

Yosemite's Last Stand

The defense of the heritage

BY JOHN MIDDENDORF

“Among all of the debates affecting America’s national parks, the most enduring—and most intense—is where to draw the line between preservation and use.”

—from the opening line of *Yosemite, the Embattled Wilderness*, by Alfred Runte, 1990

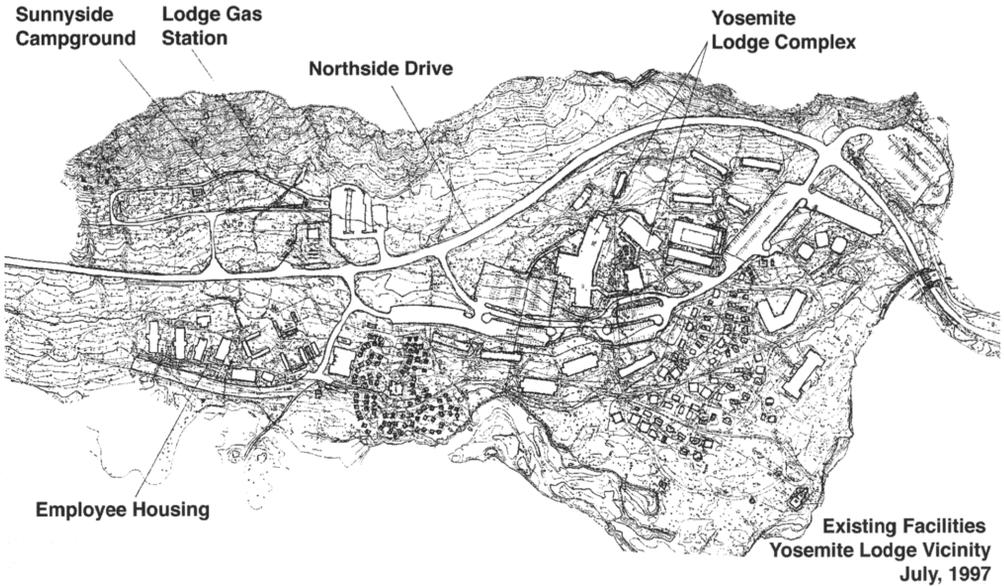
Yosemite is the model. It is the model for all our popular public lands. It is a model of beauty and awe. It is the model of a preserved ecosystem and an accessible wilderness. It is the model for big-wall climbing and the model for rescue techniques that, learned here, have saved lives all over the world. With resident National Park Service (NPS) and concession employees living in its midst year-round, it is the model for urbanization on the edge of wilderness. And most recently, it has become the model for an alliance between the NPS and the park concession contractor.

Ever since the passage of the Yosemite Park Act in 1864, and the subsequent establishment of Yosemite National Park in 1890 (which expanded the area to 1,512 square miles to include all watersheds), there has been an ongoing battle between preservation and use. The early battles took no prisoners: In 1905, the park was reduced to two-thirds its original size, and Hetch Hetchy Valley was dammed in 1913. Brutal battles were fought—and sometimes lost—by the conservationists of the day, including Frederick Olmsted, Joseph LeConte, and John Muir. In 1916, the National Park Service was formed to manage the natural resources in our public parks, and preservationists’ hopes were lifted.

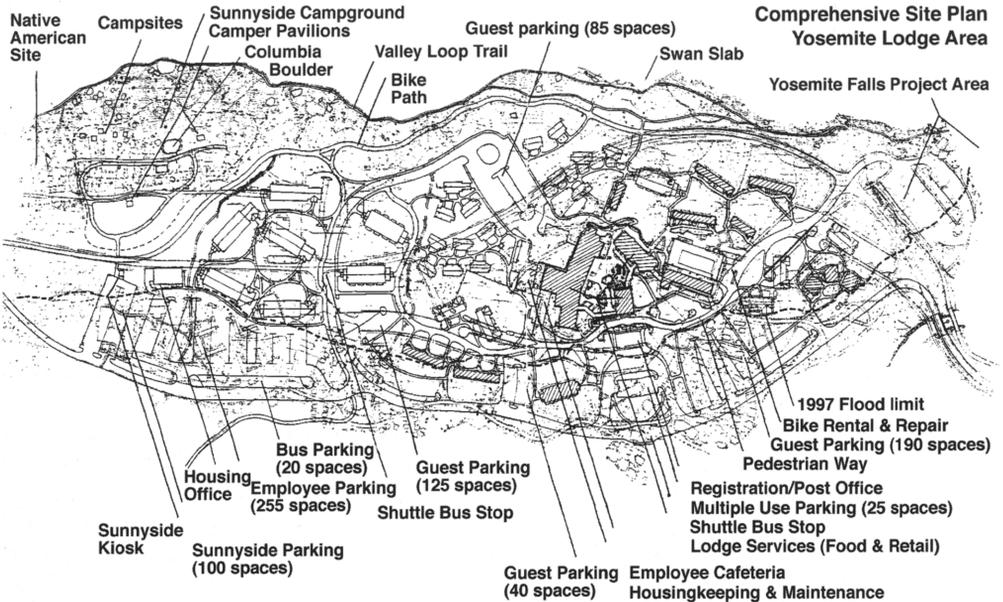
The first resource challenges addressed the park’s growing pains. Roads established in 1913 opened Yosemite to automobiles. Cars could be parked in any beautiful meadow for camping. Word spread quickly. As early as 1927, Charles Michael, Yosemite’s assistant postmaster, noted: “Yosemite Valley is getting to be an awful place. The air is filled with smoke, dust, and the smell of gasoline.” Soon after, the NPS began restrictions on the ability to roam around in cars.

The surge of visitation resulted in increased accommodations and services within the park. Competition for the visitor’s dollar among a variety of entrepreneurs created resource abuses. One concession offered a “bear show” that involved baiting bears at a certain time each night, then illuminating the feeding for tourists at 50 cents a head. Further commercialization prompted the Secretary of the Interior in 1925 to insist that the two most influential concessions, Yosemite National Park Company and the Curry Camping Company, merge into a single organization with a legally granted monopoly on accommodations, sales and services within the park, possibly on the premise that regulation would be simpler.

The newly formed Yosemite Park and Curry Company began an advertising campaign for Yosemite and built the Ahwahnee Hotel. The ads and posters highlighted amusements and diversions such as the popular firefall event at Glacier Point. As tourism increased, it became clear that a new threat to the resource was developing: overcrowding. In the years following, the NPS and the YP&CC established a relationship that maintained a balance between preservation and ever-increasing use. Some believe that too much of our public trust lands were allotted to concession infrastructure, while others say that the NPS managed the use with preservation in mind. Regardless, there existed a balance between YP&CC’s dreams to build



The sketch above illustrates Yosemite today. The sketch below is a preliminary proposal for development put forward by the National Park Service and the park concessionaire. Where would you rather take your vacation?



and fill hotel rooms year-round and the park's efforts to keep the user experience at a natural level. In 1980, as a result of an extensive public process, the NPS issued the Yosemite General Management Plan, which outlined the guidelines for future policies for visitor use, park operations, and development of the park.

In the early 1990s, MCA, the parent company of YP&CC, was bought by a Japanese company, Matsushita. Concern was raised regarding a Japanese company running the concession in a national park. As a result, the concession was put up for auction. In December, 1992, Delaware North Companies, Inc. was awarded the concession contract in Yosemite over five other bidders, including the more environmentally conservative Yosemite Restoration Trust and the more experienced TW Services, Inc. (which operates at Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon). Delaware North's "better proposal" included, among other things, a radical increase over prior financial relationships between a concession and the NPS. While prior contracts provided 1 percent of concession gross revenues to the NPS, along with agreements between the NPS and the concession to keep prices reasonable, Delaware North's proposal included a 15 percent cut on the gross revenues (currently at \$70 million) for the Park Service. Yosemite's tourism cash cow now was to be reinvested in the Park Service, with the prevailing argument that it was only fair that the concession return funds to the keeper of the land. Yosemite's current crisis, however, clearly reveals the folly of such a financial alliance.

The big floods of 1997 changed the landscape. It caused more damage to the Valley infrastructure than either of the big floods of 1937 and 1950, causing extensive damage to 50 percent of Yosemite lodging and 100 percent of the permanent concessionaire employee housing at the lodge area. It was called a disaster and Congress allocated \$178 million for flood-damaged facilities. The park had a choice: restore the low -amenity tent cabins (which went for \$40 per night) or upgrade to hotel rooms (at more than \$100 per night). It chose to upgrade. Why? Because it is in the best bottom-line interest of both the NPS and the concession to increase revenues. The balance between the traditional objective role of the NPS as the protectors of our public lands and the concession as developers has been lost to an auction, and now the response to increased use is more exclusive infrastructure. The plans regarding the development refer to "providing a quality visitor experience," which clearly follows a trend to reduce campsites and increase exclusive hotel-style bungalows.

When I realized Yosemite's probable future, I finally decided to experience the "wilderness" from the comfort of a hotel room. Though I have spent more than 1,500 nights in Yosemite spread out over a 20-year climbing career, never once had I contributed to the concession's lodging profits. Seeing that high-dollar lodging was a possible future for Yosemite, I thought I should see what it was like.

After paying \$100 for the privileged of residing in Yosemite Lodge, I enclosed myself in Manzanita Room 3400. The drone of the bathroom fan and the muffled hard noises from other hotel inhabitants seemed eerie in contrast to the occasional clank of gear and cook pots and the soft murmured conversations I was used to hearing from fellow campers in the campground, only several hundred yards away. The view from the front door of the lodge was that of the post office. The wind brought the odor of chlorine from the lodge pool.

The next morning, the weather was cloudy, as it had been the night before when I went to bed. I ventured out to the lodge café, where I ran into Stephanie Davis and Warren Hollinger, who had just that morning made it down from the top of El Cap. They had finished the *South Seas* to *PO* route on the big stone and were warming up on coffee and sharing exploits with Kennan Harvey and Mike Pennings, who had come down from El Cap a few days earlier. Looking a bit weary but glowing from their experience, they told me of their efforts to top out

late the day before and their subsequent descent down the East Ledges through the night in bad conditions.

"Oh," I said. "Was it storming last night?"

Suddenly, I realized the full extent of the isolation a hotel room creates. Though I myself had on many occasions battled fierce weather, slippery rock and desperate conditions on the final pitches of a big stone route, at that moment I found it hard to relate to their tales. The ferocity and savageness of the weather had eluded me in my safe, warm room. It became clear to me that the NPS should protect, preserve and encourage our ability to get close to nature, not aid and abet in an increasing isolation from its power.

The current plan for the Yosemite Lodge area is to increase the infrastructure of the hotel accommodations, expanding development into the undeveloped land around the lodge. The plan compresses Camp 4 into a smaller area hemmed in by a cultural center to the west, multi-story employee housing to the south and east and more parking for the giant tour buses. Twelve four-plex hotels are planned in the Swan Slab area. The atmosphere would further be violated by the addition of more than 300 people (employee dorms add 226 to the count, while the 48 new hotel rooms would bring in roughly 120 more) in the area north of Northside Drive. The buildings would sever the natural, peaceful connection between Camp 4 and Swan Slab. Visually, the magnificent views of Sentinel, Glacier Point, Yosemite Falls and Half Dome would be marred by the new three-story employee buildings.

Camp 4 and Swan Slab are sacred spots to climbers the world over. They offer one of the few places on the Valley floor where one can get away from the indoor life, camp with the stars and the moon, experience the morning sun, and feel the pulse of nature. Swan Slab is visited daily by climbers and is an integral part of Camp 4: without Swan Slab and the grove of trees that connect it to Camp 4, Camp 4 loses its solitude. That solitude, and the ability to remain away from buildings, is key to the experience of Yosemite's beauty and wilderness. The park's birthright was set up to preserve this elusive experience, but the new plans would disrupt the ability we currently have to roam and enjoy these areas. With every acre lost to development in our public lands, humanity's ability to connect with nature is incrementally decreased.

The NPS can and should respect their original role as the protector of our public parks. The plan to develop the area directly east of Camp 4 is both overdevelopmental and an outrage to those who love the "Sunnyside" area. Yosemite has its own unique geological and biological infrastructure. Exclusive hotels should not supercede the right to experience Yosemite naturally. The soul can not be commercialized.