# THE MOUNTAINS ARE CALLING

**Environment and Region in the American West**

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## Tourists and the Unmaking of Yosemite National Park

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Dedicated to my parents Barbara and Dale Childers

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# THE MOUNTAINS ARE CALLING

# Introduction

A handful of people were milling about the Tunnel View Overlook when my wife and I pulled into the parking lot on a June evening in 2015. It had already been a long day of travel, but after setting up our camp at Crane Flats, we had decided to take a quick drive to the western edge of the Yosemite Valley before settling in for the evening. We got out of the car and walked to the overlook's edge, where we silently took in the view. The valley floor was already cast in shadow, with just the upper portion of El Capitan still ablaze in sunlight. As I stood there, soaking in as much of the scene as I could, my wife snuck behind me and began taking photographs. After shuffling back and forth, angling for a shot of the valley with no one in the foreground, she finally gave up and took several with me standing among a few small knots of people. It was a telling moment. My wife, along with every other visitor standing with us, not only failed to capture an image of the valley without people, but also failed to recognize ourselves, and our fellow visitors, as an integral part of the moment.

The valley was teeming with people the next morning when we arrived back in the Yosemite Valley. After dropping my wife off at the Vernal Falls trailhead so she could hike to the base of the falls, I drove around the valley for the next half hour seeking a parking spot. I finally secured one, and our yellow lab, Bear, and I headed out for our own little adventure. We first crossed the Sentinel Bridge over the Merced River before turning down a ponderosa-lined trail to the Curry Village. Then we crossed the Merced once again, passing by the Stoneman Meadow before finally wandering into the Yosemite Village, where we sat down and watched the crowds of tourists stream by. Banners hung throughout the village celebrating Yosemite National Park's 125th anniversary, which, in part, explained the number of people. A family passed by debating whether they wanted pizza for lunch, while an older couple stopped a ranger to ask a question. Harried tourists bustled in and out of the small grocery store grabbing what I could only imagine were last-minute items for that evening's dinner.

My wife soon returned, exhausted but smiling from her hike. The crowds had been unbelievable, she said, but seeing the falls was well worth the frus-

tration of walking in a queue to the bottom of the Mist Trail. She went on to describe how the hike was not as she remembered it from when, when she was a child, her family would spend a week every summer in Yosemite Valley. It was often the highlight of her year, she recalled. She and her brother would escape their parents' ever-vigilant gaze to explore the valley on their bicycles and wade in the Merced River, before spending evenings sitting around a campfire. Perhaps it was a trick of memory, but she remembered Yosemite as a bit less crowded.

Others have made the same observation. In the introduction of his book, *The Tourist in Yosemite, 1855–1985*, which in part inspired this book, geographer Stanford E. Demars recalled when, in the summer of 1968, he and his wife were confronted with campgrounds so congested that visitors sat in line like vultures waiting to pounce on the next open site, the park's stores were crowded to capacity, and parking was so limited that many frustrated drivers had left their vehicles wherever they could find a spot, regardless of the signs prohibiting illegal parking. While we had reserved our campsite months in advance, the rest of the Demars's experience felt very similar nearly a half century later.[1]

A record five million people visited Yosemite National Park the summer following my wife's and my visit. Like us, most spent the majority of their time in the Yosemite Valley, whose sheer granite walls and towering waterfalls have attracted tourists since 1855. Others crossed the Sierra Nevada on the Tioga Road, perhaps stopping at Olmstead Point then driving along Lake Tenaya's northern shore, through Tuolumne Meadows, before dropping into the Yosemite Valley. That year's record number of visitors underscored both Yosemite's immense popularity and its limits. Many commented Yosemite felt more like an amusement park that summer than a crown jewel of the U.S. National Park System. Crowds inundated the park's campgrounds, viewpoints, parking lots, trailheads, and rustic village—spoiling visitors' experiences and threatening Yosemite's increasingly strained natural environment.

Following climate change, overcrowding poses the single greatest environmental threat to Yosemite. The tread of millions of feet has eroded and compacted the soil while trampling of vegetation has negatively affected water quality by hardening the surface and reducing water's ability to percolate into the ground. The sounds of cars, buses, and thousands of visitors often drown out the songs of birds. Although less severe than in urban areas, light pollution at night has dramatically impacted the behavior of nocturnal wildlife. Air pollution not only obscures the Sierra Nevada sky but also settles in

Yosemite Valley. Human-wildlife interactions have caused the deaths of tens of thousands of brown bears and changed wildlife behavior. Additionally, the park's development has intensified the effects of floods, heavy winter storms, and wildfires, increasing their destruction of the park's infrastructure. All of which have unmade Yosemite in critical ways.[2]

To understand how we got to this point, we first need to look at Yosemite's past. But rather than just cast the park as an wilderness invaded by hordes of visitors, we need to step back and realize that Yosemite's story, in many ways, is that of its visitors. I attempt to tell some of those stories in the coming pages. By placing the stories of Indigenous people, tourists, innkeepers, soldiers, rangers, climbers, concessioners, inholders, and administrators in the foreground, I seek to tell a much more complete story of the park's history. Readers will no doubt recognize many of the personalities in the coming pages, including John Muir, Frederick Law Olmsted, and Ansel Adams. But they will also meet many who have not historically been included in Yosemite's story but are very much a part of its history.

In this manner, *The Mountains Are Calling: Tourists and the Unmaking of Yosemite National Park* is a book about placemaking, and the environmental consequences of that making. Visitors have experienced Yosemite in much the same manner since the first tourists entered the Yosemite Valley in the mid-nineteenth century. Drawn by its sheer beauty, they have come to camp, hike, swim, and, most importantly, find quiet moments of reflection within the park. Through their recreation, they have not just visited but actively crafted the story of Yosemite National Park's landscape and meaning. But that meaning brought greater numbers of both visitors and development, threatening the very beauty most came to experience.[3]

Early visitors recast the Yosemite Valley, and the nearby Mariposa Grove soon afterward, as landscapes emblematic of American republican ideals, and, perhaps more crassly, as a means to attract tourists. They built lodges and roads, cut down trees, dynamited the Merced River's moraine, camped at the base of the Yosemite Falls, measured the thickness of the giant sequoia, and wrote about their experiences in both the valley and the grove in newspapers, magazines, and books. Others followed, Yosemite soon became a national park, and new roads, campgrounds, lodges, and even a ski area were built to serve growing numbers of tourists. But amid Yosemite's ever-changing landscapes, the allure of its beauty has remained a constant. Visitors, drawn by the majestic granite cliffs and the whisper of ancient trees, found solace and inspiration in its embrace, engaging in a variety of outdoor pursuits

that both celebrated the park's splendor and turned Yosemite into one of the most renowned national parks.

Placemaking is never a neutral endeavor, however. The creation of Yosemite was entwined with the dispossession of its Indigenous peoples. Widely acknowledged as an act of imperialism by historians, the pushing aside of the region's Native inhabitants allowed settlers to tell a new story about the Yosemite Valley and its surrounding region, reflecting both Americans' changing views of nature and a landscape unburdened by history. This erasure of the Indigenous past allowed settlers to reinvent Yosemite as a landscape of untouched sublime wonder and contemplation. In prioritizing recreation, they not only excluded traditional practices like timber harvesting and grazing but also necessitated the preservation of the landscape's scenic values, ensuring it would be enjoyed as a park for generations to come.[4]

In this manner, Yosemite National Park has long been a symbol of American nature. From its invasion by the Mariposa Battalion in 1851 through today, its beauty and wonder have captivated generations. One runs out of superlatives in describing Yosemite, though John Muir came close to capturing its grandeur in writing that no temple made with human hands can compare to the park's wonder. Yosemite entered the American consciousness at a key moment in the nation's history. The embrace of nature's sublimity as core to American identity, along with the conquest of the American West, wove both the Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove into the very fabric of our national identity. By the time it was established as a national park in 1890, Yosemite had become a renowned destination for thousands of visitors, like Muir, seeking to bask in its beauty.[5]

Yosemite is also a landscape of controversy. From legal battles over ownership and development of the Yosemite Valley, the inundation of the Hetch Hetchy Valley, and the carving of the Tioga Road out of Yosemite's granite, to fights over the park's commercialization, Yosemite's history is rife with disputes over the park's purpose, and the environmental consequences of its popularity. So while Yosemite's landscape is iconic, we cannot understand its meaning and its past without its people. From its tourists and administrators to its rangers and climbers, the park's visitors, I argue, played a central role in shaping its history. From the first party of tourists to enter the Yosemite Valley in 1855 to the millions who visit the national park today, each has driven Yosemite's popularity and, ultimately, its development. But in doing so, they came to threaten both the park's environment and the very expe-

riences that they sought by overwhelming Yosemite's landscape, which in turn impaired its environment and visitors' ability to enjoy it.

Though no institution is more symbolic of the American conservation movement than the national parks, the environmental consequences of their popularity have increasingly threatened these hallowed places. Tasked to "promote and regulate," the National Park Service has long struggled to balance use with conservation within the parks, whose purposes are to conserve the nation's scenery, history, and wildlife unimpaired for future generations to enjoy. Yet the popularity of parks like Yosemite has challenged the Park Service's ability to meet this mandate. Overcrowding has severely affected Yosemite's natural environment, profoundly impacting visitors' enjoyment of the park. In this sense, experiencing the natural world is itself a vital natural resource, one that must be carefully managed to preserve its beauty and its accessibility.[6]

Histories of national parks are often framed as paradoxes between preservation and use, highlighting key individuals who played significant roles in the creation, preservation, or management of a particular park. These narratives, however, frequently marginalize or overlook the millions of visitors who contribute to the park's story. Most experienced Yosemite through their recreation. Yosemite became a place to escape, to hike, and to gaze at its granite cliffs and towering waterfalls. But this understanding did not emerge in a vacuum. It was influenced by shifting cultural ideas of nature, leisure, and progress. I trace how those ideas attempted to erase the park's Indigenous history, aided tourists and park managers in reshaping the landscape to meet recreational demands, and shaped debates over Yosemite's fundamental purpose.

While these traditional histories have their merits, they often neglect the broader experiences that shape the park's past. This realization led me to explore some fascinating aspects of the archives. I found a notable gap between how most visitors experience the park and environmentalists' portrayal of Yosemite as an embattled wilderness. Many families visit to enjoy a long weekend of camping, roasting marshmallows over a fire, swimming in the Merced River, and buying souvenirs at the visitor center. While they may care about the park's health, their primary concern is experiencing and enjoying the park. We often dismiss these visitors as mere crowds, failing to recognize that they represent the vast majority of those who have shaped Yosemite's history.[7]

Americans habitually place as much, if not more, value on their personal connections to places and the past as they do on scholarly works like this one. They are not mere consumers of narratives presented by others but active participants in crafting their own understandings of the past. I found much the same in exploring Yosemite's history. Visitors, Park Service personnel, and concessioners have long created their own meanings of this incomparable place, shaping history to their own wants—often while overlooking the paradox of fulfilling those desires and protecting the park's environment.[8]

While it is easy to find visitors in Yosemite, it's much more challenging to locate them in the archives. They are of course lurking in the pages of their published memoirs, letters, and newspapers. But I also found them hiding in National Park Service memoranda, reports, and planning documents. Their individual stories combine to tell Yosemite's history. Yet not all voices can be found in the archives, or in memoirs that were left behind. The archives are all too often silent concerning the experiences of countless people who played an integral role in the park's history.

Among those were the thousands of Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans who built Yosemite's roads, washed tourists' laundry, and cooked their meals. Glimpses of their contributions can be found in brief mentions within letters, articles, and other sources, but few sources tell us their whole story. And we may never know their entire history within Yosemite. Likewise, African Americans and other minoritized groups' contributions to making the park are largely absent from the archives, even though they played as important a role as Chinese Americans in shaping Yosemite. While I attempt to correct these absences, their stories remain incomplete.[9]

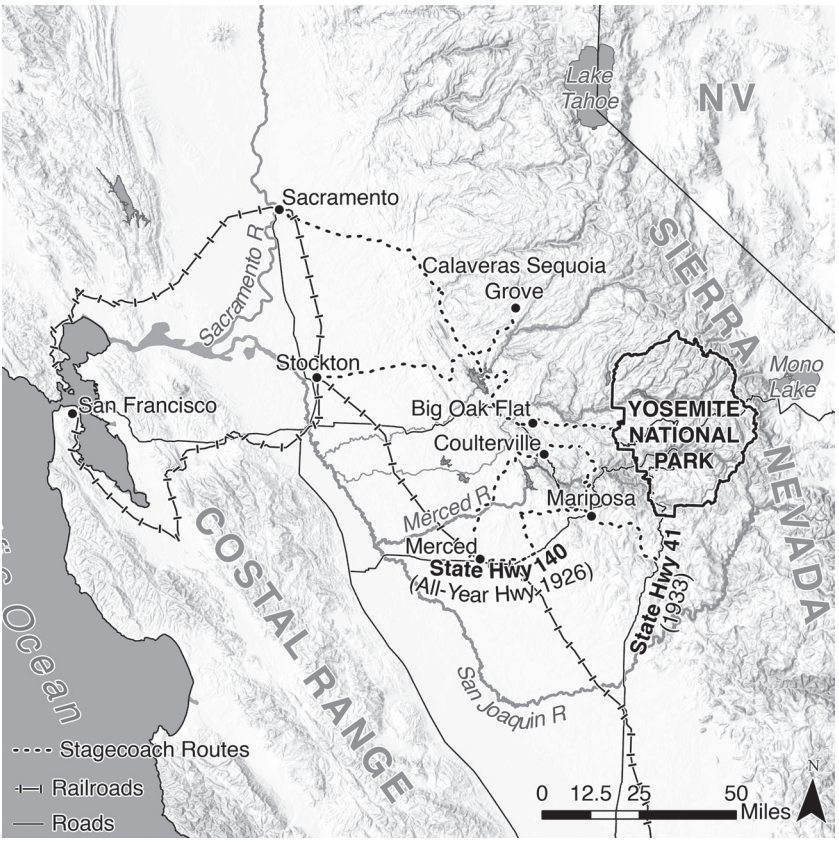
This book is divided into three acts tracing Yosemite's history through its making and gradual unmaking. The first act opens with the Mariposa Battalion's invasion of Yosemite Valley in 1851. News of the remarkable valley brought a small band led by publisher and booster James Hutchings to explore the valley three years later. Within a decade, President Abraham Lincoln ceded the Yosemite Valley and Mariposa Grove to the state of California for "public use, resort, and recreation." Yet visitation to the Yosemite Grant remained sparse, with only a few hundred visitors making the arduous trip to the remote mountain valley. Chapter 2 picks up immediately following Yosemite National Park's establishment in 1890. A year later the U.S. Cavalry took control of making and managing the new national park, while growing criticisms over the despoilation of the Yosemite Valley led to the emergence of a broader struggle over the park's purpose. This story also

includes the recession of the Yosemite Valley and Mariposa Grove into the national park and the battle over control of the Hetch Hetchy Valley—all of which contributed to the creation of the National Park Service in 1916.[10]

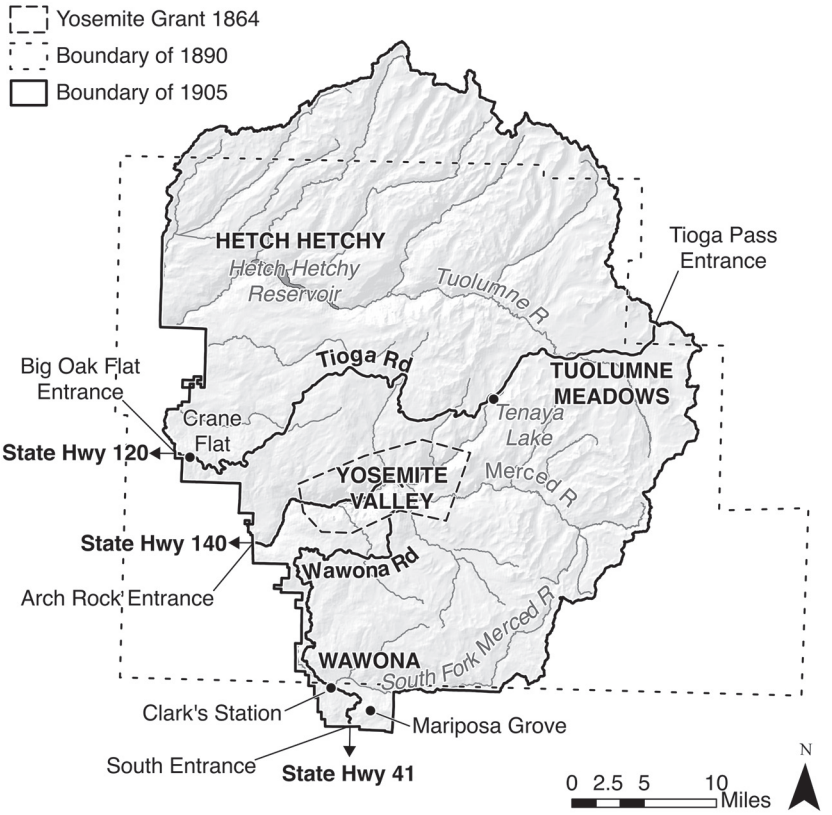
Part 2 traces the next fifty years of the park's history and the increasingly acrimonious debate over tourism's environmental costs. Chapter 3 tells the story of how a broader swath of Americans embraced national parks as places not only of respite and natural wonder but of mass entertainment. The ascendance of the automobile allowed visitors to easily travel to the park, driving increased visitation and the development of facilities like Badger Pass Ski Area and the Ahwahnee Hotel. Chapter 4 picks up Yosemite's story following World War II, as thousands poured into the park only to find its roads, campgrounds, and facilities in increasing disrepair. But as the Park Service poured millions into rebuilding Yosemite, amid growing national concerns over the environment, many began to question the consequences of continued development in the park. This led to difficult, and often contentious, debates over the Park Service's mandate and, more broadly, Yosemite's meaning. While historians have long interpreted this as a struggle over the Park Service's "dual mandate," Yosemite's millions of visitors continued to view their enjoyment as the park's fundamental purpose.

The growing gulf between those competing views plays out in the book's final act. Covering a single decade, chapter 5 explains how the 1970s proved to be the turning point in Yosemite's history. Concerns about overcrowding and development came to a head, leading to shifts not only in policy but in visitors' expectations of their experiences in the park. While most agreed that too many were visiting the park, few were willing to make any sacrifices to stem the tide of visitors. Chapter 6 tells the park's increasingly complex story from the 1980s through the opening decade of the twenty-first century. Floods and wildfires combined with continued increased visitation threatened ruin throughout the park. Yet change remained elusive as few wished to cast off Yosemite's long-held promise of enjoyment for all. Visitor numbers peaked at over five million in 2016, the National Park Service's centennial, before a global pandemic led the park to finally place a limit on visitor numbers starting in 2021.

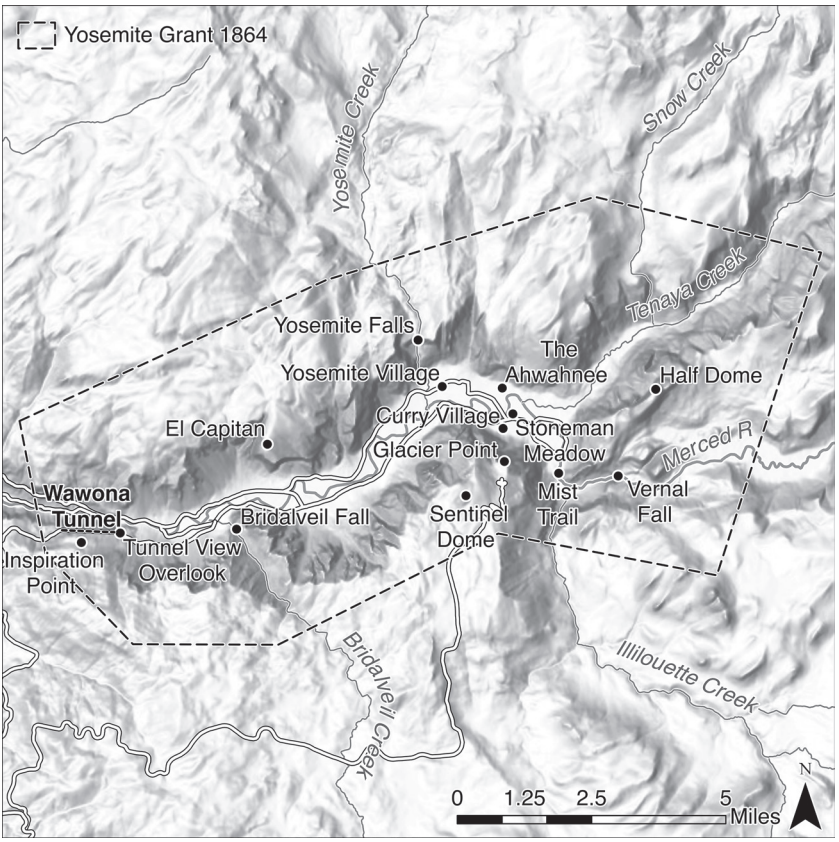
Yosemite's history is a human story, rich with the voices of its visitors, administrators, and Indigenous inhabitants. By placing these experiences in the foreground, we can gain insight into how this remarkable place came to be, the struggles over its meaning, and how we might forge a better future for this incomparable place.




**MAP 1.** The San Francisco–Yosemite region. Map by Amber Bell.




**MAP 2.** Yosemite National Park boundaries, 1865–1905. Map by Amber Bell.




**MAP 3.** The Yosemite Valley. Map by Amber Bell.