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Jessica M. DeWitt

## **Between Stewardship and Exploitation: Private Tourism, State Parks, and Environmentalism**

As we sit together at a restaurant in the summer of 2007, the person I am interviewing, an owner of a business adjacent to Cook Forest State Park, Pennsylvania, hesitates to discuss with me one of the ways in which he and his employees manage the river because he is unsure if the activity is allowed.<sup>1</sup> The potentially taboo activity he is referring to is the movement of rocks in the Clarion River to make passageways for thousands of recreational—often novice—canoeists, kayakers, and “tubists” that visit the Cook Forest area every year. He also cuts out potential snags in the river and erects signage directing canoeists to deeper water. For him, the management of the river for customers goes hand in hand with taking care of the river—picking up garbage left behind by recreational users, giving out free trash bags to users, and participating in local environmental groups. The apprehension expressed by the business owner is valid, though, because many environmental groups view water recreation specifically, and tourism in general, to be detrimental to the area. For instance, the Audubon Society, a non-profit conservation organization with a particular focus on birds, states that in Cook Forest “runaway development on the periphery of the park is a concern ... [and] booming commercial canoeing recreation poses a threat to the riparian habitat.”<sup>2</sup> An inherent distrust of private tourism on the part of environmentalists, as well as by the broader public, often means that the legitimacy of private-sector environmental knowledge and perspectives in park historiography and contemporary environmental debates is downplayed or disregarded.

The tension between possessing an intimate knowledge of and affection for the Clarion River and the need to use it for profit illustrates the complicated relationship between environmental stewardship and exploitation inherent in the activities of tourism business owners located on the peripheries of national, state, and provincial parks in North America. Such tension between recreation and preservation in parks is nothing new. A great number of scholars have tackled the topic of this clash, with many

- 1 Identifiers may have been changed throughout to preserve the anonymity of the interviewees. All interviews conducted with author in 2007. Names withheld for privacy. Copies of interviews can be found at the Jefferson County History Center, Brookville, Pennsylvania.
- 2 Audubon Society, “Important Bird Areas: Cook Forest State Park,” accessed 24 March 2016, <http://netapp.audubon.org/iba/Site/1166>.

concluding, ironically, that the increased popularity of parks is their greatest threat. As early as 1967, Roderick Nash concluded the first edition of *Wilderness and the American Mind* by observing how environmentalists and preservationists “reasoned that preserving wild places depended on getting Americans into them without saws or bulldozers, only to find in their success the source of their gravest present challenge.”<sup>3</sup> Yet tourism in parks can be categorized as a necessary evil. In most instances, high rates of visitation are crucial for ensuring continued government funding, protection, and acquisition of park land.

Private sector tourism on the outskirts of parks is not as readily embraced. The exploitation of park nature for personal gain is not easily whitewashed with feel-good tales of environmental heroism or shrugged off as unavoidable. Public opinion tends also to view private sector tourism through a more critical eye. When asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement, “Stores and commercial development should be encouraged in the area immediately adjacent to a state park/trail,” 85 percent of Wisconsin residents polled disagreed or were neutral.<sup>4</sup> Government-sanctioned opportunism in protected lands is tolerated, even encouraged; private sector opportunism is eyed with suspicion. Without access to the financial and professional resources that enable governments to justify their right to stewardship and exploitation of the environment, or the connections to popular avenues of environmental discourse enjoyed by many environmentalist groups, private business owners are at a disadvantage in regard to their ability to legitimate their role in environmental stewardship.

Contempt for private sector tourism is tied to a general mistrust of those individuals and industries that make their living working on the land and profiting from natural resources. As Richard White argues in “Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?,” environmentalists and society in general often “equate productive work in nature with destruction. They ignore ways that work itself is a means of knowing nature while celebrating the virtues of play and recreation in nature.”<sup>5</sup> The historical record similarly tends to overlook the importance of these business owners and the

3 Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 236.

4 Dave Marcoullier, Eric Olson, and Jeff Prey, *State Parks and Their Gateway Communities: Development and Recreation Planning Issues in Wisconsin* (Madison, Wisconsin: Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System, 2002), 27.

5 Richard White, “Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?: Work and Nature,” in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), 171.

gateway communities they live in, their role in park guardianship, and the significance of parks and park peripheries as places of work. Business owners' concerns about and opinions on contemporary issues also tend to be brushed aside.

Gateway communities—those communities that are located on the outskirts of parks and natural areas through which visitors have to travel to get to the park—can be beneficial to the parks that they neighbour. R. Neil Moisey argues that natural areas and parks benefit from gateway communities in two major ways. Firstly, “by providing the needed services for visitors, gateway communities can concentrate the development in the best locations.” Secondly, “gateway communities can provide economic and political support for the protection of the park and protected area resources.”<sup>6</sup> Writing in response to over a decade of decreased funding, Phyllis Myers argues that state parks had to create closer relationships with the private sector in order for both to survive.<sup>7</sup>

Former Cook Forest operations manager Steve Farrell acknowledged the importance of businesses in the area in 2000, stating, “Businesses and the park are great partners.” Cook Forest’s gateway community is as old as the park itself. The park was established in 1928, and the first cabin rental businesses were opened in 1928 and 1929. By the 1950s, Cook Forest was one of the most popular vacation destinations for working- and middle-class people from western Pennsylvania, mainly Pittsburgh and Erie, and northeastern Ohio, mainly Cleveland. The 1956 pamphlet from the Cook Forest Vacation Bureau—the area’s business association—lists over 20 places to stay in the area. This growth in tourism continued through the early 1990s as individuals and families moved to the area specifically to capitalize on the park’s popularity. Others fell in love with the area first as tourists, moved to the region, and turned to the tourism industry because it was the only viable option to make a living.

Interviews with Cook Forest area business owners illuminate the way in which they connect to nature and the park on both a personal and a business level. A cabin rental business owner in Cook Forest discusses how he distributes informational packets and newsletters about taking care of the area’s land and wildlife. “Don’t kill my snakes

6 R. Neil Moisey, “The Economics of Tourism in National Parks and Protected Areas,” in *Tourism in National Parks and Protected Areas: Planning and Management*, ed. Paul F. J. Eagles and Stephen F. McCool (New York: CABI Publishing, 2002), 238–39.

7 Phyllis Myers, “Strategies for Tourism and Economic Development,” in *State Parks in a New Era* (Washington, DC: Conservation Foundation, 1989).

... don't kill my bats ... don't cut any of my trees ... no harm," states the owner, who purposely leaves areas of his property natural for wildlife. Another business owner describes feeling satisfaction when simply walking their property. Many of the business owners describe a symbiotic relationship with the park; cuts to funding and poor management directly affect the prosperity of their businesses.

One cabin owner connects the downward turn of the area's economy and aesthetics in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which led to the demise of his business, with the decline of conditions in the park. The park was a "mess" and the entire area began to look "seedy and sad," he states. Several other business owners connect this decay to a political and environmental battle that took place in the mid-1990s over a state-sponsored bid to build a US\$3 million, 50-room lodge and convention centre in the forest at the same location as the Sawmill Center for the Arts—a private arts-and-crafts organization and business established in 1976. The issue pitted Anthony E. Cook,<sup>8</sup> influential heir of the Cook family from whom the land for the park was purchased in 1928, environmentalists, and a minority of business owners, known as the Save the Forest Committee, against the Sawmill Center, the majority of area businesses, and the state of Pennsylvania.

The proposed complex was a unique opportunity, remembers one business owner and lodge advocate. According to others, the opposition was a powerful and vocal minority. A. E. Cook's stance against the lodge illuminates some of the broader tensions between private business and the park:

Cook Forest is a park for all of the public to share. Cook Forest was not created so that a certain few could take a piece of Cook Forest for their own private use ... not one dime of this money benefits the park ... there is a tremendous amount of scientific information available concerning the adverse affect [sic] a development such as the lodge would have on the fragile ecosystem of Cook Forest ... the conception for

8 Cook is described by Mary Byrd Davis in her book, *Eastern Old-Growth Forests*, as Cook Forest State Park's "leading citizen activist." In addition to environmental activism, he is a photographer and owns/has owned oil and natural gas production companies in Southern California, Pennsylvania, and elsewhere. Cook has stated that "being in the oil and gas business is something that might strike people as a conflict with my environmental feelings. The oil industry has always been maligned or accused as a ruiner of natural resources ... But I can show that it doesn't have to be that way." Mary Byrd Davis, *Eastern Old-Growth Forests: Prospects For Rediscovery and Recovery* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1996): 369; John Bartlett, "Cook Forest State Park Is One Man's Family Legacy," *Time News*, 1994. More precise dates for sources 8–11 are unavailable. For more information, please contact the author.

which Cook Forest was preserved for all of us should not have to involve discussions today around the issue of sharing Cook Forest as a publicly held recreational forest preserve and the aspirations of the private business enterprise ... for their own special interests and financial gain.<sup>9</sup>

A significant proportion of locals believed that the lodge would be good for business by drawing in large groups and conferences, and that it was even essential for maintaining the relevance of Cook Forest as a vacation destination. The business owners who opposed the lodge claimed the exact opposite—that the proposed lodge would drain business from already established businesses—and joined ranks with Cook mainly out of economic, not environmental, concerns.<sup>10</sup> Both sides attempted to gain control of the discourse surrounding the lodge project in order to sway public opinion. However, the perspectives and knowledge of A. E. Cook and other environmentalists—or as some referred to them, “Tony Cook and his friends”<sup>11</sup>—were given more weight than the viewpoints and knowledge of pro-lodge local business owners whose livelihoods were directly connected to the economic and ecological health of the park. Ultimately, the opposition was successful. The state capitulated to the pressure of A. E. Cook and his allies. The lodge bid and its corresponding funding were moved to other Pennsylvania state parks (as was, presumably, the environmental degradation); this led to Cook Forest missing out on other future funding opportunities and elicited hard feelings between those business owners that had supported the project and those that had joined Cook to lobby against it.

This episode also highlights two characteristics of the historical and contemporary relationship of parks and protected areas to the private businesses that lie adjacent to them. Firstly, the opinions and knowledge of environmentalists and elite activists are typically granted more value than those of local business owners whose existence is tied to the park. This trend occurs because of a power imbalance between some environmentalists and the owners of small tourist businesses, and an alleged incongruence between tourism and environmentalism, which together work in favour of individuals with the resources and standing to position themselves within mainstream

9 Anthony E. Cook, “Let Voters Decide Lodge Issue,” *Clarion News*, 1994.

10 For instance, one business owner, Ellen O’Day, then innkeeper at Clarion River Lodge, stated “I am absolutely livid ... They (want to use) tax money to build a place in direct competition with private concerns.” Lisa C. Caylor, Untitled, *Clarion News*, September 1994.

11 Jeremiah Nebbish, “Martha Should Run for Governor,” *Clarion News*, September 1994.

environmentalist discourse. Secondly, funding cuts to parks lead to (at least perceived) direct effects on the economy of the surrounding area. This relationship between private enterprise and parks and protected lands needs to be given more comprehensive attention in historical analyses. In order for this to occur, scholars need to look outside the strict boundaries of parks, to their peripheries and the communities whose subsistence is tied to the park's existence, analyzing parks and their surrounding areas as places not only of recreation and preservation, but also of work.

### **Suggested Further Reading**

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