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Creating Wilderness: A Transnational History of the Swiss National Park

By Patrick Kupper. Translated by Giselle Weiss. Oxford, United Kingdom: Berghahn, 2014. xi + 266 pp. US$ 95.00, £ 60.00. ISBN 978-1-78238-373-4.

Creating Wilderness is a detailed and thought-provoking historical analysis of the origins and development of the Swiss National Park. Kupper positions the Swiss National Park model within a broader global historical context and, in so doing, identifies the influence national parks have had, and continue to have, on our modern world. In contrast to the US national park model, which was based on preserving an existing wilderness and providing opportunities for outdoor recreation, the Swiss model was based on developing a large-scale biological reserve wherein nature would be allowed to restore itself and natural processes could be observed and recorded, undisturbed by human interventions. The Swiss model emerged as a result of a combination of historical factors and scientific insights and was a deliberate reinvention of the national park concept for early 20th-century Europe. In a wide-ranging environmental history, Kupper effectively links the specific case of Switzerland with globalization and Westernization, international conservation paradigms, the social construction of wilderness, and an evolving understanding of ecosystem dynamics and the science of conservation.

Kupper initially outlines the discussions in 1909–1914 relating to the proposed development of a nature reserve in the Swiss Alps, involving a group of Swiss scientists and conservationists including Carl Schröter. These proposals eventually resulted in the establishment of a 14,000-hectare national park in the Engadine Valley of southeastern Switzerland by the federal government in 1914. The national park model that had become established globally commonly incorporated state control or ownership of land and (in certain cases) the eviction of communities—such as in Yellowstone, the first national park, created in 1872. In contrast, the Swiss approach required the cooperation of local people from the beginning to allow the park to be established effectively. Leases were negotiated with communes for territories that had been managed for low-intensity agricultural land uses. Local residents and institutions were therefore strongly positioned within the national park concept in Switzerland from the earliest stages.

The reality of the Swiss Alps as an extensively managed (and degraded) landscape with an absence of "pristine wilderness" necessitated a new approach. The emphasis therefore became about "laying the foundations" for nature, which required increased scientific understanding based on monitoring of an undisturbed "outdoor laboratory." As Kupper explains, the Swiss approach came to represent an alternative to the American national park model for the establishment of protected areas. However, the founding goal of restoring wilderness and creating an outdoor laboratory protected from human interventions proved distinctly challenging. The increased recognition of an area labeled as a national park proved counterproductive to creating wilderness, with visitor numbers rising over time, resulting in increased visitor-related impacts and conflicts. Furthermore, the idea of restoring natural processes through nonintervention was hampered by missing ecosystem elements (eg keystone predators) and functions; addressing this required active human intervention over long time periods. The park's authorities therefore altered their aim of "total protection" to one of protecting the park area from damaging human interventions.

Balancing the requirement for human intervention against the noninterventionist ideal of park regulations is a theme that emerges continuously. Increasing numbers of grazing animals (which lack a natural predator), in particular, resulted in repeated calls to allow hunting within the park, in order to lessen the impacts of overgrazing on native flora. Despite resisting for decades in an effort to preserve the principle of a national park without human intervention, the park authorities eventually agreed to selective shooting of animals within the park from 1973 onwards, as well as increasing deer culls in areas around the national park. Human interventions were also undertaken in an effort to restore native fauna, including the reintroduction of bearded vulture and ibex, with some attempts made to restore larger predators, which nevertheless remain largely absent from the park.

Despite the differing emphasis, many of the pressures faced by the Swiss National Park in recent decades reflect those experienced by US national parks and other protected areas around the world: demands to harness hydroelectric power, neglected wildlife management and overgrazing, and increased pressures and disturbance linked to high visitor numbers. The aim of a separate, wholly wild nature is clearly articulated as a flawed and impossible ideal, with the boundaries between disturbed and undisturbed nature blurred by the requirements for management, the dynamism of ecological systems, and increasing levels of human interaction with nature through recreation.

Kupper's historical analysis of the Swiss National Park provides us with important broader insights into shifts over time in human–environment relationships. Necessary changes in how the area is managed (eg hunting) and how people interact with the

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park's environments (increased tourism) highlight the paradoxical nature and social construction of the "wilderness" concept. As Kupper concludes, "Wilderness is not something that exists outside of society … it is not a natural condition but a historical process" (p 224). The detailed analysis of the Swiss case reveals the artificial separation of nature and culture, which occurred during the 19th century and resulted in dualistic representations of "society" and "wild nature." This dualism was in fact a key driver for the creation of national parks as representations of "separate" wilderness. However, over time, increased scientific understanding, experience, and wider social changes have led to the emergence of carefully negotiated degrees of intervention (and interaction), which influence our understanding and construction of the relationship between human civilization and wild nature.

From a societal perspective, the designation of national park is often perceived as an indicator of shared ideals and common qualities. In fact, the International Union for Conservation of Nature classifies the Swiss National Park not as a "national park" (category II) but as a "strict nature reserve" (category Ia). In demonstrating how the Swiss National Park model blends approaches from other countries and, in turn, influences the overall development of the national park concept, Kupper also highlights how national parks are not, as so often articulated, an American invention. Instead, they are a shared, global concept, which evolves and adapts based on local context, current scientific understanding, and sociopolitical factors. The national park concept is therefore malleable and continues to evolve, with new models emerging in response to new global and local agendas. Scotland's recently designated national parks, for example, reflect the current global sustainability agenda, as well as the presence (within park boundaries) of long-established communities, by incorporating aims for local socioeconomic development alongside the conservation of natural heritage. The Swiss National Park failed to create a pristine wilderness; however, in taking an innovative, science-based approach, its contribution went far beyond the boundaries of the park by influencing the evolution of the national park concept at a global scale.

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