improves. Another hiker, his business with the permit office completed, pulls out. Like Christmas shoppers, we grab the space before any of the several other circling cars do so. Inside the wilderness permit office, a plywood building with the ambience and layout of a car rental office, we wait our turn. When it comes, I produce

my reservation form—this does feel like renting a car—and listen as the young ranger behind the desk explains wilderness to me. I've been hiking in these mountains for forty years, and have issued thousands of these permits myself to eager hikers, but I listen patiently as she speaks. I must keep all my food in a bear canister, she explains, and I will do grievous harm to the environment if I burn used toilet paper rather than hauling it out. I lay out my planned itinerary. She has obviously never heard of my destination far to the south in Sequoia National Park. Her computer does no better. It has no code for the Crescent Meadow Trailhead and prints out my destination as "unspecified." After the form is printed, the ranger adds "Crescent Meadow" by hand. I wait for her to instruct me to initial various parts of the form—I'm still in car rental mode—but all she asks of me is my signature at the bottom of the form. She countersigns, staples an additional rules sheet to the already rule-burdened permit form, and hands it to me. "Have a good hike," she intones mechanically, and then she looks past me. "Next," she says.

I've chosen the parking lot of the Tuolumne Meadows High Sierra Camp as my wilderness portal. Four long rows of cars occupy a hundred yards of asphalt. We spy the John Muir Trail sign in a corner of the lot. Out of the car comes my pack. It's heavy—nearly fifty pounds—but I've spent too many years as a ranger to trust the wilderness. It's an occupational hazard. I think back to numerous official conversations with newspaper reporters in which I explained what had gone wrong with other people's wilderness adventures. Those conversations shadowed me as I prepared my own pack for this trip.

In recent weeks, I've joked with friends that this trip will either make me a good deal younger or significantly older. In the past, I've always been able to count on growing stronger (and younger) on the trail. I'm hoping for the same this time, but doubts remain. I cinch



The northern half of the author's hike: the dashed line traces his progress along the John Muir Trail from Tuolumne Meadows, in Yosemite National Park, to Lost Valley Ranch, near the northern gateway to Kings Canyon National Park.

down the pack's shoulder and waist belts and pick up my walking stick. My wife takes my picture by the trail sign, strolls with me for a few hundred yards to the Dana Fork bridge, and we say our good-byes. I turn onto the John Muir Trail and walk southward.

An important question returns to me within the first mile—what am I doing here? A friend asked me this very question a few days earlier, and, to my surprise, I told him that I intended to make a pilgrimage. Later, I tried to figure out where that had come from. Was I really making a sacred journey? The more I thought about it, the more the idea worked. For many Americans, national parks and wilderness areas are sacred. The ideas that support them possess the power and importance of religion. I am going into the wilderness to reconsider those ideas and seek perspective. In that regard, at least, I am a pilgrim.

I think back to the events that started me down this path. The story started more than four decades ago in my undergraduate college years. I remember the night clearly. Cold rain fell outside the library at the University of the Pacific in California's Great Central Valley. A history student there, I had spent much of that particular evening searching out assigned readings in various historical journals, and now, putting off the inevitable cold, wet walk back to my dormitory, I was simply wandering through the massive maze of stacks that held the collected issues of various periodicals. Now and then, something would look interesting, and I'd pull it off the shelf for a moment of curious browsing. The back issues of the *Sierra Club Bulletin* caught my eye. I knew this title as a modern, slick-paper magazine and didn't recognize the volumes before me, which consisted of a long series of tan-covered paperback books, each running to a hundred pages or more. I pulled one off the shelf. A new world opened.

In the succeeding weeks, spending time in the old *Bulletins* became

my nightly dessert, my reward for finishing up whatever I needed to do that evening. It didn't take long to understand the basic dimensions of what I had found. From its founding in the early 1890s until the opening years of the 1960s, the Sierra Club had dedicated one issue of the *Bulletin* each year to a literary summary of things of interest to the club's members. During most of those seventy years, this had meant what was going on in the Sierra Nevada. The stories fascinated me. I read reports of exploring parties in the 1890s; of early outings to Tuolumne Meadows, the Kings Canyon, and the Kern River by surprisingly large groups; and of women in long skirts and hobnail boots climbing summits still ranked as difficult. Names came into focus: John Muir, Theodore Solomons, J.N. Le Conte.

This history captured me because, like so many Californians of my generation, I had already begun to flirt with the Sierra Nevada and the world of outdoor adventure. Between my junior and senior years of high school, as a casual lark, I had talked a friend into joining me in a foot crossing of the southern Sierra. With five-dollar packs from an army surplus store and sleeping bags so thin we could see through their seams, we innocently hiked across the highest mountains in the forty-eight states. Captured by what I had seen, I wrangled a job the following summer hauling visitor luggage around in a wheelbarrow at a lodge in Sequoia National Park's Giant Forest. I discovered that I liked the outdoor, people-oriented work, and for the next few years I returned to Giant Forest each summer. For a seasonal student job, it paid well. The hotel company gave me almost nothing, but a good porter could collect a quarter per suitcase in tips. More important, I enjoyed being in the mountains. Every day off found me exploring a new trail. Eventually I discovered, as did so many other young people in those years, that the mission of protecting and preserving national parks was something I could believe in.



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