Tourism and National Parks

International perspectives on development, histories and change

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BOOK REVIEW


A number of academic books have addressed the issue of national parks from multiple angles, one of the best from a tourism perspective is Butler and Boyd (2000). Almost 10 years on, this volume, with almost the same title, can be viewed as a worthy successor. Indeed, it covers many of the same subjects, even using some of the same areas as examples.

The very term ‘national parks’ is a strong, international brand and has been so since, or even before, the Yellowstone area in Wyoming was given that status by the US congress back in 1872. What the term actually covers is another story: an object of study as well as debate. Most people tend at least to agree that national parks are connected with nature and its protection and conservation, and a complex terminology and hierarchy of protected areas has been defined by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. A bewildering number of terms are in play, from ‘wilderness area’ to ‘protected landscape’ or even ‘national scenic park’, depending on their location and the vegetation and landforms found within them. Another competing perspective is that of ‘cultural landscapes’, clearly illustrated in this book in the chapter on Uluru, also known as Ayers Rock, in Australia. Even the national aspect of national parks has been challenged. As noted in the concluding chapter, conservation through the use of protected areas has always been a concept characterized by international innovation and diffusion.

The book starts with a fine historical review of the emergence of the national park concept, describing how a number of actors played a role in the establishment/creation of such parks, including scientists, railroad companies, touring clubs and the respective nation states. An issue of particular interest addressed in the introductory chapters is the ‘worthless lands hypothesis’ or the question of whether areas were protected – and opened for tourism – only because economic revenue could not be generated in other, more traditional ways. The remainder of the book is structured as a grand tour of the world, taking the reader from the ‘New World’, or rather the Anglophone one including the USA, Canada and Australia, via the ‘Old World’, meaning the European countries of England, Spain and Sweden, on to the ‘Developing World’, with cases from Indonesia, China and South Africa, before a soft landing ‘beyond nature’, with a discussion of cultural landscape and indigenous peoples and a visit to the National Mall in Washington DC.

Regarding management issues, the chapters with examples from the UK have interesting descriptions of the role of park boards and other administrative bodies – typically supplementing existing administrative units – with all the conflicts and confusion that can lead to. In other words, these are ‘parks by negotiation’, to borrow a precise term used by Janet Cochrane in her chapter on Indonesia. In a very different perspective, the role of Western concepts such as maps and surveying for the delineation of ‘protected areas’ (or wildlife
sanctuaries/game reserves) by colonial powers is discussed thoroughly, and this discussion becomes even more interesting when compared with the post-colonial administration of the park areas. Concerning indigenous peoples in all parts of the world, the contributions to this volume seem to suggest that parks can indeed support indigenous communities through tourism development, both economically and culturally. The recurring issues of defining the national parks (distinguished from regional or state parks, landscape parks and so on) and of creating efficient management schemes are seen to be particularly tricky in countries in transition such as China and South Africa. China is on the way to market economy while still retaining a one-party system, while South Africa is on the way from Apartheid to parliamentary democracy with traditional leadership still in place. A critical comment to the chapter on South Africa concerns the so-called case studies: are they really that? They seem more like rather long historical and topographical descriptions than critical discussions.

The last case describes the development and modernisation process of the National Mall. This is done using a very interesting, rather meticulous methodology for collecting, analysing and using visitor feedback. The Swedish case is also based on visitor feedback, supplemented with opinions from the broader public. Here some interesting observations are presented, especially about the existence value of the parks, as well as their functions for recreation and nature protection.

This volume covers a broad range of issues but will probably be received most positively by those with historical interests. As a whole, or chapter by chapter, it constitutes a useful study material, in tourism as well as in cultural geography. It may even be useful for biologists or ecologists wanting to familiarize themselves with the societal aspects of national parks. It is not a handbook on how to establish or manage a national park, although much can be learned from the cases and it can surely inform the discussion among conservationists and policy-makers. All in all, it provides a great introduction to the national park concept and the surrounding discourses.

Reference

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