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Book Review: Making Rocky Mountain National Park

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Making Rocky Mountain National Park: The Environmental History of an American Treasure.
By Jerry J. Frank. (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2013. 272pp. \$34.95).

For many, the idea of a national park is a world separated from society. Removed from the influences of humans, the park serves as a refuge, preserving the landscape in its most natural form. Birds fly, fish swim, and forests grow free from human interference. These sanctuaries boast equally evocative names: Yellowstone, Denali, and Rocky Mountain National Park. According to Jerry Frank, however, this pristine image of unspoiled nature is a misconception. In his book *Making Rocky Mountain National Park: The Environmental History of an American Treasure*, Frank argues that national parks are not untouched landscapes, but rather results of the interactions between mankind's ideas of nature, human actions, and the environment itself.

Beginning with the dedication of Rocky Mountain National Park in 1915, Frank examines how human actions transformed the area around Estes Park, Colorado from a remote mountain locale into a popular tourist destination through the twenty-first century. According to Frank, multiple public and private interests collaborated to create Rocky. Hoping to capitalize on their city's reputation as a "health resort" for weary urbanites, Denver's business and political leaders spearheaded the effort to designate the Estes Park region as a national park. Although officials billed the project as a nature preserve, Frank argues that actions by both government agencies and the public have shaped the park throughout its history. To facilitate automobile-inclined tourists' access to the park's vistas, the National Park Service (NPS) constructed miles of roads and parking lots throughout Rocky. With the completion of the road system, Rocky became essentially two parks—that which was visible from a car window and that which was not.

The division between the two parks altered Rocky's landscape in significant, and often conflicting, ways. Tree removal maintained road access for tourists, but disrupted natural forest growth. At the same time, fire prevention saved Rocky's forests from destruction, but promoted abnormal growth patterns, allowed for spikes in parasitic insect species, and ultimately led to the use of potent chemical insecticides. Decisions meant to increase the park's attractiveness to tourists, like the introduction of nonnative fish preferred by anglers and the construction of ski resorts, disrupted Rocky's natural progression. National Park Service efforts to reverse such damage, like the protection of elk populations and the reintroduction of the greenback trout, caused disruptions of their own. Ultimately, Rocky was not "a static forest set loose from the bounds of history," but a changing depiction of both our understanding of nature and our relationship with the environment (p. 113).

Making Rocky Mountain National Park is a fascinating examination of the human influence—seen and unseen—on the supposedly "natural" landscape of a national park. Instead of an environmental preserve, Rocky is an attraction created by humans for humans. Frank demonstrates how both the original support for the park and the NPS's administration of it consistently favored public access and enjoyment over preservation. Enos Mills's speeches advocated for conservation, but also for the public enjoyment of the "wild" landscape. NPS administrators initially envisioned Rocky's trails dotted with horseback riders, but the growth of American automobile culture replaced four-legged transportation with the four-wheeled variety. Rather than an untouched landscape, Frank argues that Rocky is actually "*Rocky*," an idea of nature conceived of and regularly recast by humans.

Frank's emphasis on sustained change over time and his incorporation of recent ecological developments deserve particular attention. While other books on Western

environmental history emphasize a decline from the “natural” landscape to the human-influenced one, *Making Rocky Mountain National Park* returns to the idea of a dynamic environment. Frank certainly acknowledges the changes in Rocky’s environment from 1915 to the present day, but he refrains from portraying it as a decline. Frank also incorporates scientific elements into his narrative, particularly with regard to the park’s animal population. An earlier work of environmental history would have similarly addressed the NPS’s efforts to reintroduce the greenback trout to Rocky, but Frank adds an additional layer of analysis by including evidence on the genetics of the new fish versus the original population. Both elements add depth to an interesting—albeit brief—monograph.

Frank’s roughly chronological structure and frequent use of subheadings and sections seem targeted toward the thousands of curious and conservation-minded tourists who pass through Rocky every year — and who make up one of the book’s key active forces. That intended audience belies several of Frank’s more ambitious decisions, particularly the exclusion of any maps. Frank’s justification portrays maps as simply constructions that “reify the things they depict,” but in so doing, Rocky becomes a place without a setting (p. xii). Moreover, the book misses a chance to underscore the arbitrary nature of the park’s borders, drawn by bureaucrats without concern for existing ecosystems.

In its focus on government manipulation of the environment, *Making Rocky Mountain National Park* resembles Donald Worster’s *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West*. Both Frank and Worster examine how the decisions of government agencies made for public benefit transformed the “natural” landscape of the Western states. For Worster, both government actors and private business interests collaborated to bring water to the West, creating an agriculture-friendly “hydraulic society” out of a dry, but otherwise sustainable, environment. Similarly, Frank examines how the NPS reshaped the environment of Estes Park into the human conception of “nature,” rather than preserve it. But while Worster largely condemns the transformation of the West, Frank does not arrive at a similarly pessimistic judgment. For Frank, the NPS’s efforts have often been flawed, but Rocky is not a devastated landscape.

Making Rocky Mountain National Park is a welcome addition to the growing body of scholarship on Western environmental history. The book is too brief to be a truly seminal work in the field, but Frank’s approach is innovative and should be an example to future historians. For that reason alone, the book is an important work. But Frank’s work is fascinating enough to stand on its own, and serves as an interesting redefinition of what “makes” America’s national parks.

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