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An Expedition to the Public Lands: Public Lands of the Mid-Atlantic Region

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Abstract

This hypothetical "expedition" explores the complex history and managerial challenges of four different public lands in the Mid-Atlantic region: Pinelands National Reserve, Assateague Island National Seashore, Shenandoah National Park, and Monongahela National Forest. Additionally, the conceptual ideas of nature as commodity and nature as static or unpeopled in the context of public lands will be discussed in this expedition.

Keywords

National Parks, environmental science, public lands

Disciplines

Environmental Studies | Land Use Law

Comments

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FYS 120-3 “What Would Smokey Say?"

“Stop” #1: Pinelands National Reserve, NJ

Historical Background

- The Pinelands National Reserve was established by Congress with the passage of the National Parks and Recreation Act of 1978; it was the first National Reserve in the country.
- The Pinelands is managed by a joint-federal-state collaboration.
- The federal government assisted the state in financially acquiring lands for the reserve. The Secretary of the Interior and the state worked together to create the Pinelands Commission, which was intended to be a planning entity for the Comprehensive Management Plan (CMP).
- Today, the National Park Service enforces the implementation of the Comprehensive Management Plan throughout the reserve. Meanwhile, the Pinelands Commission continues to work to develop rules and regulations that will protect and preserve the reserve.

Challenges in Management

- Joint-Federal-State Management: It is the job of the Pinelands Commission to create the legislation that protects and maintains the reserve. Environmental regulations are either pushed back or enforced depending on the politics of the elected members of the Pinelands Commission. As a result, when there is a greater Republican or Democratic majority among electors, the Commission tends to reflect this, as do their enforcement or deregulation of Pinelands policies, creating a weak commission
- Climate Change: The Pinelands are incredibly fire prone, but the landscape has evolved to be able to withstand numerous fires each year. For example, the Pinelands’ iconic pitch pine has thick and resinous bark which allows it protection from fire. Climate change has exacerbated the frequency and intensity of the Pinelands’ wildfires; shorter winters mean more time for vegetation to grow, which is more material to burn, and creates drier conditions within the Pinelands. Greater material to burn and drier conditions mean wildfires are more frequent and more destructive. Wildfires pose a threat not only to the natural landscape and health of the area, but also to the livelihoods of the people living within the reserve.

Conceptual Ideas

- Nature as a Commodity: The CMP has made it clear that the reserve’s management attempts to balance the protection of the natural environment of the Pinelands while allowing development that is compatible to the region. The Pinelands is home to over half a million people; development is almost inevitable. The contradiction here is clear: how can the Pinelands Commission and the National Park Service protect the unique environment of the reserve while also keeping the area open to development and human use?

“Stop” #2: Assateague Island National Seashore, MA and VA

Historical Background

- Assateague Island National Seashore was established by Congress in 1956 and is managed by the National Parks Service.
- The land was first managed by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, who created Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge in 1943 at the southern end of the island, and the state of Maryland, who created a state park at the northern end in 1956.
- When the NPS wanted to acquire the land, it was agreed that it would acquire the whole island while the USFWS and Maryland kept their respective lands and manage them separately.

Challenges in Management

- Reshaping of the Island Landscape: The island is only 0.5 to 2.5 miles long across, making it vulnerable to sand migration from ocean currents, storms, and weather patterns. The flow of water over dunes and the whole island is slowly pushing it towards the mainland. The flow of water over dunes and the whole island is slowly pushing it towards the mainland
- Threat of Tourism: Recreational boating and commercial fishing damages aquatic habitats and destroys a habitat for countless species of marine organisms.
- Wild Horses: The horses are non-native organisms, and they graze on the marsh grasses of the island. However, many organisms such as clapper rails or ribbed mussels rely on these marsh grasses as their habitat. To keep population growth in check, the NPS gives the horses a vaccine that reduces successful pregnancies, thus gradually minimizing the amount of these non-native horses.

Conceptual Ideas

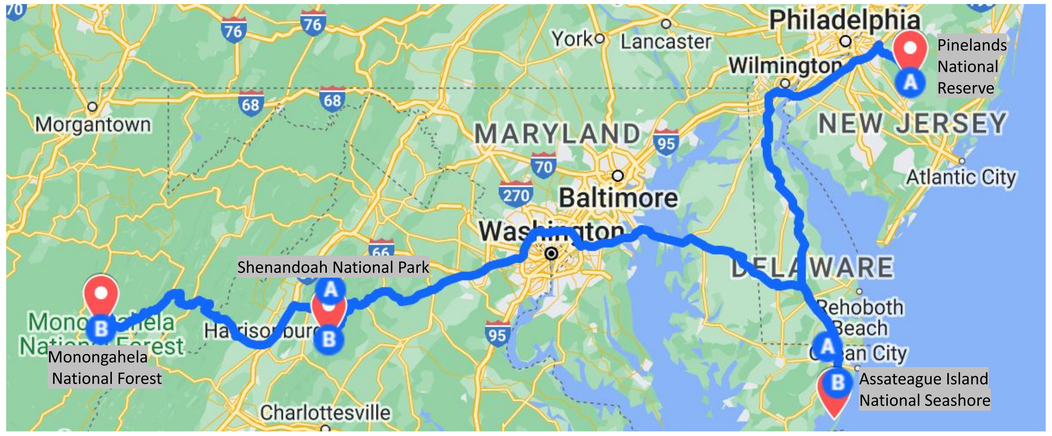
- Nature as a Commodity: Environmental challenges brought on by human force are examples of the danger of the idea of nature as a commodity. Using the waters around Assateague for recreation and economic purposes ignores the fragile ecosystem that lies below the waves.

Introduction

- My expedition to the public lands will cover the Mid-Atlantic region of the East Coast of the United States, which typically includes Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia.
- The Mid-Atlantic states were involved in setting an important precedent for the national public domain; during the Revolutionary War, Maryland and other states without western land claims were concerned about the power of states with land claims.
- Maryland feared that these states would be too powerful and influential over the new government and refused to sign the Articles of Confederation until states with western land claims ceded them to the government.
- To appease Maryland, New York became the first state to cede western land claims to the government in 1780. Other states followed suit and the Articles of Confederation were finally ratified.
- This cession of land set a precedent that national public land was “land owned and managed by, and for, the people of the United States” (*Wilson, 2020, p. 12*).

Trip Itinerary

- I plan on beginning my hypothetical expedition during June for optimal temperatures, climate, and weather.
- I will spend 5 days at each location; my expedition into public lands will last just shy of 3 weeks.
- My main mode of transportation will be by car, with an estimated total of 11 hours and 28 minutes of driving.
- I will begin my expedition in Pinelands National Reserve, located in New Jersey.
- After spending some time there, I will move on to Assateague Island National Seashore, which is located in Maryland and Virginia.
- Next, I will travel to Shenandoah National Park, located in Virginia.
- I will finally end my trip in West Virginia’s Monongahela National Forest.



U.S. Department of the Interior

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Discussion

Overall, the conceptual idea underlying every public land in my expedition is the idea of nature as a commodity. With the Pinelands, it could be seen with the dilemma between protecting the area and allowing human development. At Assateague Island, it could be seen through environmental challenges caused by human forces, such as the destruction of aquatic habitats by recreation and commercial fishing or the wild horses. With Shenandoah National Park, it was seen with the creation of the park, the disruption of the land and the justification that tourism would benefit the local economy. Finally, with the Monongahela National Forest, it could be seen in the clearcutting of the forest for timber.

Looking ahead, the biggest issues for these public lands in the future is climate change. As temperatures grow warmer, wildfires will ravage the Pinelands National Reserve more frequently, posing a threat to the ecosystem and the residents of the area. Changing weather and climates will continue to move Assateague Island National Seashore away from the mainland. The invasive species of Shenandoah National Park will thrive while greater numbers of native species will become climate casualties. Drier conditions combined with the increased practice of clearcutting threaten to burn Monongahela National Forest to the ground. There is still time to combat the issues of climate change, but we must set aside our views of nature as a commodity. We must retire the age-old notion that nature works for us and instead figure out what we can do for nature.

“Stop” #3: Shenandoah National Park, VA

Historical Background

- In 1926, Congress authorized the creation of Shenandoah National Park in Virginia but provided no federal funds for the acquisition of land, leaving it up to the state (Wilson, 2020, p. 85).
- When surveyors visited proposed locations for the park, they found that tenant farmers, squatters, and local families already lived there. When prompted to sell their lands, many who lived in the area refused, as they had lived on the land for generations.
- The state of West Virginia forcibly evicted the locals, claiming that they were “poor” and “inbred” as justification for expelling them.
- Shenandoah National Park was finally established on December 26, 1935,

Challenges in Management

- History of the Park: Shenandoah’s controversial history has long been ignored by the park in favor of a solely “natural focus.” However, the park’s focus is beginning to shift as it recognizes its cultural history and resources (Horning, n.d.). Despite the park’s efforts, there has still been pushback and agitation from local communities. Children of Shenandoah, a nonprofit group of the descendants of mountain residents, lobbied for the park to remove questionable interpretive displays.
- Use and Development of Land: Those who used to live in the park cut down trees and removed rocks to establish homesteads, grow crops, raise livestock, and participate in small-scale mining. Their homesteads are no longer present, but the mark the development left on the land is. Other developments, such as Skyline Drive or the numerous lodges, were more permanent disruptions to the land and are still in use today.
- Climate Change: Changing conditions and temperatures can affect the habitats and ecosystems of many native plants and animals, making them no longer suitable to live in. An unfortunate example of this may be the endangered Shenandoah salamander, which only exists in the National Park and could become a climate change casualty. Additionally, milder and warmer winters allow invasive species usually killed off by the cold of winter to survive and reproduce. This creates an issue for local ecosystems that risk being devastated by the overpopulation of invasive species

Conceptual Ideas

- Nature as a Commodity: One of the primary justifications for the creation of the park was that tourism would boost the economy and create new jobs for a struggling community, just like with the parks out West. However, this notion of nature as a commodity became dangerous, as seen with the disruption of the land to create a more accessible park and with the eviction of Shenandoah’s locals.
- Nature as Static or Pristine: To the state, a populated Shenandoah National Park was unusable until it was uninhabited. To them, vacancy proved the idea that nature was static, staying the same and staying uninfluenced and untouched.

“Stop” #4: Monongahela National Forest, WV

Historical Background

- The Monongahela National Forest was established with the passage of the Weeks Act in 1911, which authorized the purchase of land to protect watersheds and natural resources.
- This was spurred by the flood of the Monongahela River in 1907 that had been caused by logging that had stripped the area of trees and vegetation that could stop runoff after heavy rains.

Challenges in Management

- Clearcutting: The Monongahela Controversy began when the Forest Service adopted clearcutting as its method of cutting the Monongahela National Forest. They clearcut large areas removing the remaining trees from heavily deforested areas, causing the Izaak Walton League, a local citizen group, to sue the Forest Service for violating the Organic Act. They were found guilty, but the provisions of the Organic Act were not profitable for the Forest Service and Congress passed the Resources Planning Act. This act permitted clearcutting in National Forests only where it had already proven to be the best practice for forestry
- The issue of clearcutting still echoes today, as recently there has been a project proposed to clearcut thousands of acres of old-growth forest in the Monongahela National Forest. This project has faced major opposition from local citizens, who worry about fire hazards, the contamination of drinking water, and flooding in the project area. These are valid fears, as clearcutting can often lead to issues with flooding and wildfires in the area that is cut.

Conceptual Ideas

- Nature as Commodity: To harvest a greater amount of timber in a shorter amount of time, the Forest Service proceeded to clearcut areas that had nearly been deforested in the Monongahela National Forest. The Forest Service used the Monongahela as a commodity and essentially a tree farm, clearcutting whatever trees they desired. This idea of nature as a commodity continues today, especially in the issue of clearcutting. The recent proposal to clearcut old-growth forests is an example of nature as a commodity. In order to garner a profit, the Forest Service is willing to use this public land as their source for timber.