

# National Parks in a Comparative Perspective

Created by Gillian Russell and Prakash Kumar

## Module Introduction

### Description

This module invites a comparative and global emphasis in a study of national parks in USA and India. The universal quest for conservation and preservation varies in its motivation and is inevitably influenced by local histories and culture. The two sections of the module focused on the United States and India respectively bring the separate trajectories in view. In bringing a critical perspective on analyzing national parks, the module will not only look at aspirations for preserving heritage, but also see the parks as geographical and social spaces with conflicts. Conflicts between communities and flora and fauna will be a primary theme of analysis.

### Keywords

conservation, preservation, heritage, land grab, land dispossession, territoriality, sovereignty, conflict resolution, wilderness

### Author A Biography

Prakash Kumar is Associate Professor of History at Pennsylvania State University. He is a specialist of South Asian history with interest in science and technology, colonial history, development, and agrarian and rural modernization. His first book, *Indigo Plantations and Science in Colonial India* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), complicates the history of colonial “improvement” by examining global knowledge flows and colonial science on the indigo plantations established by European planters in colonial India. It examines the claims of the planters that “natural” indigo made on plantations was superior to the cheaper and purer synthetic indigo launched on the international markets in 1899. He is currently working on his second monograph project that examines American projects of agrarian and rural modernization in India in the second half of the twentieth century. This book illustrates the contested territory of modernization in India by examining American archives of intervention and the playing out of tensions in execution of community development programs, pursuit of extractive agricultural practices, in food aid and public distribution systems, an epistemic community in which ideas of yield enhancement struck roots, and in rural-urban continuums. He has published widely in history journals including *Journal of Asian Studies*, *Modern Asian Studies*, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, *Technology and Culture*, *Agricultural History*, *South Asia*, and *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. His research has been supported twice by Scholar Awards by the National Science Foundation. In 2020-21, he will be the United States Fulbright Scholar in India.

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## Author B Biography

Gillian Russell is an undergraduate student and Paterno Fellow at Penn State University who is double majoring in Anthropological Sciences and Global and International Studies. Her interests are very broad, but they center on topics such as history, culture, conservation, environmental advocacy, and public outreach. She is currently working on her honors thesis which will be about human-environmental interactions in National Parks around the world, with a focus on indigenous land rights. In Gillian's free time, she enjoys running, knitting, kayaking, reading, hiking, and listening to music.

## Part 1: What is Wilderness?

While National Parks across the world have different histories and goals, many of them were created to uphold ideas of wilderness. In the first part of this module students will learn about what wilderness is and why the idea is problematic.

### Part 1.1 Wilderness Over Time in the United States

Wilderness has had many different connotations over time in the United States. When European colonists first arrived in the Americas, they saw the land (as well as the indigenous peoples living there) as being savage and dangerous. Wilderness was something to be either avoided at all costs or resisted against. This idea transformed during the early and mid 1800s. Wilderness then was still something to be feared, but many people began to seek it out to prove their strength. This was the era of the 'Manifest Destiny' and colonists began to move towards the west coast to seek their fortune. The movement of people of European descent from the original thirteen colonies on the Atlantic coast towards the west displaced even more populations from indigenous nations

The next large shift in the connotation of wilderness occurred in the late 1800s. One great stalwart to trigger this shift was John Muir. When talking about American National Parks, John Muir is sometimes called the “Father of Our National Park System.” Muir is known as being an activist of preservation and was the founder of the Sierra Club. With John Muir arose the idea that wilderness is pristine and sublime, a place to go in order to seek out a spiritual experience. John Muir made the objective of protecting wilderness areas more mainstream. However, as readings will show, Muir’s plans were laced with racial overtones, and the protection of wilderness areas as per his plans benefitted white people and harmed Native populations who were kicked off their ancestral lands for the so-called ‘protection’ of many wilderness areas.

Muir made many derogatory remarks about people of color and according to environmental historian Jon Christensen, promoted the ideal of “the lone white man at one with nature in the wilderness.” This white, western perspective of environmentalism still exists in many garbs today and leaves many people out of the environmental movement.

### Assignment 1.1

Read [“The Trouble with Wilderness”](#) by William Cronon

Discussion/essay questions

- What is the trouble with wilderness?
- Why is the idea of wilderness important in the National Parks System?
- Is the idea of wilderness a result of white supremacy? If so, explain your reasoning. If not, explain your reasoning.
- Are the critiques Cronon makes about wilderness still relevant today?

### Assignment 1.2

Read [Sierra Club Grapples With Founder John Muir’s Racism](#)

Discussion/Essay Questions

- In what ways does the western environmental movement benefit White people in preference to people of color?
- What does historian Richard White mean when he said “I would leave Muir’s name on things but explain that, as hard as it might be to accept, it is not just Muir who was racist. The way we created the wilderness areas we now rightly prize was racist.” Do you agree with him?
- Is there anything that can be done to ensure natural areas are accessible to all?
- How can we center Indigenous Peoples and other people of color in environmental movements?

### Part 1.2 The Wilderness Act

The Wilderness Act was passed in 1964 and protects 109,511,966 million acres of land that fits the definition of wilderness. This is a very important act that preserves natural spaces and is critical to the formation of National Parks and other preserved natural areas.

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## Assignment 1.3

Read [The Wilderness Act](#)

Discussion/Essay Questions

- What parts of the Wilderness Act are problematic?
- What parts of the Wilderness Act are beneficial?
- Are Indigenous Peoples mentioned in this act?
- If you had the chance to revise the Wilderness Act, what changes would you make and what would the final product look like?
- Do you agree with the definition of wilderness in the act?
- What makes wilderness more valuable or worthy of protection than places in suburban or urban environments?

## Part 2: Land Dispossession in the National Parks: Case Study Yosemite

In many different instances, Native Americans were violently removed from their ancestral homes for the creation of National Parks. One of the largest examples of this is Yosemite National Park.

### Part 2.1 What Happened at Yosemite?

## Assignment 2.1

Read [Return the National Parks to the Tribes](#)

Discussion/Essay Questions

- What happened at Yosemite?
- What important figures played a role in the creation of Yosemite?
- What does the paper argue for?

## Assignment 2.2

Research other National Parks in North America. In what other places did this kind of land dispossession take place?

## Part 3: National Parks in India

This section discusses the history of national parks in India from pre-colonial times to the current era.

### Part 3.1 Indian Ideas of Engagement with Nature Before British Rule

## Assignment 3.1

Read: Julie Hughes, *Animal Kingdoms: Hunting, the Environment, and Power in the Indian Princely States*

- What are pre-modern ideas of ecology and environment?

- What major differences from the American system do you notice in the way scholars have approached study of ecology in India?
- Is care and stewardship of nature and wilderness only a modern idea?

### Part 3.2 Hunter and Naturalist Jim Corbett

#### Assignment 3.2

Read: Jim Corbett, *The Man-eaters of Kumaon*

- How was Jim Corbett a “colonialist”?
- Does Corbett’s fascination for tigers make him ignore the devastations they brought upon people of India?
- Why and how did tigers become “man-eaters”? How would you resolve moral dilemmas in addressing the animal-human conflict that man-eaters bring to the table?

Part 3.3 Major Push by the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972  
The Government of India’s passing of the 1972 Act marked a new stage in developing sensitivity in India towards protecting India’s threatened species. In particular, there was an urge to protect wildlife from poachers who killed animals to sell their body parts.

#### [Assignment 3.3](#)

[Read: Wildlife Protection Act of 1972](#)

- [What are the major questions raised by the 1972 Act?](#)
- [How do you explain India’s new motivation for protecting wildlife in the 1970s?](#)
- [How was this “national approach different from a colonial approach such as that of Jim Corbett?”](#)

### Part 3.4 The Concept of “Sanctuary”

The concept of sanctuary emerged in India in order to provide protected spaces for the conservation of specific animal species (much focus on tigers and rhinoceros).

#### Assignment 3.4

Read: Guy Mountfort, *Wild India*

### Part 3.5 Animal-Human Conflicts

Many national parks emerged as bounded spaces after displacement of tribal populations and adivasis living in those areas. The latter had a livelihood traditionally tied to forests. As these spaces were made inaccessible to these populations, the latter’s access to wood and land was cut off, threatening livelihoods. Some national parks simply outgrew their confines. As animal populations started to increase, they encroached upon human settlements on the edges, bringing the issue of human-animal conflict to the fore. In a densely populated country like

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India, questions of conflicts around human geography are inherent to any drive to reserve areas for animals.

### Assignment 3.5

Read: Newspaper Reports of animal attacks and of tribals engaging in counter-attacks. You may look at individual articles in the newspaper, Times of India's archives through database ProQuest.

### Assignment 3.6

Read: Mahesh Rangarajan, Peoples, Parks and Wildlife: Towards Coexistence  
Consider five newspaper reports of attacks by tigers, leopards, and bears on humans; Read another five reports on campaigns and protests in India that the government was not doing enough to protect their lives from wildlife. Prepare a balanced report of 1,000 words analyzing the root cause of this human-animal conflict.

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