

What Did Clinton Learn On His Vacation?

by Alton Chase

Bill and Hillary's Rocky Mountain high is mercifully over, so Yellowstone's bears can rest easy. These ursine survivors no longer need fear encountering reporters, Secret Service agents, presidential aides, rangers and local officials tramping through the foliage in search of wilderness and lost golf balls. They can get on with their losing struggle to survive in America's arguably worst-managed national park.

It is therefore time to query the Clintons, as teachers ask their students: What did you learn on vacation? The president hoped to see a bear, but spent most of his time on the golf course. That doesn't suggest a profound knowledge of nature.

Nevertheless, Clinton pleased environmentalists — many, no doubt, golfers themselves — by holding a secret meeting with them and then declaring war on the New World gold mine, planned outside the park. Thus, the president missed a golden opportunity to rescue wildlife from these self-same environmentalists. For as bad as this mine may turn out to be, its potential damage is unlikely to equal the depredations currently perpetrated by preservationist policies inside the park.

The president might have understood Yellowstone's plight better had he spent his holiday reading a new book instead. Titled "Wildlife Policies in the U.S. National Parks,"

this to me is written in dry, non-inflammatory prose by a committee of eight highly qualified university scholars. It reaffirms what biologists have said for decades — that Yellowstone and other national parks have become black holes for wildlife.

Park Service preservation policies, write the authors, are destroying the very biodiversity they are intended to save. By following a "hands-off" management demanded by environmentalists, rangers permit elk, deer and other species to grow so numerous that they destroy vegetation on which other creatures — including mountain sheep, beaver, white-tailed deer and grizzly bear — depend.

Thanks to overprotection, they observe, white-tailed deer numbers "have increased four- to tenfold" in eastern parks, where they severely damage vegetation. Moose browsing in Isle Royal National Park has reduced mountain ash and balsam fir and brought the American yew to "near extinction."

Yellowstone elk have "profoundly altered the northern range ecosystem, broadly reducing species, habitat and landscape diversity," causing the "disappearance of the entire riparian shrub zone, aspen as a woodland type and the upland, deciduous-shrub habitat type" that grizzlies need.

Likewise, "Black bears are now seldom seen in the park."

Similar calamities, the committee avers, are occurring in many other sanctuaries as well.

The most distressing feature of this news is that it's not new. It merely reaffirms the charges of my 1986 book, "Playing God in Yellowstone." Ever since the 1930s, scholars repeatedly have observed that park mismanagement was destroying biodiversity. But these warnings are consistently ignored by authorities and activists, who don't want their fraudulent ideas exposed.

The capacity of these forces to suppress criticism was revealed during the writing of "Wildlife Policies." This book was conceived shortly after "Playing God" appeared, when a group of biologists contacted me to discuss Yellowstone. Conditions there, they confirmed, were even worse than I had depicted. We debated how to tell the public about this tragedy.

Two of those participating in this discussion were James G. Teer, then president of the Wildlife Society (representing professional wildlife biologists), and Frederic H. Wagner, dean of the College of Natural Resources at Utah State University. These men agreed that they should talk to environmental groups about the problem and that the society should establish a panel of experts under Wagner's direction to complete a report on Park Service wildlife management.

Meanwhile, I privately made a personal

plea to George Frampton, then Wilderness Society president and now assistant secretary of the Interior, to enlist his organization in reform efforts.

These ventures were received with indifference or hostility.

Environmentalists paid little attention to Wagner or me, and the Park Service was less than enthusiastic about the society study. Wagner's committee met resistance even from within the society itself.

Most of this group's members work for the government, and many, apparently, didn't want a critical report. Even when a review committee approved a third draft, the governing council insisted on further revisions. Frustrated, Wagner and his fellow authors decided to publish their manuscript independently.

Thus, "Wildlife Policies" is yet another warning that shows how preservation policies destroy wildlife. And like its predecessors, it will probably be ignored. For neither environmentalists nor bureaucrats want you to hear its message. They seek to expand governmental (and therefore their own) power over surrounding lands, and this is best done by exaggerating the need for protection outside the parks while ignoring the catastrophes their vaunted federal stewardship creates inside these preserves.

That's why bears, once common in Yellowstone, are now invisible, and Clinton, who failed to find one, didn't see the bull.

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