

Considering the Economics of Beauty

By

Daniel E. White July 29, 2024

As the United States entered the 20th century, “people such as landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead (famous for planning New York City’s Central Park and many other public and private green spaces) recognized this pivotal moment, in which America still had stretches of unclaimed land, mainly out West. It occurred to him and a handful of others that the nascent country, struggling to compete with Europe’s rich cultural offerings, could distinguish itself with unmatched scenery.” (Heather Hansen, *100 Years of the National Park Service*, p. 30-31)

A few years later, Gilbert Grosvenor of the *National Geographic*, made a similar point. “In that architecture which is voice in the glorious temples of the sequoia grove and in the castles of the Grand Canyon, in that art which is mirrored in American lakes, which is painted in the geyser basins, and frescoed upon the side walls of the mightiest canyons, there is majesty, and an appeal that the mere handiwork of man, splendid though it may be, can never rival.” (Hansen, p.78)

They, and others, recognized that the U.S. lacked the length of history to provide spectacular feats of construction that created lasting monuments to the achievements of humankind. There would be nothing comparable to the Cathedral at Notre Dame, but we had cathedral-like groves of sequoia that lifted spirits and touched souls. There was no art collection to rival the Louvre but the U.S had the Grand Canyon, a monumental work of art by Mother Nature.

How, then, to compete for tourists from around the world? The creation of the National Park System was the major political achievement for such men in their day.

In a letter to Congress in 1913, the editor of *Century* magazine, Robert Underwood Johnson wrote:

“I am aware that in certain quarters one who contends for the practical value of natural beauty is considered a ‘crank,’ and yet the love of beauty is the most dominant trait in mankind. The moment anyone of intelligence gets enough to satisfy the primal needs of the physical man, he begins to plan for something beautiful—house, grounds, or a view of nature. Could this be capitalized in dollars, could some alchemy reveal its value, we should not hear materialists deriding lovers of nature with any effect upon legislators. Without this touch of idealism, this sense of beauty, life would only be a race for the trough.”

Fifty-five years later, Stewart Udall, an Arizona icon, said, “An increasing gross national product has become the Holy Grail, and most of the economists who are its keepers have no concern for the economics of beauty.”

Neither Johnson nor Udall was an enemy of capitalism. Both loved this country. Both recognized the tension between exploiting natural resources for the sake of monetary prosperity and ensuring that such exploitation did not result in the realization of famed naturalist John Burroughs’ worry: “We can use our scientific knowledge to poison the air, corrupt the water, blacken the face of the country or we can use it to mitigate and abolish these things. One cannot but reflect what a sucked orange the earth will be in the course of a few centuries.”

This tension is evident in the attempt by Hudbay, a Canadian corporation, to dig a mine in one of Arizona’s geographic treasures, the Sky Island we know as the Santa Rita Mountains.

We see the scarring of the northern end of the Santa Ritas on a daily basis, and the environmental disturbances mount in number as the permit process unfolds.

The estimates made by proponents of the mine are the usual economic ones: the mine will create several hundred new jobs (though it is not clear that the jobs would go to current residents of the area), the people working in the mine will spend money in the region, buy houses, add to the tax base, as would the mine itself. Furthermore, they say, more copper is what mankind needs now because of the importance of the metal to electric vehicles.

These arguments rely on estimates made by the company about the dollar impact of the mine. Also assumed is that the price of copper will never go down.

Johnson wished that we could “capitalize in dollars,” and find “some alchemy” to reveal the value of beauty; in Udall’s words, develop an “economics of beauty.” How, though, does one put a value on “nature’s scenic jewels” which we have in our backyard in Arizona, “containing so many and such an infinite variety of marvels... [indeed] thousands of matchless treasures,” to paraphrase Grosvenor.

Perhaps one could calculate the dollar impact of the tourists who come to see Sky Islands, Madera Canyon, Chiricahua National Monument and other natural wonders. What is the financial impact of retirees who move to the Santa Cruz Valley in part because of the surrounding beauty? One might argue that financial estimates like these should be used to counter Hudbay.

“Plans to protect air and water, wilderness and wildlife are in fact plans to protect man,” wrote Udall in 1968. To assert the economics of beauty, measured in tangible and intangible ways, is not to be a “crank.” It is to avoid a “race to the trough” by acknowledging the value of the beauty in nature that surrounds us. And prevent the earth from becoming a “sucked orange.”

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