

The fire last time at Yellowstone heats the 'nature' debate

By David Moberg

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK

Along the slopes of Wyoming's Mt. Washburn, charred old lodgepole pines stand as lifeless reminders of the firestorms that engulfed 45 percent of the world's first national park a year ago. But a brilliant carpet of pink fireweed and blue-flowered lupines stretches across the charcoal-powder earth, flourishing as never before on the ash-enriched soil, in sunlight the trees previously obscured.

Across the park, at the edge of the Lower Geyser Basin, lies the carcass of an elk, probably a victim of a harsh winter and the loss of forage resulting from last year's drought and fire. A coyote, appreciating the easy meal, tugs at the dried flesh and skin left behind by other predators and scavengers.

The monster fires of 1988 may have left more than a half-million acres of Yellowstone's once-tree-covered hillsides black and gray for years to come, but they were hardly the disaster that some local politicians proclaimed at the time. The loss of the trees was an opportunity for many other plants and animals.

Nature's comeback is a reminder that "the resource at Yellowstone is not 20,000 elk, not a million lodgepole pines, not 200 grizzly bears. It's wildness and interaction according to natural laws," says David Simon of the National Parks and Conservation Association.

Nature answers: The nation's parks, our counterpart to Europe's great cathedrals, are shrines of great beauty when not reduced to tourism-industry adjuncts. Despite the setbacks of the Reagan era's unprecedentedly politicized management of parks and natural resources—a management hostile to wilderness and ecological principles—the parks' policy has shifted over the past quarter-century. Their mission is to preserve not just postcard-pretty scenes, but unencumbered and ever-changing wilderness. Yet they still must cater to a rapidly growing number of human visitors, many of whom see the parks as natural theme parks with built-in zoos.

The parks' dilemma reflects a universal problem: how can we abandon our inherited nature-conquering mentality and accept nature's processes? The need to live within an ecological framework we cannot completely control is constantly driven home by overflowing urban landfills, chemically overdependent farms and a global greenhouse effect. It's also the parks' main challenge.

The biggest problem that U.S. national parks face is not natural cataclysms, like last year's Yellowstone fire, to which the parks can readily adapt if their distinct ecosystems are still fairly intact. It is encroachment from various forces on the outside—smog from cities and power plants, obscuring the Grand Canyon; oil exploration, logging and real estate development on the outskirts of Yellowstone; farming, land drainage and urban sprawl near the Everglades.

Indeed, Yellowstone's fire is probably an inevitable part of its natural history, and one with potential long-term benefits. The prevailing scientific evidence is that Yellowstone's distinctive lodgepole pine forest endured a similar fire in the early 18th century. Large fires are very rare in young lodgepole forests. But after about 200 to 400 years the mature forest, with many dead or older trees providing fuel, and younger spruce and fir trees acting as fire ladders, becomes vulnerable to widespread fire, especially under drought conditions.

In recent decades park managers have recognized that fire is an important natural process, clearing the way for new and more varied growth of plants that mature forests crowd out. The fires create more edges between forest and meadow or brush, edges that support far more and varied wildlife than dense forest. Fire also opens the resinous cones of lodgepoles, releasing the seeds otherwise trapped within.

Park firefighters' policy in recent decades has been to extinguish fires started by humans but not those caused by lightning, which usually burned themselves out in days, or at most a few weeks, in Yellowstone. But in the summer of 1988, as the fires dragged on, firefighters tried to extinguish most of the big fires from their beginning. Some, however, were actually the result of backfires started to combat other fires, or were ignited outside the park. The conditions were perfect for an unstoppable conflagration. The Greater Yellowstone Postfire Ecological Assessment Workshop—a panel of academics—concluded that "regardless of manpower and equipment, suppression of fires in [areas containing] heavy fuels may be impossible when the weather is severe."

Rising from the ashes: But the fires set in motion a new round of growth—and provided unexpected benefits. Aspens will probably grow back more strongly, and there will be many more birds in the park. Many elk and bison, including weaker animals spared during previous mild winters, perished last winter (half of them at the hands of hunters outside the park). But the survivors had lush foraging this year and liked the winter warmth in the sun-absorbing blackened forests. And grizzly bears, already thought to be on the rebound, had extra carcasses to eat before and after hibernation. Yellowstone natural resource management specialist Stu Coleman said this meant the bears were likely to produce more young, and more easily feed their bigger cub crop in the spring. "The fires played very well for bear population," he said.

After a year of attempts to suppress all fires, the park service will soon return to a slightly modified version of its old natural-burn policy, Coleman said. Fire management plans will now take more into account drought and other weather conditions, a move some purists condemn. But according to Coleman, a pragmatic faction believes that the rules won't make much difference. "Lodgepole pines don't burn much until they're 250 years old, and then there's not much you can do to stop it," he said.

Despite scientific evidence backing park policy, there may still be a widespread belief that park managers goofed. Conservationists worry that the glare of bad publicity will slow projects such as the reintroduction of the wolf—exterminated in the '30s—to Yellowstone, or make park directors cautious about defending wilderness values.

"That's truly unfortunate," argues Wilderness Society northern Rockies representative Michael Scott. "At the center of the greater Yellowstone ecosystem, the park is faced with significant choices for the future. Yellowstone is surrounded by six national forests that have produced management plans under political appointees of the Reagan administration, which promoted resource maximization—maximum roadbuilding, mining, timber harvest and oil and gas exploration. The potential exists for that ecosystem to unravel." Park representatives consequently must argue with other public agencies for their wilderness

values.

Within the next two months the Bridger-Teton forest southeast of Yellowstone is expected to announce a new management plan permitting oil and gas leasing on 95 percent of legally available land, right up to the borders of the Grand Teton and Yellowstone parks and throughout prime grizzly habitat as well. North of Yellowstone, the "new age" Church Universal and Triumphant is expanding development and interfering with wildlife's winter range. The church moved there in the early '80s after Reagan blocked Forest Service acquisition of the elk's critical winter grazing lands. And in the next couple of weeks the park system may allow a sawmill to use Yellowstone roads in an "emergency" to haul timber it is cutting in an adjacent public forest, despite legal prohibitions against such commercial activity in the park.

Northern Plains Sierra Club representative Larry Mehlhaff argues that policies regarding forests adjacent to Yellowstone are the "biggest threat" to the park at the moment because of the threat commercial activity in these areas poses to Yellowstone's ecosystem. Despite a new coordinating committee of park and Forest Service directors from the whole Yellowstone ecosystem, Forest Service policy often directly conflicts with park aims (for example, not protecting adjacent grizzly areas).

Loss leaders: Ironically, the Forest Service usually loses lots of money on its timber sales in the Yellowstone area (see *In These Times*, Sept. 13), but counts the roads it builds through previously roadless wilderness areas as

INSIDE STORY

a public benefit—though conservationists would argue that the roads should count in a permanent loss column. Besides, the forest product yield from the area is negligible nationally, Mehlhaff argues, and the limited local employment would in any case be more stable if lumber companies had practiced sustained-yield cutting over the years. Now the Wilderness Society is devising an alternative economic strategy for the region that is compatible with wilderness values.

Many Reagan appointees still occupy key park-related posts, and conservationists consider the two new Interior Department officials most responsible for park policy hard-line ideological conservatives with no national park experience. But some park and environmental group lobbyists still hope that Bush will be more sympathetic to parks, pointing to his decision to ask for more land-acquisition money than Reagan did. Bush's request—for less than half of what most groups say is needed—may simply represent a pragmatic accommodation with what Congress allocated last year despite Reagan's puny recommendation. Yet at the same time Bush officials have approved building an environmentally destructive jetty area off Cape Hatteras, N.C., that Reagan's crew had long delayed.

Congress is considering legislation to protect the park service from the most blatant political manipulation, and some environmentalists would like to revive legislation, twice passed by the House, requiring other federal agencies to manage their lands compatibly with park aims. Park advocates want greatly expanded appropriations to buy land, including \$2 billion for sites Congress has already approved. Big fights are possible over expanding the Everglades park and creating a southern California desert park. Another critical issue looms: how much Bureau of Land Management acreage will be designated as protected wilderness?

Bush's signals that he intends to be more environmentally sensitive cheer park defenders, but the administration has yet to clearly stake out its commitments. It's not enough to simply be less bad than Reagan when every national park is threatened by degradation of the land around it. "The Reagan years deferred everything," warns Steven Whitney, national parks program director for The Wilderness Society. "Now everything is coming due." □

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By Kevin Robinson

GUATEMALA CITY

A WAVE OF DEATH-SQUAD KIDNAPPINGS AND assassinations in Guatemala marks the largest increase in human rights violations here since President Vinicio Cerezo's civilian government took office in January 1986. The Cerezo administration claims it is under siege by extreme-right, clandestine groups that hope to submerge the nation in a spiraling political crisis that could pave the way for a new coup attempt.

A string of terrorist bomb and grenade attacks since July does in part appear to corroborate Cerezo's claims. But most independent groups here and international human rights organizations directly accuse security forces of heading a well-coordinated campaign to destroy the country's budding mass movement, with or without the consent of civilian authorities. Indeed, growing repression against virtually all center to left groups is terrorizing the population, threatening to completely destroy the nation's democratic opening.

Following the Cerezo administration's rise to power in 1986, which ended nearly 20 years of successive military governments, human rights abuses fell noticeably. Unions, peasant organizations and progressive groups began to organize openly again on a mass scale for the first time since 1980, when widespread repression forced most of those groups to demobilize or operate underground.

Workers and guerrillas: Last year alone some 50 new worker organizations and peasant associations emerged, although few obtained legal status, according to one prominent labor adviser here. Throughout 1988, unions carried out more than 100 strikes or work stoppages and about 100 protest marches, according to government estimates.

This year, workers' mobilizations grew even bolder. Between June and August, for example, some 70,000 civil servants, including all of the country's public school teachers, led a three-month strike for higher wages. The strike inspired the largest street demonstrations here since 1980, and constant clashes broke out between protestors and riot police after strikers repeatedly blocked highways and occupied public offices around the country.

Alongside this surge in labor activity and social mobilization, the Guatemalan guerrilla organizations, previously decimated by massive counterinsurgency drives from 1980 to 1984, also managed to reinstate activities on a wide scale, partially rebuilding their former social support network. The Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG), a coalition of the country's four main rebel organizations, now boasts of 3,500 armed combatants and a 35,000-strong civilian base of support, mostly in rural areas.

The URNG reports a total of 440 battles with government troops in the first five months of 1989, plus 45 attacks on army bases and outposts in half of the country's 22 provinces. Despite official denials, many guerrilla reports are corroborated by local press coverage of insurgent actions.

Alarmed by this rapid growth in mass organization—and especially the sharp jump in rebel activity and strength—dissident army officers, backed by right-wing politi-



Confrontation in the capital: striking Guatemalan teachers demonstrate in the face of repression.

Guatemalans face up to terror's rising tide

cians and businessmen, attempted a military coup on May 9. Although the overthrow attempt was crushed by army units based in the capital loyal to the government, more than 20 high-ranking and mid-level officers participated directly or indirectly in the revolt. Many of the officers had been implicated in a similar putsch attempt in 1988.

"The principal cause of discontent among officers is the guerrillas' strong re-emergence and the threat that the army stands to lose all it gained in the counterinsurgency campaigns of the early '80s," said one former intelligence officer who participated in the 1988 putsch and confidentially confessed to connections to the May 9 revolt.

Many army officials fear that Cerezo's Christian Democrat (CD) government is permeated by leftists who are either sympathetic to or maintain direct links with the URNG, using state resources to finance and promote the growth of left-oriented labor and peasant organizations. Even more disturbing to army commanders is the belief that Defense Minister Gen. Hector Gramajo and most of his loyal collaborators in the high command "sold out" to the CD, turning a deaf ear to complaints from their subordinates.

"Most officers are well aware that a lot of people who previously had connections with the subversives are now with the CD, and many directly blame Defense Minister Gramajo for weakening the army by rotating dissident officers to powerless administrative posts or by discharging them from the military," the former intelligence officer said. "The army is severely divided, and many officers hate General Gramajo even more than President Cerezo."

Given the failure of the May 9 rebellion, officials now accuse disaffected officers of unleashing a "terror campaign" around the country to push the population to lose faith in the political opening, thereby destabiliz-

ing the Cerezo government and paving the way for a new coup attempt.

Disgruntled officers? Since mid-July, a string of bomb explosions throughout Guatemala City damaged about two dozen buildings and vehicles and injured more than 20 innocent bystanders, while another 100-odd bomb threats against public offices and commercial centers sowed panic among city residents. On at least three separate occasions, right-wing commandos terrorized pedestrians by indiscriminately lobbing grenades at crowded bus stops and shopping centers as they calmly cruised the capital's downtown areas.

"Clearly, those responsible for the bomb attacks are the same groups who want to reinstate a hard-line military government, and many of those involved may be the same people who participated in past coup attempts," Cerezo said in a press conference here September 12.

Reported political assassinations and abductions climbed to 91 in July and August, according to one count.

In fact, on September 15 police caught two men in the capital carrying war materiel in their cars who later confessed to planning and executing terrorist acts under the orders of Lionel Sisniega, head of the ultraconservative Anti-Communist Unification Party who allegedly participated in past coup conspiracies. Sisniega is now in hiding, but police discovered grenades and machine guns in his home, and the army immediately sent Sisniega's son, a captain in Guatemala's

presidential guard, off packing to Venezuela as military attache.

Few doubt then that uncontrollable, extreme-right groups are behind many of the bombings, as Cerezo claims. But alongside these indiscriminate terrorist attacks is a new wave of political assassinations, kidnappings and death threats targeting liberal and progressive groups around the nation, which many suspect is a well-calculated campaign of repression directly headed by the country's security forces, with or without the consent of Cerezo or Gramajo.

While death squads killed or kidnapped 237 people throughout the first six months of this year, the number of political assassinations and abductions reported climbed to 91 in July and August alone, according to one local conservative count. This month the abuses appear to be growing even worse. In less than 24 hours on September 13, death squads massacred 15 people in the western provinces of Quezaltenango and San Marcos, both heavy army-guerrilla "conflict areas," dumping many of the victims' mutilated bodies along roadsides in those regions.

Following are some of the most noteworthy cases of human rights abuses since June:

In June and July hit squads kidnapped four union leaders, including a labor organizer at a local branch of the Granai and Townsend Bank, plus a member of the powerful Coca-Cola factory union in Guatemala City. Most workers' federations here say an unprecedented stream of death threats against their leaders and members began in July and continues unabated.

In July and August hit squads kidnapped two members of the Mutual Support Group for the Families of the Disappeared (GAM). And on August 16 a powerful bomb ripped through GAM's offices in the capital, while another explosion partially destroyed the nearby residence of the International Peace Brigades, a foreign pacifist organization that collaborates with GAM.

In August constant death threats forced the entire editorial staff of the new liberal newsweekly *Porque* to resign after a hit squad murdered one of the magazine's founders. At least five other journalists, two of

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