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# REPRINTS

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When Woodrow Wilson signed the legislation establishing the National Park Service in August 1916, over six years of efforts by park advocates, including J. Horace McFarland, Robert Sterling Yard, Horace M. Albright and Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., were finally rewarded. It was Olmsted Jr. who insisted that the legislation include an explicit statement of the purpose of the parks and he drafted this portion of the bill. “The fundamental purpose ...” of the parks, he wrote, “... is to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.”

Olmsted Jr. remained intensely interested in the federal agency he helped create. The memorandum reprinted here was part of a 1934 review of U.S. Forest Service plans for the development of the Kings Canyon area in California, which was then still part of the Sequoia National Forest. Forest service officials endorsed Olmsted’s conclusions and had this portion of his report distributed, noting that the specific observations regarding Kings Canyon should apply generally to wilderness areas in national forests. In 1935, *Landscape Architecture* magazine reprinted the circular letter as an article.

Kings Canyon was a remote wilderness area with dramatic Sierran scenery that had been compared to Yosemite Valley since the 1870s. Although it had been part of a federal forest reserve since 1893, preservation advocates had pressed for the more complete

protection of national park status for decades. In 1934 Congress was preparing to consider new legislation to create a Kings Canyon National Park, which would have transferred jurisdiction of the area to the National Park Service. By accepting and distributing Olmsted’s report, forest service officials were trying to show that they were worthy stewards of the area, implying that park designation might not be necessary.

The issue of how and where to protect wilderness on public lands had become a heated issue by the mid-1930s, largely because of the extensive road building and recreational development made possible by the Civilian Conservation Corps and other New Deal programs. Olmsted argues here that officials should not repeat the mistakes made at Yosemite Valley by allowing hotels and other “amusements” that would make the area a destination for reasons other than the appreciation of its unique scenery. His recommendations were not unlike those made by his father in 1865 for Yosemite Valley. In 1940 Congress finally established Kings Canyon National Park, and in 1946 Olmsted again reviewed development plans for Kings Canyon, this time at the request of the Sierra Club, of which he was vice president at the time. Published in the *Sierra Club Bulletin* the following year, the report reiterated many of the convictions contained in this article: development of the wilderness park should remain the absolute minimum that would provide for reasonable access and primitive camping. In part due to his efforts, Kings Canyon has remained far closer to that ideal than Yosemite Valley.

Ethan Carr, Reprints Editor

## FREDERICK LAW OLMSTED JR., “AMUSEMENTS’ AND RELATED ARTIFICIAL CONVENIENCES IN THE NATIONAL FORESTS”

Kings River Canyon is one of those places still in a predominately natural condition (that is to say, very slightly altered by human activities) which have exceptionally great potential value to mankind of a sort that is wholly and absolutely dependent upon the inspirational and other qualities of those features and characteristics which are natural and peculiar to it, as distinguished from any features and characteristics which have resulted or may result from human activities. Therefore the primary and controlling consideration throughout any planning for the Canyon area should be to provide for the most effective possible enjoyment of what is natural and peculiar to it.

It is true that visitors to the Canyon cannot be engaged exclusively in such enjoyment all the time. Obviously they must take out time for such physiological necessities as eating, sleeping, etc., or they will not remain in physical condition for adequate enjoyment of the essential natural values of the place during the rest of the time. But beyond that, if they are to keep psychologically fresh and sensitive to the inspirational and other qualities natural and peculiar to the area, most of them really need to do, at intervals, other things of a “recreational” sort which do not directly contribute to their enjoyment of what is peculiar of the Canyon as such and which could be done just as well or better somewhere else, if it were magically possible for these people to be instantaneously translated to some other place and then back to the Canyon after they had got through doing them.

But in providing, within the Canyon, for any such amusements or recreations, or indeed for any special activities, utilities, or conveniences not directly contributory to the enjoyment of what can be enjoyed nowhere else than in the Canyon, several considerations ought to be borne in mind which are implied by the principle stated above.

1. There are limits on the number of people who can visit the Canyon without bringing into play a sort of “law of diminishing returns” by which the total benefit derived from their visits by all of them would become less than if a smaller number visited it with a higher average degree of satisfaction.
2. It is, therefore, a matter of serious importance that the attractiveness to the public at large of whatever is to be found with the Canyon, taken as a whole, shall be strongly selective; so as to draw into the Canyon as few as possible of those who could find elsewhere in the reasonably high degree whatever it is that interests and attracts them, and so as to draw into the Canyon as large a proportion as possible, and repel as few as possible, of those who are interested and attracted primarily by those admirable natural qualities which are peculiar to the Canyon and not obtainable elsewhere.
3. Among possible artificial elements (including certain provisions for “amusements”) the presence of which in the Canyon might upon the whole, even in spite of some ill effects on the natural conditions, help the majority of the latter class of visitors to get more benefit from the natural features peculiar to the Canyon if they were the only people concerned, there are many elements which would tend to attract to the Canyon and keep in the Canyon large numbers of visitors of the former class, whose tendency would be to use the Canyon as an ordinary summer resort, or place for miscellaneous amusement and recreation, with little regard for its primary and peculiar values. And the presence of these people in large numbers, together with the consequences which would follow from their presence, would be likely to diminish seriously the benefit derivable from the natural features peculiar to the Canyon by all visitors. This would offset as least in part, and might much more than offset, the benefit which would otherwise be derived from these artificial elements by those whose main interest is in the natural features peculiar to the Canyon. It might easily make their satisfaction with the Canyon much less than if these otherwise desirable artificial facilities were lacking but the Canyon were free from the crowds attracted

primarily by these artificial facilities and not primarily by features properly peculiar to the Canyon.

4. Therefore, in my opinion, wherever a question arises as to the introduction of any artificial elements not clearly necessary for, or directly and clearly tending to enhance, enjoyment of the natural features peculiar to the Canyon, or as to the extent and character of such artificial elements, it is of basic importance to consider whether a given decision would tend to attract to the Canyon people who might better be somewhere else so far as concerns the best utilization of those peculiar features, and if so to curtail these artificial attractions at a point distinctly short of what would be ideally desirable for other people if it was not for this danger of attracting the people who might better go somewhere else.

Such considerations lead me to oppose artificial swimming pools, for example, and to favor reserving ample borders along the streams with trails for general use, where one may be unconscious of the presence of camping areas, etc., even at the expense of making the camping as such much less attractive than if an individual camper could fry his fish right on the edge of the stream.

It will further illustrate what I mean, to point out that the essential values of the Yosemite Valley have, in my opinion, been impaired actually to a very appreciable degree, and have been endangered to a much greater degree, by the insidious tendency toward the successive introduction within the Valley of activities and conveniences of kinds, which although individually more or less justifiable as capable of indirectly contributing to the public's ability to enjoy the Valley's natural features —on the principles set forth in my second paragraph above —have the aggregate effect of development in a direction ultimately and basically inconsistent with maintaining the values peculiar to the Valley, —a direction of which the logical ultimate outcome would be a definitely urban pleasure resort. Even remotely to approach such an outcome is wholly inconsistent with the much more specialized objective of enabling those who want to do so to enjoy the distinguishing natural characteristics peculiar to the Valley under conditions as favorable as they can be made for that one purpose.



*Kings Canyon National Park*  
*Image courtesy of National Park Service*

The same tendency will be present in the Kings River Canyon as soon as it is made accessible by road. And this tendency ought in my opinion to be guarded against carefully at every step.

The Canyon has hitherto been protected from the serious misuse, as well as from adequate use, by its inaccessibility. When that barrier is removed by completion of an

automobile road, other obstacles against misuse must be provided. One of the most appropriate of such obstacles can be the lack of facilities that would make it a convenient and satisfactory place of resort for people who are not sufficiently interested in its natural features to be willing for the sake of them to put up with some inconvenience and with the absence of many artificial facilities and amusements such as draw people to ordinary good summer resorts.

For these reasons, as well as for the direct physical effects on the landscape, I would, for example, omit electric service in the camp grounds and elsewhere throughout the Canyon except in the very few limited areas where buildings must be concentrated, and would service the latter by small local plants, thus eliminating transmission lines in all

other parts of the Canyon. I would sedulously seek to retain, or attain, as far as practicable and consistent with a reasonable degree of public safety and public health, surroundings and conditions of life approximating those which are possible and appropriate under rather primitive conditions in regions remote from cities; both because these are apt to be physically less disturbing to the natural character of the Canyon and also because they would have a selective effect on visitors to the Canyon, in favor of those who attach relatively high values to the natural features peculiar to it, as against those who attach relatively low values to those features and relatively high values to man-made conditions better obtain elsewhere.



*Kings Canyon National Park*  
*Image courtesy of National Park Service*