

## An Unfortunate Legacy From 1916



**Susan Clark**, the Joseph F. Cullman Adjunct Professor of Wildlife Ecology and Policy Sciences at Yale University's School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, is the author of "Ensuring Yellowstone's Future." **David Cherney** is a research associate with the Northern Rockies Conservation Cooperative.

In 1916, Woodrow Wilson signed a landmark piece of legislation to create the National Park Service. This document asserts that the purpose of our national parks is to:

...conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife **therein** and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations. [emphasis added]

This undertaking demonstrates great foresight by early conservationists and politicians. However, this mission also left an unrecognized and unfortunate legacy for protecting our national parks.



Anne Sherwood for The New York Times Yellowstone National Park.

For more than 100 years, our park system has focused on protecting wildlife and scenery inside the boundaries of our national parks. The National Park Service accomplishes this by regulating, and often excluding, undue human use from within a park's boundaries. The highest profile controversies in our Park Service have centered on excluding human impact; ranging from snowmobile use in Yellowstone to the potential restoration of Hetch Hetchy in Yosemite. Unfortunately, public controversy is not a strong indicator of genuine threat.

Today, the greatest threat to our national parks is the “therein” philosophy of management — the idea that effective park management ends at a park’s boundaries. Decades of ecological research has shown that even the largest national parks are too small to maintain viable populations of wildlife in the long run.

Yellowstone National Park is a prime example. The future of wolves and grizzlies bears in Yellowstone is dependent on how well we manage these species in the 18 million acres surrounding Yellowstone, not just the 2.2 million acres within the park. The National Park Service has been reluctant to directly engage in issues outside of their geographic jurisdiction. The failure is evident. For example, the lack of action outside of Yellowstone’s park boundaries, in part, led the loss of 75 percent of large mammal migrations within Greater Yellowstone ecosystem.

In 1995, Yellowstone National Park Superintendent Mike Finley made a bold and politically controversial move to deviate from the “therein” style of management by fighting the development of a gold mine outside of Yellowstone that threatened pollute the waterways and wildlife within the park. His efforts helped stop the mine from being completed, saving Yellowstone from irreparable damage.

The political engagement of a park superintendent outside of a park’s boundaries is still the exception rather than the rule. To ensure a future for the national parks, the Park Service needs to learn from Mike Finley’s leadership, and make transboundary stewardship of public lands part of its work.