
The Sorry Story of the World's First National Park

The world's first 'Park', established in Yosemite in the Sierra Nevada in California was the homeland of the Miwok people. The startling landscapes of Yosemite, substantially an outcome of indigenous land use systems, were proposed for conservation by the very same settlers and miners who, twelve years previously, had waged the 'Mariposa Indian War' against the area's indigenous people - the Miwok. In this one-sided struggle, forces sanctioned by the US Government made repeated attacks on Indian settlements. Indian villages were burned to the ground to force the Indians out of the area and to starve or freeze the Indians into submission. The main proponent of the Park, LaFayette Burnell, who led the Mariposa Battalion, and who professed a take-no-prisoners approach to the Miwok, wanted to 'sweep the territory of any scattered bands that might infest it'. In common with the prejudices of the day, he thought of 'redskins' as superstitious, treacherous marauders, 'yelling demons' and 'savages'. Once the Park was established, it was run by the US Army for the following 52 years before being taken over by the newly established National Parks Service in 1916.

Expulsion from the Park deprived the Miwok of their traditional hunting grounds, grazing areas, fish runs and nut collecting groves. When they tried to take anything back from the whites, they were resisted with guns and then hounded out of the area again by the Mariposa Battalion. Ironically the very word 'Yosemite' is, according to Simon Schama, a term of abuse used by the Miwok to describe the Americans who were assaulting them and actually means 'some among them are killers'.

In 1890, some years after their expulsion, the Miwok petitioned the US Government. They called for compensation for their losses and denounced the managers of the park for letting white ranchers and settlers invade the area with impunity.

"The valley is cut up completely by dusty, sandy roads leading from the hotels of the white in every direction.... All seem to come only to hunt money... This is not the way in which we treated this park when we had it. This valley was taken away from us [for] a pleasure ground... Yosemite is no longer a National Park, but merely a hay-farm and cattle range."

Their pleas were ignored and further evictions of remnant Miwok settlements were made in 1906, 1929 and as late as 1969. The Miwok noted that the National Parks were not only being set up to preserve 'wilderness' regions 'unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations' but were also designed with a profit motive.

Yet the splendours of Yosemite, with its spectacular rocky eminences and the enormous Sequoia gigantea trees, also resonated in the American mind as 'an overpowering revelation of the uniqueness of the American Republic' and were thus signed over in a bill creating the world's first wilderness park to the State of California in 1864 in the midst of a civil war 'for the benefit of the people, for their resort and recreation, to hold them inalienable for all time.'

Extracted from: "Salvaging Nature: Indigenous Peoples, Protected Areas and Biodiversity Conservation", by Marcus Colchester.

