

Letter by the late Mr. David Brower to the Yosemite National Park Service dated July 7, 2000, two years after the flood, during the period for public comment to the then "draft" Yosemite Valley Plan. The letter represents his pro-camping views.,

Quote:

Right now the National Park Service (NPS), which has heretofore cherished Yosemite, now seems intent on converting this temple into a Profit Center, with pricey hotels, scant camping, few modest accommodations, wider roads to field bigger diesel buses, ecological roadside mayhem, atmospheric damage statewide, people who want to celebrate Yosemite Valley required to tie their cars outside, in various still unspoiled places, soon to be paved. All to exploit what you can do when you have two or three hundred million dollars to spend instead of the discipline former NPS Director Newton Drury enjoyed when he said, "We have no money, we can do no harm." NPS is trying to do too much, too fast in Yosemite forgetting that protecting the Park, not the Yosemite Park Service revenues, is the most important thing here. It's time NPS remembered what Yosemite is all about.

Anyone who has been visiting Yosemite for almost eighty two years is likely to brag about it, and I do incessantly. I started going to Yosemite in 1918. There were 37,000 visitors that year and I celebrated my sixth birthday camped alongside the railroad that was helping construct an alien dam in Yosemite's Hetch Hetchy Valley. Restoring this lost treasure should be an ongoing part of the Park Service agenda.

Unbeknownst even to many in the Park Service, Yosemite was the first national park, set aside eight years before Yellowstone, and its mission clearly stated a year later by none other than Frederick Law Olmsted, père. After he had done his bit for Central Park, Olmsted came out to California and the Fremont Estate to recover and to advise California how to take care of the best of its nature, including Yosemite. Mountains can use a voice, and Frederick Law Olmsted was one of the first to try to speak for them.

He proposed the rights for nature implicit in the national park idea. "The first requirement is to preserve the natural scenery and restrict within the narrowest limits the necessary accommodation of visitors.

"Structures should not detract from the dignity of the scene. In preventing the sacrifice of anything that should be of the slightest value to visitors to the convenience, bad taste, playfulness, carelessness, or wanton destructiveness of present visitors, would probably yield in each case the interest of uncounted millions to the selfishness of a few."

Thus, in 1864, did an idea born on one coast reach another?

Maybe Olmsted can help all of us, including the National Park Service, remember what the national park idea, perhaps America's best, is all about. It was probably not just to let people who can afford the Ahwahnee or Yosemite Lodge to luxuriate there, but a place to celebrate a bit of equity in a magical place meant to be shared with the current brief tenants of the earth, but most importantly, held in trust for the "uncounted millions" not yet born; the greatest luxury in Yosemite comes from what the Valley has to say, not just from its structures. If Old Dave Brower wants to go slumming at the Ahwahnee, OK. But maybe his kids and friends would rather camp, the way he used to.

I am deeply concerned these days about Yosemite. As I am old fashioned enough to believe that national parks were not set aside to create profit centers for concessionaires or to pad NPS construction budgets for park officials to short-change the future. Large crowds are seasonal, but new roads, hotels, and parking lots despoil the park year-round.

I saw the trouble begin with Mission '66, when then-NPS director, Connie Wirth went to the American Automobile Association, not to conservationists, for advice. What he let happen to Yosemite in the controversy over re-routing the Tioga Road was a disaster the Sierra Club let happen by not opposing it strongly enough. NPS people should have been jailed for what they destroyed at Tenaya Lake, just as I would now urge long sentences for engineers who molest roads until they are big enough to accommodate big diesel buses. Left alone, they would get rid of Yosemite's autumn color with two-stroke leaf blowers.

In the 1950s, my attempt to save Yosemite from what Ansel Adams described as National Park Service vandalism at Tioga was enthusiastic enough to bring Horace Albright, second director of the National Park Service, to San Francisco to try to get me fired as Executive Director of the Sierra Club.

He was not successful but neither was I successful in stopping the NPS demolition of Tenaya's granite domes. I have had more than one Park Ranger recently lament to me how right we were to have opposed that project and how our alternative would have been better all around. We have seen this pattern repeated in the Merced River Canyon, where Judge Ishii confirmed the righteousness of our protest against illegal NPS vandalism of the river, but mostly too late. When I see the war-zone that used to be the Merced River Gorge in Yosemite, I am furious that the criminals that pushed this project through in violation of NEPA and the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act are allowed to continue their shoddy planning in the rest of the Park rather than taking some time out to rethink (in jail preferably).

On the contrary, no one is taking time out and no one is rethinking (and none of the lawbreakers are in jail, or even repentant). The Merced River Plan was rushed through using old wildlife data (the wildlife situation may have changed a bit since one bank of the river was paved by NPS). The River Plan was not meant to be a formality, it was intended to be the biological foundation of planning efforts for the entire valley, Judge Ishii's statements in the court room indicate that he would concur. If NPS is not violating the letter of his ruling, releasing the Draft Valley Plan before the River Plan was finalized certainly violates the spirit of Ishii's call for sound planning. I call on the Park Service to submit a complete plan for the Merced River before asking us to comment on a Draft Valley Plan.

NPS seems to be drunk on appropriations money, hell-bent on another "Tioga Hangover." This time I don't have another 40 years to wait for the Park Service to realize their mistake. It's time to wake up, and for God's Sake, no more construction on the River between the 120 Junction and the Valley!

This brings us to the next major disaster contained in the Alternatives of the Valley Plan. Why did that road need to be widened, other than to spend some of the Congressional cash? In a private statement to me in a meeting last year Regional NPS Director John Reynolds said that the road had to be widened because buses were a necessary piece of Yosemite's transportation future. He repeated this once to the press but has been denying it ever since. The emphasis on diesel buses in the Draft YVP force me to infer that he was telling the truth the first time. With EPA in California and Washington DC both currently cracking down on diesel as a carcinogen and a massive air pollution problem, it is unconscionable for NPS to advocate for dramatic increase in diesel traffic in Yosemite Valley. Yosemite gets more pollution than it needs already from the Central Valley, without creating a new toxic menace locally. Until clean fuel buses can make the grade, we are stuck with diesel which is far dirtier than modern cars (even per passenger-mile!). The Central Valley is beginning to look to rail as a solution to its air problems and I strongly encourage the NPS to climb aboard this statewide effort which can be part of the solution for Yosemite as well (see addendum for more).

Finally, let's put the brakes on any new parking lots! Parking is currently sited in areas long-since developed while the Draft YVP suggests that we pave over huge lots in unspoiled areas of the Park so diesel buses can service expanded hotels in the valley on widened roads (NPS may want to see the additional facts I have discovered on toxic leaching from new asphalt, before it paves one more square inch of the Park-see addendum).

All of the Alternatives are all based on the assumption that it is inevitable that we will continue to try to pack as many people into the Park as possible at any given time. Congestion problems are relatively easy to solve; as Ansel Adams said, "When the theater's full, they don't

sell lap-space." National Parks were created to be a natural haven from the world of mindless development and endless growth. Placing no limit on the numbers of current visitors that can visit the Park at one time is a violation of the Organic Act and a breach of our contract with future generations. This may be easy to miss with so much Fee-Demo money pouring into Yosemite, but it is your job as the appointed guardians of Yosemite not to miss it.

So skip the hotel expansion, replace lost camping instead, and if you want parking lots, limit them to impacted non-riparian areas where other structures are being removed (not at Camp 6 or Taft Toe). As for Restoring Yosemite, I'm glad the Park Services is at least aware of the concept, but I don't see much restoration in the plan that isn't undone by destruction elsewhere. That's not Restoration; it's called Mitigation, as your highway building friends can tell you. If you widen Southside Drive and pull out other roads there is no net ecological gain especially if the other roads are not actually removed. Bruce Babbitt and others have said that the future of the Parks is in Restoration. I heartily agree and will begin applauding the moment that NPS gets done using this kind of language as green-wash for half-baked development plans like the Draft Yosemite Valley Plan.

Sincerely,

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