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An Expedition to Public Lands

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An Expedition to Public Lands

Abstract

A look into common ideas appearing in the US public land system. These ideas include "nature as commodity," "nature as unpeopled," and "nature as pristine." The specific areas looked into are Havasu National Wildlife Refuge, Prescott National Forest, Grand Canyon National Park, Gold Butte National Monument, and Death Valley National Park.

Keywords

Public Lands, Grand Canyon, Death Valley, Commoditization, Bundy Standoff

Disciplines

Cultural Heritage Law | Indigenous, Indian, and Aboriginal Law | Land Use Law | United States History

Comments

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An Expedition to Public Lands

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FYS 120-3: What Would Smokey Say?

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Introduction

• This project aimed to locate examples of commonly recurring ideas within the public land system.

• These ideas are "nature as commodity," "nature as pristine," and "nature as unpeopled."

• In this project, I looked at five locations in the states of Arizona, California, and Nevada. These locations were specifically Havasu National Wildlife Refuge, Prescott National Forest, Grand Canyon National Park, Gold Butte National Monument, and Death Valley National Park.

Havasu National Wildlife Refuge

• Established in 1941 by Executive Order under President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Havasu National Wildlife Refuge was created to provide a habitat for migrating birds.⁶

• In 2016, a major controversy arose within the nearby Lake Havasu City, when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed a limit on recreational boating on a section of the refuge due to wildlife safety concerns and environmental impacts.⁴

• The new limit would have negatively impacted the local economy, as an estimated 75% of the roughly three million visitors who vacation at Lake Havasu every year are interested in water recreation.⁵

• In addition, locals were frustrated that they were not consulted about the new limits. Locals were also disgruntled due to lack of input on restrictions placed in 2015.⁵

• The proposed limit was withdrawn in 2016 after the Fish and Wildlife Service received a massive amount of community complaints.⁴



"2007.03.06 - Havasu National Wildlife Refuge" by JBYoder is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.

- The controversy at Havasu National Wildlife Refuge strongly gives view into the idea of "nature as commodity."
- While the Fish and Wildlife Service wanted to add more protections to HNW, the locals saw more value in the land as an economic and recreational resource than environmental protection.

Grand Canyon National Park

• In 1908, realizing congress wasn't likely going to make the Grand Canyon a national park, President Theodore Roosevelt declared 1,279 square miles of national forest surrounding the Grand Canyon as a national monument. Then, in 1919, although many opposed it, Grand Canyon National park was created.¹⁸

• Being such a popular tourist destination, the Grand Canyon management has a number of struggles with tourism. One such challenge regards the number of aerial tourism vehicles that tourists use to view the canyon from above, which tends to anger hikers looking to experience nature as wilderness, away from the noise pollution of helicopters and low-flying planes.⁷

• In addition to managing flight paths to avoid noise pollution from the aerial vehicles, the park also places many restrictions on campers and visitors. This action is to give tourists a better "wilderness" experience.

• There are also issues outside of tourism, of course, such as air pollution from nearby power plants. These power plants take advantage of the regions coal supply to fuel themselves. The coal releases air pollution, lowering the great air quality that the canyon was once known for.⁷

- The challenges present at grand Canyon National Park raises two common ideas surrounding the public lands, "nature as commodity" and "nature as pristine."
- The tourism issues touch on both ideas. The tourists on the ground who care looking for a wilderness experience are looking for nature without human presence. Of course, it is impossible to find nature on earth that doesn't have some influence by humans, the now-low air quality from an outside source is evidence of that. Additionally, the Grand Canyon was inhabited by Native Americans far before Europeans arrived.
- These issues deal with making revenue for tourism companies, and using tourism of nature to do that is a great example of nature as commodity. The coal power plants also show this idea, using nature's resource to turn a profit, while damaging nature in return.



"Grand Canyon - 2014" by screaming_monkey is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.

Prescott National Forest

• Established on May 10, 1898, by President McKinley as the Prescott Forest reserve, Prescott National Forest was originally created to protect the watershed used by the local community. In 1908, after realizing that timber was still being cut, the land was renamed to "Prescott National Forest" and absorbed the Verde National Forest.¹⁵

• In 2020, a controversial gold mine was planned to be made on the Hassayampa River within Prescott National Forest. This mine would have had a negative impact on an endangered species of plant, the Agave phillipsiana or "Phillip's agave." The project failed to ensure the avoidance of substantial impacts on the environment.²

• In addition to environmental impacts, it would have damaged a Native American cultural site. The site the proposed mine would have been built on a site where Native American tribes farmed Phillip's agave between 500 and 1,000 years ago.²

• On July 2, 2020, the Prescott National Forest withdrew its approval of the gold mine.²

- The proposed mine expresses two ideas common in thinking about the public lands and nature as a whole, "nature as commodity" and "nature as unpeopled."
- The project not only wasn't able to ensure the avoidance of largely damaging the surrounding environment but would also have damaged an endangered plant.
- The project ignored the native American culture and history of the location and would have damaged the location if it were built.



"Green Pool" by yandahi is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

Gold Butte National Monument

• Under the Antiquities Act, President Barack Obama established 300,000 acres of Nevada as the Gold Butte National Monument in 2016. This was done both to protect not only its geological features, but also for its Native American history and "early 20th century ranching sites associated with Spanish explorers from the late 18th century."⁹

• The establishment of Gold Butte National Monument was a massive controversy. Farmers and ranchers in the area wanted to use the property for agriculture. Locals also expressed their want for more communication before new designations.³

• This controversy culminated in an armed standoff with a local rancher, Cliven Bundy, as well as Bundy's sons and supporters on Bundy's ranch in April of 2014. The rancher claimed "ancestral rights" to the area of Gold Butte and faced criminal charges for the standoff.⁹

• The original case against Bundy failed, as prosecutorial misconduct had caused it to be ruled a mistrial, and Bundy continued to graze the land without paying the fee. In 2014, owed over \$1 million in grazing fees.¹⁰

• The controversy surrounding the establishment of Gold Butte expresses the continuity of the idea of "Nature as commodity." The locals wanted to use the land for profit, rather than protecting it for its cultural and historical value.

• The establishment of this monument goes against the idea of "nature as unpeopled," as it was established to protect Native American culture and history.



"Gold Butte National Monument, Nevada" by mypubliclands is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

Death Valley National Park

• On February 11, 1933, President Herbert Hoover established Death Valley National Monument to protect it from mining interests. In 1994, Congress turned it into a national park.³

• When the original monument was established, the Hoover administration gave a number of reasons for its protection, one of which that it was completely vacant of inhabitants.³

• This was a lie, as the Timbisha Shoshone people had lived in the valley for centuries.³

• Certain officials did say that Native Americans lived in the general area of Death Valley, however, did not specify that they were within the borders of the monument.³

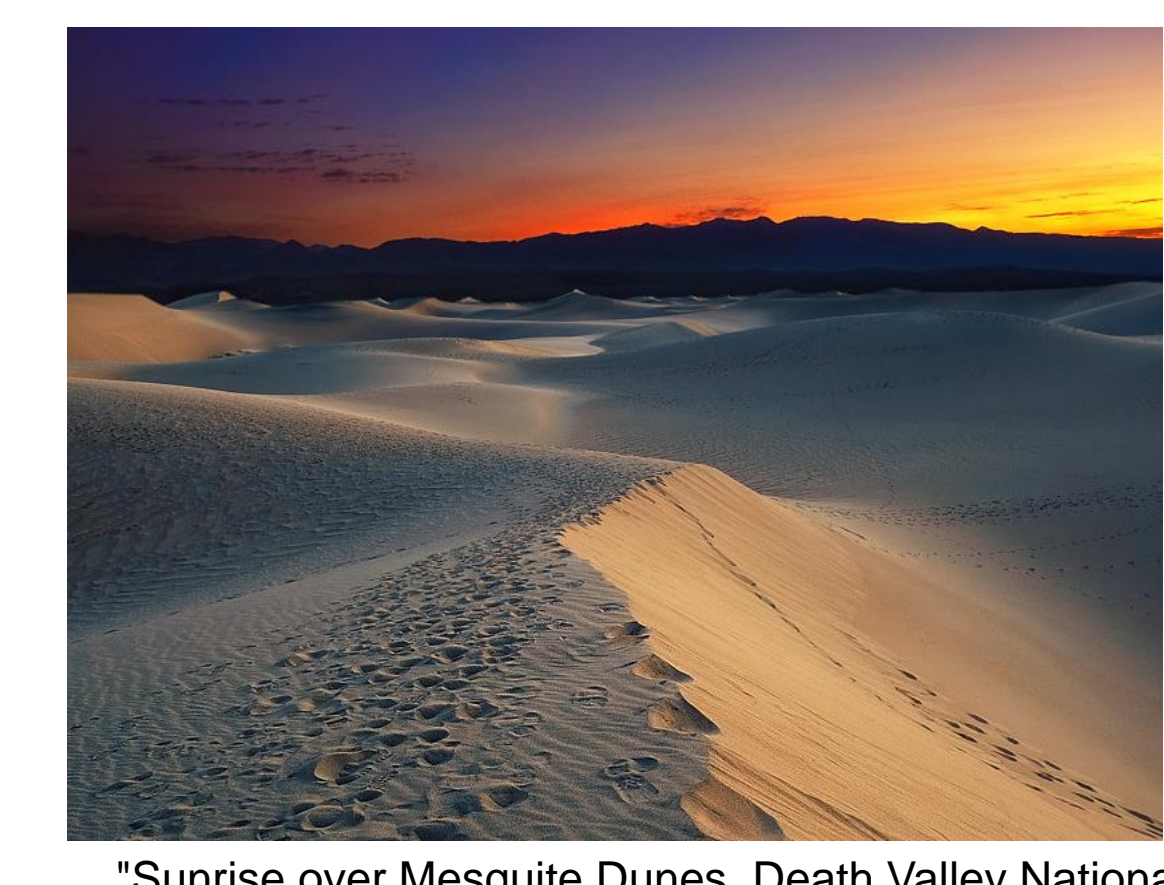
• Acknowledging the Native Americans would have meant they were evicting them, which would have forced the discussion of Native American land rights.³

• To avoid the hassle, the government decided to pretend that the Native Americans in the area, specifically the Timbisha Shoshones, didn't exist.³



"Death Valley Scene" by Fred Moore 1947 is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.

- The idea present at Death Valley is very clear to be "nature as unpeopled."
- By acting as though the Timbisha Shoshones tribe didn't live in Death Valley, the government ignored the culture and history of the land.



"Sunrise over Mesquite Dunes, Death Valley National Park" by andrew c mace is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

Connecting Destinations

• The controversies at Havasu National Wildlife Refuge and Gold Butte National Monument had a common critique of the government, lack of communication with the locals.

– After earlier restrictions came in 2015 without warning, the locals in Havasu City did not want the government to continue promptly restricting activity.⁵

– Lack of communication at Gold Butte National Monument led to a dangerous situation, that might have been avoided if communication was established earlier.

• Knowing about the idea of nature as unpeopled within the public land system is important, as it opens the ability to improve.

– Death Valley National Park was established through the erasing of Native American Culture³, but Gold Butte National Monument was created to honor and preserve it.⁹

– On a smaller scale, the mine that would have damaged a Native American cultural and historical site was unapproved in Prescott National Forest.²

• Of course, many of the discussed issues related to nature as commodity.

– The armed standoff at Gold Butte was a result of ranchers wanting the land to graze.⁹

– Disturbances to hikers at Grand Canyon National Park are due to the want of tourist revenue from aerial tours.⁷

– The fight against more restrictions at Havasu was because the local economy had a heavy dependency on tourism and water activities that the restrictions would have slightly hindered.⁵

– The proposed mine at Prescott National Forest was a plan to generate an income by taking advantage on the environment.

Conclusion

• The issues described in this project exemplify some of the common ideas found within the public land system.

• Ideas of "nature as commodity," "nature as pristine," and "nature as unpeopled" are engrained in many people's views of nature.

• To move forward and improve the public land system, we must look at not only our past mistakes, but also our current problems.

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