LAND-USE CONFLICT IN THE KINGS RIVER CANYONS

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The battle for Hetch Hetchy, on the Tuolumne River, is a well-known story in California conservation history. The struggle over this canyon, within the established boundaries of Yosemite National Park, took place between a thirsty City of San Francisco and a fledgling preservation movement. The combatants for San Francisco included engineers, civic officials, and men for whom pragmatic use of frontier resources was both common and correct. Opposing them were John Muir, his Sierra Club, and those who espoused the burgeoning public ideal of wilderness protection. In 1913, after a short and sharp conflict, Muir’s forces lost this battle. Today, nearly three-quarters of a century later, the loss is still bemoaned by preservationists.¹

Approximately 100 miles to the south of Hetch Hetchy, another conflict took place over two equally spectacular canyons on the Kings River. On the Middle Fork, Tehipite Valley is a spectacular gorge, lined by towering,

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granite cliffs and glacially-scoured domes (Figure 1). Waterfalls, lush meadows, and the turbulent river add a majesty which led John Muir to compare Tehipite favorably with the more famous Yosemite Valley. The South Fork of the Kings River passes through miles of rocky gaps which widen into another Yosemite-like canyon known as Cedar Grove, after its only area of development. It, too, is marked by towering vertical cliffs, a flat, partially-forested floor, and numerous examples of glacial scouring and deposition (Figure 2).

The conflict for Tehipite Valley and Cedar Grove embroiled a host of contestants with widely varied and incompatible plans. The City of Los Angeles, San Joaquin Valley irrigation interests, recreation developers, the National Forest Service, and the National Park Service competed for the canyons for more than six decades. The intent of this paper is to outline the major elements of that conflict, to demonstrate how the uncertainty and variety of threats to the canyons froze development by all parties, and, finally, to show that this state of confusion persisted long enough for a public spirit to arise which favored minimum development and the retention of pristine conditions

**Early Conflicts over Land Use**

From the late nineteenth century until 1935, each interest group attempted to implement its plans. As early as 1902 engineers published scientific reports on the water storage potential of the Kings River. These led the Fresno Irrigation District and other local water agencies to convene meetings in an effort to determine the best manner of water collection and use. In addition, the river’s potential for power generation was noted, partic-
ulary in a 1919 investigation by the Los Angeles Bureau of Power and Light. In June, 1920, the Federal Power Act spurred action by creating a commission to be headed by the Secretaries of Agriculture, Interior, and War. They were invested with the power to license water and power projects in national forests and on other government lands. A few months later, the City of Los Angeles proposed an elaborate plan to control the Kings River. The plan called for principal units to be constructed at Cedar Grove and Tehipite Valley, with subsidiary units on tributaries above the canyons and on the main channel below (Figure 3). The new Federal Power Commission took the plan under study, and Los Angeles prepared to fight the expected opponents. Los Angeles did not have
long to wait. San Joaquin Valley residents, in particular, were angered at this territorial intrusion and feared that their area might become another parched Owens Valley. Before the Federal Power Commission was entirely sure of its duties and limits, the San Joaquin Light and Power Corporation filed a proposal for the same sites on behalf of local interests.\(^5\)

The National Forest Service watched the growing water and power controversy with interest and considerable detachment. Acting upon its philosophy of multiple-use, in 1933 the Forest Service began plans to develop a resort complex at Cedar Grove and blast a road through to Tehipite Valley for possible later develop-
ment. Local businessmen and civic officials quickly joined in promoting these potentially lucrative projects. One plan, authored by a Forest Service landscape architect, envisioned replacing the miserable nineteenth-century camp at Cedar Grove with a 600-acre complex, including 500 campsites, up to six resort hotels, several stores and service centers, access roads from three directions, and even an airstrip. Other Forest Service proposals were more modest, but all planned Cedar Grove to be a model, large-scale resort exemplifying the superiority of Forest Service recreation management.

Meanwhile, from 1881 through the late 1920's, in order to protect the Kings River drainage and the two.

Figure 3. Diagram of potential power developments on the Kings River Middle and South Forks as proposed by Los Angeles. Source: Randall, 1930.
canyons, congressmen representing preservation groups and the National Park Service made frequent attempts either to establish a new park or to enlarge nearby Sequoia National Park. The two most serious of these efforts culminated in the creation of Sequoia and General Grant National Parks in 1890 (Figure 4) and in the enlargement of Sequoia National Park in 1926. Each of these proposals actually began several years earlier, and agitation by preservationists and other supporters kept the Kings River watershed in the public eye on a consistent basis.8

The result of these conflicting proposals was an atmosphere of such confusion and desperate antagonism that most politicians and government officials not directly representing one of the groups avoided the controversy. Hence, the Federal Power Commission took nearly three years before it rejected the 1920 power application of Los Angeles. The City immediately refiled, however, and the controversy continued.9 Repeated efforts to include the Kings River watershed in an enlarged Sequoia National Park clouded the issue when the Federal Power Act was amended to exclude National Park lands from power development. Many concluded that if the Federal Power Commission approved a project while the area was under proposal for park status, the ultimate achievement of such status would suspend project construction.10 Congress also found the Kings River controversy too hot to handle. The campaign to enlarge Sequoia was extremely well organized and engineered, lasted seven long years, and in 1926 succeeded in adding Kern Canyon and the Mt. Whitney country to the park (Figure 5). However, the original proposal which included all the Kings River watershed proved too controversial. Faced with fierce local opposition on the grounds of potential water and
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Figure 4. Map showing Sequoia and General Grant National Parks, as established in 1890, and the area proposed for a larger Roosevelt-Sequoia National Park in 1921. Both forks of the Kings River were to be included. Source: National Park Service Bulletin, 1922.
power needs and the perception that the Forest Service would encourage greater commercial development, Congress excluded the entire region.\(^{11}\)

By 1930, a harried Federal Power Commission organized its own water resource survey. Although water storage and power potentials for the two canyons were slight in comparison to areas outside the proposed parkland, survey engineers made no recommendations.\(^{12}\) Recreation developers, however, quickly seized the figures to show the illogic and waste inherent in any project that would flood Cedar Grove and Tehipite Valley. They suggested that it would be far more economical, and preferable, to build a dam on the lower Kings River at a
fothills site known as Pine Flat, and thus save the can­
yons for recreation.¹³

The Forest Service, which actually administered the land through this time, exercised considerable caution in implementing its plans. The threat of inundation fore­stalled their grand construction plans in Cedar Grove. An additional threat came in the form of the possible loss of the area to the National Park Service. Over the years, a deep philosophical division had developed between the two government agencies. Forest Service personnel were convinced that their multiple-use policy was inherently superior to the Park Service’s “single purpose” approach, which the foresters believed entailed strict preservation.¹⁴ The Park Service, on the other hand, regarded many of the Forest Service’s plans as environmentally irrespon­sible, or at least unsuitable for areas of great natural beauty. Curiously, this conflict was stronger at the local and regional levels than at the national level, and it was a powerful issue in California development as well as in the behavior of both agencies.¹⁵

With these concerns foremost, the Forest Service was content to engage in the slow, but steady, construction of a paved road from the edge of General Grant National Park to Cedar Grove. In the canyon, four campgrounds and a tiny ranger station were established. Tehipite Valley road plans became part of an enlarged campaign to build a high-elevation highway from Kern County in the south to Lassen Volcanic National Park in the north. The Tehipite plan foundered, however, when the construction of this “Sierra Way” proved too expensive.¹⁶

The Creation of Kings Canyon National Park

The year 1935 marked one of the turning points in the history of the watershed and the two canyons of the Kings
River. Secretary of Interior Harold Ickes entered the conflict and proposed a bill to create Kings Canyon National Park and, further, to make it a wilderness preserve. While horse trails, footpaths, controlled use by commercial packers, and camping were to be encouraged, roads, hotels and other large-scale developments would be banned. The Secretary had become interested in the Hetch Hetchy conflict many years earlier and, subsequently, through his friendship with National Park Service Director Stephen Mather, taken an interest in wilderness preservation. Ickes had a powerful influence on President Roosevelt, and his sudden appearance in the conflict alarmed most of the contestants. Opponents and proponents of park status were surprised when, at the urging of Ickes, a previously disinterested Senator Hiram Johnson of California introduced the “Wilderness Park” bill in 1935. A storm of protest followed as most local irrigation interests, power claimants, recreation developers, and Forest Service representatives opposed the bill. Regional Forester S. B. Show later described Ickes as “overambitious, ignorant, egocentric, ruthless, unethical and highly effective.” Whatever the truth of these allegations, by dangling certain lures and, according to Show, illegally undermining his opponents, in 1940 Ickes hammered out a compromise with Fresno-area farmers and other San Joaquin Valley residents which allowed creation of Kings Canyon National Park.

Although Los Angeles suspended its vigorous assault for the canyons after the completion of Hoover Dam on the Colorado River, local citizens continued to regard the big metropolis as a threat to their water and power, indeed, to their very survival. Accordingly, they set three conditions for their support of the park bill. First, they demanded that their immediate water needs be met. As
Secretary of Interior, Ickes also controlled the Bureau of Reclamation and thus was in a position to promise that other water development projects would be guaranteed. Chief among them was the large, flood and irrigation structure at Pine Flat (Figure 6). Ultimately, this dam would contain 67 percent of the total annual flow of the Kings River. In addition, projects on the North Fork of the Kings River, outside the proposed park, would be sanctioned.  

In addition to satisfaction of their immediate needs, the local irrigationists demanded that Cedar Grove and
Figure 7. Kings Canyon National Park as founded in 1940 excluding Cedar Grove and Tehipite Valley. Source: National Park Service Bulletin, 1940.
parties, launched another series of attempts to dam not only Cedar Grove and Tehipiti Valley, but also several other sites within the new park (Figure 8). The purpose, stated to both the Federal Power Commission and the State Board of Water Resources, was to generate necessary power for booming urban expansion.24 Once again anger and panic rocked San Joaquin Valley residents. Rumors spread that Los Angeles wanted to build the dams to generate power that it did not need, but could sell at a profit. Another story accused Los Angeles of planning a fourteen-mile tunnel below the Sierra Nevada to deliver Kings River water to its Owens River Aqueduct.25 The Kings River Conservation district quickly filed for the same sites, but confided to the Park Service that it only meant to block Los Angeles.26 As the 1950’s progressed, Los Angeles finally withdrew from the battle, but not until after the Federal Power Commission summarily rejected its claims to sites within the National Park and indicated a favorable response to local claims for the two canyons. Local irrigationists further benefitted from the completion of Courtwright and Wishon Dams in the early 1960’s by the Pacific Gas and Electric Company. These two small dams on the North Fork provided another 250,000 acre feet, or some 18 percent of average annual flow, for irrigation and power needs. Hence, a subsequent effort to bring the two canyons into Kings Canyon National Park met only token local resistance and succeeded in August, 1965.

Thus, the water and power needs specified in the compromise between Ickes and the Kings River irrigation interests were eventually satisfied. However, the third part of the agreement, development of Cedar Grove tourist facilities, proved to be a problem. The unusual status of the valley created an imposing threat to any recreation
Figure 8. Reservoirs and power complexes proposed by Los Angeles in the 1920's and again in 1948. Source: Randall, 1930.
investor. It was on Forest Service land, administered by the Park Service, but withheld from the park due to potential reservoir development.

For various reasons the Park Service also preferred to allow one company a concession monopoly in each park. In Kings Canyon that company was the Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks Company, administered and partially owned by one George Mauger. From 1926 to 1966, Mauger ran a shoestring operation, constructing a few cabins at a time by using lumber salvaged from condemned buildings. With his limited development capital, he restricted his investments to the desirable areas of the Giant Forest in Sequoia National Park and the old General Grant Park which had been absorbed into Kings Canyon National Park. He had no interest in what he saw as a distant, seasonally-snowbound, and presumably doomed canyon far from the main park highway. Because the Park Service administered Cedar Grove, Mauger’s company was the only option available for construction of visitor cabins and services.

For twenty-five years the Park Service tried to cajole, lure, and even threaten Mauger into enlarging the facilities at Cedar Grove. In 1947 the National Park Service regional office in San Francisco released plans for the canyon. They proposed to build or improve facilities to include 400 campsites, a picnic area for up to 40 groups, 250 cabins to house 700 guests, parking for 1,000 cars, plus assorted services, such as a store, post office, cafeteria, pack station, and ranger station. By the early 1950’s, planners had become somewhat less ambitious; but various master plans still envisioned dozens of cabins and up to twenty multiple-dwelling chalets as well as all necessary service facilities. Mauger balked at spending money for construction, however, because he believed
that the area would eventually be inundated by reservoir waters. In a 1954 letter to the Fresno Chamber of Commerce, in response to its persistent urging, Mauger explained that his Washington, D.C., attorney had advised against construction due to the unclear legal status of the canyon.

According to Mauger and his attorney, there were three solutions to the problem. First, the canyon could be incorporated into Kings Canyon National Park, thus eliminating the threat of inundation. A second solution required the United States to build concession facilities and lease them to the concessionaire. This would place investment risk on the government rather than on the company. Finally, the Park Service could allow construction of facilities, and a road to serve them, within the wilderness portion of the existing Kings Canyon Park. The Park Service declined these options, but assured Mauger that if he built facilities and they were later flooded he would be recompensed by the government. Mauger took a dim view of this promise; and, secretly, some Park Service personnel also questioned whether he would be fully reimbursed. This attitude may have arisen because the Park Service itself had never invested in major improvements during the two-and-one-half decades between the founding of the park and the addition of the two canyons. Mauger also delayed installation of the commercial power lines necessary for a major complex by refusing to commit to a share of the cost.

Accordingly, in 1965 when the two canyons became part of the Park, visitor infrastructure consisted of the campgrounds and ranger station built by the Forest Service thirty years earlier, a small, decrepit store, and a half dozen ramshackle tent-cabins. That year also marked the end of Mauger’s forty years of operation. He sold his
interest to Fred Harvey Company, a major concessionaire in the National Parks of the Southwest. Shortly after the Harvey family bought the Sequoia and Kings Canyon operation, they entered into negotiations to merge with the Amfac Corporation. By the time these complicated corporate maneuvers ended and Amfac owned the company, their interest in Sequoia and Kings Canyon had flagged. In 1972, Amfac in turn sold the concession rights for the two parks to Government Services, Inc., or GSI (now Guest Services). Throughout the turbulent six years between Mauger’s ownership and the takeover by GSI, very few investments were made in new structures; and even maintenance of existing buildings within the two parks was allowed to lapse. Interest in Cedar Grove development was nonexistent.32

The entry of GSI coincided with the completion of Pacific Gas and Electric power lines into Cedar Grove. For the first time a company with the will, the money, and the infrastructure for major development tackled the problem of Cedar Grove. During the more than three decades of confusion and inaction, however, thousands of people visited Cedar Grove and appreciated its serenity and relatively pristine condition. By 1972, more than 150,000 visitors per year sought Cedar Grove to escape the crowded conditions which prevailed in Yosemite Valley and parts of nearby Sequoia. Thus, when GSI presented its grand development plans, they were rejected by both the public and the Park Service.33 The environmental movement and a strong constituency of people favoring little or no construction had appeared just in time to block the type of development that had been sought for so many years. Today, a modest, twenty-room facility with a small store and snack bar is all that exists at Cedar Grove. In 1985 a proposal to double the room
capacity was rejected by the Park Service. Tehipite Valley to the north is now part of a wilderness area, a difficult two-day hike from the nearest road.

Conclusion

In summary, for more than two-thirds of a century Cedar Grove and Tehipite Valley were the foci of widely varied, competitive, and incompatible interests. Time after time, Los Angeles power developers, San Joaquin Valley irrigationists, and tourism proponents blocked each other’s proposals. After an historic compromise in 1940, the status of the two canyons remained uncertain. The combination of continued proposals for reclamation and the refusal of the concessionaire to risk investment amid such uncertainty allowed a spirit of preservation to overtake the public and the National Park Service.

This odd history suggests several unrealized potential scenarios. For example, had the Park Service fully taken over Cedar Grove in 1940, it probably would have honored the third portion of Ickes’ agreement and forced a reluctant George Mauger to develop a large resort. The same would no doubt have occurred if the various water interests had given up in 1940. On the other hand, if Los Angeles had not threatened so often, the 1940 compromise which created Kings Canyon National Park might never have been reached. Indeed, development projects of one sort or another so often threatened the canyons that they led to almost perpetual conflict and confusion, the end result of which was inaction and no development. The conclusion, therefore, is ironic; for, in a sense, the inclusion of these spectacular canyons in the National Park system is due to the bickering of the various developers who battled so fiercely for so long.
NOTES


7. S. B. Show, "Background and Events of Kings Canyon Controversy," Part 4, unpublished interview by Amelia R. Fry (Bancroft Archives, University of California, Berkeley, 1963), pp. 175-211.


13. Chester H. Warlow, unpublished letter to Regional Forester S. B. Show, March 30, 1931 (Sequoia National Park Archives, attached to Randall "Report").


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16. National Park Service, unpublished memorandum from Regional Director Kittredge to Director Arno Cammerer, January 8, 1936 (Sequoia National Park Archives), 2 pp.; San Joaquin Council, California Chamber of Commerce, unpublished minutes of meeting on Sierra Way, March 13, 1936 (Sequoia National Park Archives).

17. Harold Ickes, unpublished memorandum to National Park Service Director, September 20, 1935 (F. P. Farquhar Papers, Bancroft Archives, Univ. of California, Berkeley).

18. William Colby, unpublished interview by Corrine Gibb (Bancroft Archives, Univ. of California, Berkeley), pp. 52-57.


34. Tweed, 1986, op. cit.