Beyond Wilderness: Parks, People, and Politics in the Age of Environmentalism


This dissertation examines the intersection of land use, economics and state action in the late twentieth-century United States, with an emphasis on the period stretching from the Great Society to the election of Ronald Reagan. It argues that shifts in production and consumption served as a primary influence on the designation and management of parks and other protected areas, especially in metropolitan regions. As capital became more mobile and government spending less plentiful, efforts to protect threatened sites evolved, reflecting altered social and environmental conditions and values. Accepted models of park management, which had long stressed firm boundaries, state ownership and a disavowal of human impacts on the land, proved inadequate to meet the needs of complex, “lived-in” landscapes suffering from ecological degradation and financial hardship. Instead, proponents opted for collaborative approaches that emphasized inter-governmental cooperation, citizen participation and various forms of zoning as opposed to outright purchase or condemnation as a means to protect sensitive areas in urban and urbanizing locations.

These new “parks,” which ranged in size from the downtown of Lowell, Massachusetts, to the rugged Santa Monica Mountains on the outskirts of Los Angeles, were neither nature preserves nor idyllic green spaces. Private property, including homes and businesses, comprised much of the land within their boundaries. Supporters did not emulate the wilderness ideal of John Muir, the resource management model of Gifford Pinchot, or even the progressive reform notions of Frederick Law Olmsted. Rather, they sought, but did not always realize, new paradigms, grounded in evolving understandings of ecology and a renewed interest in local, place-based histories.