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Visual Media’s Influence on Land Policy

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Abstract

Historically, American land policy has been subject to various different influences. One of the greatest forces to influence land policy is visual media, or human created imagery. The use of imagery to help influence federal land policy can be seen very clearly with respect to the National Park system. In this thesis, I argue that the publication of images related to a certain place is directly related to the way that same land is managed. By comparing the time at which visual media was circulated to legislative strides in land preservation, this thesis traces the effective use of imagery throughout the creation of Yellowstone National Park, in 1872, and Canyonlands National Park in 1964. These two examples were picked because they show incredible similarities despite being nearly 100 years apart. The final section of my thesis provides recommendations about proper ways to consume media respective to land policy and management.

*Keywords: Yellowstone National Park, Canyonlands National Park, visual media, media influence, land policy*
Introduction

In 1871, photographer William H. Jackson and landscape painter Thomas Moran toured the Yellowstone region with USGS surveyor Ferdinand V. Hayden. They returned to Washington D.C. with a vast portfolio of sketches, paintings, and photos to show the President and other lawmakers. One year later, in 1872, President Ulysses S. Grant signed Yellowstone National Park into law (John, 2007). This was not an isolated incident; many of the great legislative strides in American land preservation have been ushered in by the publication of some visual media.

At the risk of sounding cliché, for many, seeing is believing. This is especially true regarding American conservation and public lands policy and management. While there is no doubting the immense influence written works have had in encouraging conservation and responsible land management, visual media has played an instrumental role in catalyzing and guiding federal land policy.

In the American West, visual media, including painting, photography, and film have guided and encouraged a federal policy of conservation and preservation. I argue that prior to the 21st century, many developments in governmental conservation policy were preceded by the wide publication of some related visual media, and in this way, visual media has guided the legislative eye toward conservation of large, symbolic monuments rather than regions of a more ecologically deserving nature. In this project, I will explore the link between the publication of visual media and federal land policy in the American West.

My thesis begins with a broad overview not only of federal land policy, but also with some general media theory. I believe that an understanding of the history
of U.S. land management, the difficult path it has taken to reach its present state, and
the original rationale behind it is essential to understanding the current climate in
which federal agencies operate today, and why visual media holds such significant
influence. This portion of my essay discusses the traditional roles of media in
society; it also elaborates on my definition of visual media, which I generally refer to
as media in the following paragraphs. I do this to limit the scope of my research, as a
discussion about the influence of all media would distract from my thesis that visual
media is one of the greatest influences on public land policy.

The first section of my research focuses on the creation of Yellowstone
National Park and its subsequent survival and development. While much of this
section looks at the effects painting and photographs had in conceiving America’s
first National Park, I also focus on the years immediately following its creation.
Although the physical park was born in 1872, the National Park Service was not
created until 1916. In turn, the first half-century of Yellowstone was a battle for
political legitimacy, which in many cases was won with the effective use of visual
media, much of which was the product of widely circulated travel brochures.

In the next piece of my essay is devoted to conservation efforts in South
Eastern Utah during the middle of the 20th century. Canyonlands National Park is a
prime example of using visual media as a tool for influencing land policy. Samuel
Schmieding, who was commissioned by the National Park Service to research the
history of Canyonlands National Park, discusses media as a tool in creating the park
in Southeastern Utah. Schmieding writes about the effort it took to get the
Canyonlands region noticed when forced to compete for attention with the many
other nearby parks. His essay masterfully details the struggle to put Canyonlands before Congress and the immense amount of media needed to gain National Park status. It took nearly 30 years for Canyonlands to become a National Park, and its eventual success can be seen as a result of several cleverly focused media campaigns.

The final section of my essay examines the unforeseen consequences of media’s influence on policy decisions. In this part of the essay I will discuss how a popular view-shed, or “scenic climax,” as it is referred to by former Sierra Club founder David Brower (McPhee, 1971), if widely circulated by the media, can actually cause ecological harm and irresponsible management decisions. There are many examples of this, especially within the National Park system, and not until recently have they been addressed.

By looking at the history of Public Land management in the United States, I believe a clear trend will develop: for better or worse, the publication of imagery associated with public lands has a tremendous influence on the way that they are managed. If it is true that we learn from our history, then careful examination of the media influence discussed will allow us to understand how imagery continues to be leveraged and how we can responsibly consume and produce such media.

A Brief (and broad) Overview of Media Theory and Federal Land Policy

What is media, or more properly phrased, what are media? If this thesis were a multi-course meal, this would be a very large first course. At its most basic, media is the plural form of medium, “an agency or means of doing something.” Media are therefore the substance in which a message is delivered; in the vein of cultural
studies, this means that media are any text that can be read. Why is this relevant? If media are the means through which we receive a message, then it is also an important influence in how we read that message (McLuhan, 1964).

Messages can be delivered in nearly infinite ways. For instance, if you wanted me to know how delicious ice cream tastes, you could tell me how much you enjoyed it, you could show me a picture of someone enjoying it, or you could give me some to enjoy. All of these techniques would, if done correctly, result in me getting the message that ice cream is delicious, though admittedly to different degrees of effectiveness. When it comes to things more complicated than ice cream however, the message cannot be delivered as easily.

This is particularly true when concerned with land. Land use carries far greater implications than ice cream, so talking about how much you value it for one reason or another will carry much less weight, especially with so many competing reasons to value the land. Land is also immobile; it is impossible to move a plot of land, and it is not usually easy for me to move so I may inspect it for myself. It is therefore fair to say, based on a simple cost-benefit analysis, that showing me some image of the land would be the most effective way to deliver your message.

Now let us suppose that I am not just me, but I am the voting public and the Federal Government. It is now impossible to bring me to the land, and regardless of how articulate you are, it is entirely unlikely that you will be able to talk me into understanding and accepting your point of view. This leaves you with only one option; you need to show me why your plot of land is worth valuing, and because you cannot bring me there, you must rely on images.
It is these images, images that can be published, displayed, and distributed that I shall define as visual media. Drawings, prints, paintings, photographs, and videos (film or television) all qualify and will all be discussed in further detail. While I will not deny the power of the written word, the rest of this essay will more or less ignore written media, accepting that the logic detailed in the above paragraphs is correct, and therefore more attention need be devoted to images.

This thesis further relies on the idea that widely circulated media, or mass media, has a specific and defined role in society. Media exist to inform, to socialize, and to survey (D. Crow, personal communication, November 11, 2012). Media seek to connect us to others through ritual and conversation. This is known as “the agenda setting function” of media. Story selection, prominence, and frequency of coverage catalyze discussion among the public and among law makers (McCombs, 1972). It is the issues media focuses on that eventually get addressed.

Now that the role of media has been established, and that we understand the special role visual media holds, it is important to understand the long and complicated history of public lands management. The United States government is currently in its third phase of land policy. Initially, the government played the role of the empire builder, trying to acquire as much land as possible for our developing nation. Early U.S. expansion was key in shaping future land policy, by rapidly, and urgently, adding land, our early nation set a precedent that land and natural resources were important and valuable.

The second stage of governmental land management can best be characterized as a land disposal policy. This era was inspired by Thomas Jefferson's
agrarian ideal, and his belief that America’s greatest asset was its abundance of land. Jefferson believed that it was the government’s duty to convert newly acquired public lands into small family farms. He believed this measure would provide an alternative to the dependence and powerlessness fostered by urban industry. Up to 1890, the government did everything it could to privatize public lands for development.

It was not until the late 19th century that the public and government began to realize that the disposal policy was flawed and unsustainable. Thus began the current federal policy of public land’s management and stewardship. In 1891, the United States Forest Service was established. Though it took several decades for the Forest Service to achieve some legitimacy, its initial policy of land conservation, or multiple-use sustained yield, continues to shape its mission (Egan, 2009). Although responsible land stewardship would seem to be a welcome change, it created, and continues to create, intense controversy; it is cheaper and easier for corporations to use unregulated land than it is to work within impersonal regulations set by a distant central government.

Considering that the Forest Service was initially the only governmental agency responsible for handling federally owned lands, its guiding principles and history are of particular relevance. In 1891, there was only one man working in the United States as a trained forester, Gifford Pinchot (Egan, 2009). He was the first head of the Forest Service, and today is widely known as the father of modern conservation: he believed that responsible land management, or conservation (the term he coined), involved developing public lands for present and future needs, and
the prevention of resource waste. While these beliefs constitute Pinchot’s *Principles of Conservation*, his most important legacy was his belief that “natural resources must be developed and preserved for the benefit of the many, not merely the profit of a few” (Pinchot, 1910).

This phrase has gone on to shape the modern idea of how public lands should be managed. Ideas like “wildlife is a public trust,” and “the democracy of the hunt” have simply re-appropriated Pinchot’s revolutionary idea and continue to guide wildlife and resource management (Sparling, 2014).

It is an important note that most of the following essay will not deal with Forest Service land or policy however. All of the lands I will discuss are National Parks, which are not managed in accordance with the principles of multiple-use sustained yield. National Park lands are delegated for special protection; they are intended to be “preserved unimpaired,” or to remain uninfluenced by humans (Sparling, 2014). We must understand how this varies from Forest Service lands so we can appreciate the controversy around them. Forest Service lands can still be developed responsibly; theoretically National Park lands are to remain as they were found.

The history of public land management is important for our understanding for several reasons. First, the completely different approaches the government has taken regarding public lands have resulted in a very wide range of opinions about the best land policy moving forward. Even over 100 years after the government abandoned its policy of land disposal, many public land users believe that they have the right to use public lands unregulated, as that was the original doctrine. For these
users, past “customs and culture” outweigh responsible land stewardship (Turner, 2012). On the other end of the spectrum, many members of the public prefer stricter, more conservative management of public lands to make amends for previous lack of oversight.

The extensive and complex history of public land’s management is also important because it highlights the value land has in the United States. Without realizing that public land management has been occurring in some way since the signing of our Constitution, we could not possibly begin to understand why influencing in the system is so difficult and valuable. Finally, if we do not understand the fundamental and founding belief that public land is a democratic resource meant for the enjoyment of all U.S. citizens, we will not be able to appreciate that everyone has a say in its management.

The democracy of public land is the connecting link between media and land management. If land did not belong to everyone, there would be no need for media to start conversation and assert influence, or for the government to responsibly manage it. That being said, public land does belong to every citizen, so laws relating to public land must have public support, and as discussed earlier, the most effective way to gain public support is through visual media.

**The Creation of Yellowstone National Park**

Understanding the creation of the world’s first National Park requires a basic understanding of the political climate of the mid to late 1800’s. As discussed earlier, the 1800’s were characterized by reckless and unsustainable use of public lands.
The timber industry had depleted huge amounts of U.S. forests, overgrazing was running rampant, and water was becoming increasingly polluted through hydraulic mining (A. Kroepsch, personal communication, February 3, 2015). While all of this was occurring, efforts to save pristine areas of land were slowly becoming a reality. Led by the efforts of John Muir, Yosemite Valley and its surrounding area became the nation’s first state park in 1864 and slowly the nation was becoming concerned with the irresponsible consumption of natural resources (Egan, 2009).

This was the perfect time for a plot of land to be set aside for preservation. The Civil War had recently ended and the mad rush westward was threatening to destroy the wilderness that made America different from the rest of the world (Egan, 2009). There was only one problem, “Yellowstone remained for many years a landscape that had to be seen to be believed” (John, 2007), and for most Americans, seeing that landscape in person was not a fiscal reality.

A newspaper article from 1867 reads, “Language is not adequate to convey an idea of the marvelous beauty of scenery, which is beyond the power of descriptions,” and despite the fantastical stories told about Yellowstone prior to 1869, descriptions were “‘fragmentary and often contradictory.’” (Hayes, 1974, 1977; Meyer 1996, quoted in John, 2007). The unfathomable nature of Yellowstone, though awe inspiring, did the region no favors; although the legends of Yellowstone earned it a reputation, its reputation seemed “mythical.” The mythic status Yellowstone held put it on a plane outside the grasp of the government; laws cannot be made when their subject cannot be believed.
For several years Yellowstone sat in limbo, too wonderful be neglected and yet too fantastical to be taken seriously. This changed in 1871 when United States Geological Surveyor Ferdinand V. Hayden went on an official expedition to explore, map, and collect data on the Yellowstone region. Accompanying him were photographer William H. Jackson and painter Thomas Moran. When the party returned, they brought with them photos, watercolors (see appendix), and eventually a masterpiece painting. The wonders of Yellowstone were now believable, now there was an image with which they could associate the legend. Shortly after their return East, Ulysses S. Grant made Yellowstone the world’s first National Park.

Moran did for Yellowstone what Albert Bierstadt did for Yosemite Valley: he put a face to the name (Egan, 2009). Upon seeing Moran’s painting *The Grand Canyon of Yellowstone*, one art critic wrote, “I have never seen any place like it, but I know from this picture that it exists... Mr. Moran’s picture makes doubts of its possibilities impossible.” (Cook 1872, quoted in John, 2007).

Although Yellowstone assumed status as a National Park, the actual implications of its new status were fairly minimal. It is important to remember that the Forest Service would not actually become a reality for another 19 years, and the National Park Service would not exist for another 44.

The west was still privileged to lack of government oversight and lawlessness. According to Timothy Egan, “Grazing and all manner of commercial use continued,” and “logging was unrestricted, the trees taken for free.” The U.S. Military
eventually had to be called in to protect Yellowstone’s natural resources but even that had a limited effect considering the vast grounds of the park (Duncan & Burns, 2009).

![Figure 1: “The Grand Canyon of Yellowstone”; Moran; 1872](image)

The starved conditions in which Yellowstone National Park was forced to operate found the newly formed park fighting for its life. Luckily, Yellowstone had “a most active ally in facilitating both development and accessibility” (Blodgett, 2007), in the Western railway system. The railroad system played an instrumental role in the survival of Yellowstone National Park. Train companies actively advertised for Yellowstone, recognizing that increased interest in the park would increase passengers traveling via train. Advertisements “conjured up the most attractive visions possible to catch the potential traveler’s eye” (Blodgett, 2007). At the turn of
the 19th century, options for traveling west were very limited, and train travel was
the only viable option for most Americans. If Yellowstone could survive, the railway
system would profit immensely.

Quickly, the railroad system realized that the best way to insure the survival
of Yellowstone was to advertise for it. If Americans could just see the park they
would maintain interest in protecting it. “Recent scholarship reveals the crucial role
played by railroads employed their lobbying skills and political influence on behalf
of national park proposals from the formation of Yellowstone in 1872 to the
designation of Glacier National Park nearly four decades later” (Blodgett, 2007).

![Figure 2: Railway advertisements for Yellowstone National Park](image)

Although railroads were represented at Department of the Interior
conferences concerning the future of the National Park System, much of this
influence was directed at the public through advertising, made possible by massive
advertising budgets. In 1916 “a group of seventeen major railroads contributed
$43,000 towards the publication and distribution of The National Parks Portfolio, an
attractively illustrated volume intended to build political and popular support for the parks” (Blodgett, 2007). Railroad advertisements tried to sell Yellowstone as wild and romantic, savage and pristine: a place where “wilderness and civilization meet almost nose to nose” (Blodgett, 2007). These widely circulated advertisements helped shape the “American public’s understanding of an essential national park identity” (Blodgett, 2007).

In other words, while public land has always been threaded deeply within our culture (we have grown with our land), it was not until the media campaign orchestrated by the Western railroads that public land became part of our American identity. By trying to attract passengers, the railroad system effectively convinced Americans that the National Parks deserved to be valued.

**The Creation of Canyonlands National Park**

Canyonlands National Park in Southeast Utah is a prime example of visual media’s powerful influence in public land policy. By most accounts, Canyonlands was a very unlikely National Park. Despite the deserving nature of the region, the battle to make Canyonlands a National Park was hard fought, and the fact that it eventually became one remains one of the great successes of the preservation movement. To best understand why the story of Canyonlands was so unlikely, it is essential to understand the history of the region in which it is located.

Canyonlands lies in the conflux of the Green and Colorado rivers, within the Colorado plateau. On a political map, Canyonlands rests in San Juan County, Utah,
near the Southeast corner of the state. It is this location that makes Canyonlands such an interesting study into the power of media. Geographically, Canyonlands is in one of the most exceptional regions of the world. As a firm believer and staunch supporter of the National Parks, it is hard for me to describe a region as “saturated with National Parks,” but I cannot think of a better way to describe the Colorado Plateau. The plateau has 10 National Parks and 17 National Monuments, most of which were well established before Canyonlands. Additionally, and for several reasons that shall be explored further, San Juan County maintains a rocky relationship with the federal government, a relationship that did Canyonlands no favors when trying to become a protected area.

I have heard it said that it is “impossible to separate Western history from Mormon history.” When the Mormon Church decided to move west, it was because the West was perceived as empty and uninhabited. The Church had been forced to move quickly and frequently due to religious persecution, and eventually was forced to settle in Utah, “the most rugged, difficult as well as spectacular terrain in the West” (Abbey, 1968).

Much of Mormon settlement in Utah was done in the name of Church missions. One of the most notable of such missions was the San Juan Mission, led by Silas S. Smith. By the mid-1870’s, the Church had began to move near what was San Juan county, but officially decided to establish a colony along the San Juan River in 1879. On October 22, 1879, Smith left Iron County, Utah with over 200 other men, women, and children for the San Juan. Because the group only took provisions for a
six-week trip, and left a little later than planned, they decided to take a little established shortcut known as the Hole-in-the-Rock route (Peterson, 1975).

The biggest obstacle along the chosen course was the Colorado River, but according to a scouting report from the summer of 1879 it was passable. The scouts had discovered the Hole-in-the Rock, a narrow slit in the west wall of Glen Canyon. They reported that a road could be built through it leading down to the river. Based upon this recommendation the group began to gather in late November and early December at Forty Mile Spring about forty miles southeast of Escalante. In the meantime, exploring parties returned with negative reports concerning the terrain east of the Colorado, which looked extremely difficult for wagon travel. Unfortunately, snow had already blocked any return to their former homes, and so the group determined to forge ahead (Reeve, 1995).

It took the mission until late January to build a wagon road through the slit scouts had seen, and then another four months for the trip to arrive at the banks of the San Juan River. The town of Buff, Utah was established on April 6, 1880, capping “one of the West’s great travel exploits,” and solidifying the idea the Buff was home, the Mormons would go no further, and San Juan County was theirs (Peterson, 1975).

Buff, Utah had a lifestyle that “was clearly its own” (Peterson, 1975). The inhospitable terrain, difficult journey, and distinct sense of purpose fostered an incredible sense of cooperativism within San Juan County, as well as a strong mistrust of outsiders. Historian Charles Peterson calls this the “Hole-in-the-Rock Mystique.”

If looked at rationally, the honor of being involved in this unparalleled endeavor [the San Juan Mission] may be somewhat dubious. But San Juaners did not look at the matter rationally. They had been given a charge. In the face of insuperable odds they had carried it out. Given the strong emphasis of the Mormon teachings on duty, they could feel with justification that they had taken a place high on the scale among those who had sacrificed for the success of the kingdom.
This sense of community-reliance, pride, and purpose remains very distinctive of San Juan County, and has therefore made the area uninterested in and hostile to federal government intervention and influence. This was one of the biggest problems when trying to establish a National Park in San Juan County. In the eyes of “San Juaners,” the land that would become Canyonlands National Park was not the federal government’s for taking.

Canyonlands also faced competition from the other protected areas in the Colorado Plateau. When Major Wesley Powell first explored the plateau during the 1869 Colorado River Expedition, his attention was drawn to other nearby regions.

Although Powell identified the “Cañon Lands” as a distinct sub-region of the Plateau, his focus on the Uinta Mountains and Grand Canyon combined with a lack of follow-up work by himself or other geologists in the “Cañon Lands” to ensure the region’s continued anonymity in both the scientific and popular realms (Schmieding, 2008). It must also be noted that Major Powell was “a cultural icon and literary figure,” not just a scientist, so his first trip exploration of the plateau was staffed by many non-scientists, including the artist responsible for Yellowstone’s protection – Thomas Moran. Like Powell, Moran was primarily interested in the Grand Canyon, and painted it over 20 times throughout his career (Schmieding, 2008).

It would take another 65 years for the region Powell called “Cañon Lands” to be brought into the national spotlight. In 1907, Natural Bridges National Monument was created. Two years later, Rainbow Bridge National Monument was created, and 20 years after that, Arches National Monument came into being. Between this span, the first ever photographic and motion picture on the Colorado and Green Rivers
mission was led by brothers Ellsworth and Emery Kolb in 1911. It was during this trip where the region West of the rivers was given the name “the Maze,” now one of the four districts of the park (Schmieding, 2008).

With the increased attention dedicated to preserving portions of the Colorado Plateau, it is not surprising that the Canyonlands region eventually drew the government’s eye. In 1936, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes proposed Escalante National Monument, “a 6,968 square mile area taking in most of the Canyonlands from Moab to the Navajo reservation” (Pierson, 1989). Despite eventually being repackaged as a much smaller recreation area, the idea still did not work.

The Escalante concept was initially met with severe resistance in Utah. For reasons previously described, San Juan County is no fan of the federal government, and the idea of the feds locking up such a large portion of land was greeted with complete distain. This was only part of the problem however. It would later be expressed by Stewart Udall, “If everyone could see it [Canyonlands]... the controversy would evaporate” (Schmieding, 2008). He said this nearly 30 years after the Escalante concept died, which only further highlights the lack of media associated with the region. While the Kolb brothers’ photo tour was widely circulated, it was not enough. In 1914 Ellsworth Kolb published the photos and account from the trip in *Through the Grand Canyon from Wyoming to Mexico*, and Emery went on a lecture tour with the film he co-produced (KAET-TV, n.d.). These were the only images from the Canyonlands, and they did not reach enough eyes to
have a substantial national impact. By the beginning of World War II in 1940, the concept had died.

However, it did not remain dead for too long. In 1943, photographs of the Canyonlands region were published in the National Parks Association Journal; in 1944, when “NPS Lands Division Chief Ben Thompson outlined a park in the triangular region between the Green and Colorado Rivers” in a report titled Recommendation for a National Park at the Junction of the Green and Colorado Rivers (Schmieding, 2008). The idea faced the same obstacles as Escalante National Monument had, but this time it had the benefit of hindsight. This time, the park would be smaller, it would have a less vague name, and it would be known.

In 1944, Life Magazine ran a photo essay and feature article titled “The Colorado.” These were the first published photos of the region in a nationally circulated, popular magazine. In 1950, “the first extensive written and photo display of the Canyonlands basin” was published in A Survey of the Recreational Resources of the Colorado River Basin (Schmieding, 2008), a report from the Department of the Interior. In 1952, National Geographic Magazine released the first color photos of the Canyonlands region, and in March of 1962, a bill was finally introduced to create Canyonlands National Park.

That same year, the National Park Service commissioned independent filmmaker and photographer Charles Eggert to make a film on the Canyonlands. When Stewart Udall remarked that if everyone could to see the region, there would be no debate as to its merit as a National Park, Eggert was his solution. And what a
solution he proved to be. His film, *The Sculptured Earth*, argued that “a place should not be valued merely in dollars and cents, but through beauty and inspiration” (Schmieding, 2008), and gave powerful support to the National Park proposal. The film played in Salt Lake City, Utah in 1962 to an audience of over 700, including many important political figures in Utah (Schmieding, 2008).

The film did not end the Canyonlands controversy, but it did make a difference. *The Sculptured Earth* introduced The Sierra Club to the divisive region (Schmieding, 2008). The film even convinced David O. McKay, the presiding President of the Mormon Church that Wallace Bennett, the chief opponent of the future park, was “on the wrong side of the road” (Smith, 1991).

There is no better way to show how effective visual media was in creating Canyonlands National Park than the following statistic: “By late 1962 public opinion in urban Utah and outside the state was ninety-five percent in favor of the national park” (Schmieding, 2008). Think about that; when the Kolb brothers released the first photos of Canyonlands in 1911, no one knew or cared about the area. Just 51 years later, 95% of the population outside the region of Canyonlands supported a National Park there, despite probably having never seen it in the flesh. In 1936, there had been almost no imagery associated with the conflux of the Green and Colorado Rivers, and Canyonlands remained anonymous because of it. On September 12, 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed a law swearing to preserve Canyonlands for posterity, thereby declaring Canyonlands America’s 31st National Park.
So what?

Recently, I had the opportunity to visit Canyonlands National Park with some friends of mine. The previous night we had camped in the National Forest area North of the park, and when we woke we packed up our crowded car and headed south toward the Northern most entrance of the park, closest to the “Island in the Sky,” one of the park’s four districts. The road was well paved, and within half a mile of entering the gate we arrived at the visitor center and trailhead.

Having never been to the park, we immediately entered the visitor center to talk to a ranger and pick up a map. While there I also picked up a few post cards, one of which, at the time of this writing, now hangs above my desk. The postcard depicts an artistic rendering of the “famed Mesa Arch.” It is a highly stylized graphic, featuring intense contrast and rich colors, the type of image one would see in an old Marvel comic—dramatic and bold.

I point this out because the Mesa Arch is one of the most popular and publicized features of Canyonlands National Park: a quick Google Image search of the park proves that. It’s not that the Arch isn’t deserving of publication... it is. Mesa Arch overlooks the enormous canyon in which the Colorado and Green Rivers converge. This canyon also features the Island in the Sky, a massive plateau, which in the right weather conditions, appears to be floating above the clouds. Something sublime is, by definition, “of such excellence, grandeur, or beauty as to inspire great admiration or awe.” The view from Mesa Arch is sublime.
Due to the astounding beauty of Mesa Arch, it was an easy decision for me and my friends to go view it in person... we were not the only ones with that idea. The arch “trailhead” was a little over six miles down the road through the park, and when we pulled up there was a large parking lot to hold the many other vacationers going to view the famous arch. It was not much of a hike for us to get to the arch. The parking lot was only a half-mile from the arch, and the trail leading up to the arch looked more like a road.
Responsible trail building tries to keep trails no wider than two feet. This allows hikers to walk single file, doing the least amount of damage to the natural ecosystem. A trail as wide as the one leading up to the arch is a substantial intruder to the ecosystem of the park, an ecosystem the National Park Service tries to “preserve unimpaired,” according to their mission statement. Additionally, in federal wilderness areas groups of people are limited to 12 so as to not disturb the wildlife. There were easily 40 other people at the arch at the same time we arrived.

We took another hike after viewing the arch. This hike was longer, more difficult, and in a far less popular area of the park. On our second hike we saw no one, we walked single file, and the trail was only two feet wide. On this hike we saw much more wildlife and vegetation than we did on our walk to Mesa Arch. It was here that the canyonlands were being “preserved unimpaired,” not by Mesa Arch. Due to the circulated imagery associated with the Arch, the park service has ignored its mission to limit protect the area’s ecosystem and instead has irreparably damaged it in certain areas. This is where the power of media is incredibly apparent; if media tells us what to focus on, then it is no surprise that everyone heads to the arch. The only problem is, with more media around an area, the less it actually gets protected. Park policies have been coerced into making popular view sheds accessible, rather than preserving them.

I am not the first person to observe this. Edward Abbey, a writer and former National Park Service Ranger, discusses the degradation of the parks in his highly recommendable book Desert Solitaire. For Abbey, the problem lies in what he calls
“industrial tourism.” The industrial tourism industry includes motel and restaurant owners, the gasoline industry, contractors, the automobile industry, retailers, and many other institutions. It is comprised of businesses and business owners who seek to profit from the tourists. In a different era, Abbey almost certainly would have included the rail industry when defining the components of the industrial tourism industry.

Industrial tourism wants to make the process of visiting national parks as fast and mechanized as possible: tourists drive through the parks, stopping only briefly to peer out their car window and snag a glimpse of the popular sites... sites popularized through visual media. The industrial tourism industry benefits the most from this assembly line style of park visitation because it funnels tourists back to the restaurants, gas stations, and hotels.

This is important because “these various interests are well organized,” and in what is probably not as great an overstatement than one would like to believe, “command more wealth than most modern nations” (Abbey, 1968). This allows the industry to put immense amounts of money into attractive advertising campaigns, in order to draw tourists to the parks and profit from their expenses. It is important to note that it is not the National Park Service profiting from the advertisements, but the affiliated businesses, which make money from the industrial tourism complex.

The National Park Service unveiled its newest advertising campaign early this spring. The campaign is called *Find Your Park*, and its intended to renew interest in the National Park system with the National Park Service’s 100th birthday
approaching in 2016. The campaign is being sponsored by American Express, Budweiser, Subaru, REI, Humana, Disney, Coke, Coleman, and Accenture. While the campaign will taking place over the next several years, and has not been fully rolled out, if its website, findyourpark.com, serves as any indication, advertisements will highlight the spectacular features of America’s extensive National Park system.

The new ad campaign is just one example of the industrial tourism industry advertising for the parks to grain profit. AAA actively publishes well-illustrated park guides, highlighting the best features and the quickest way to access them. They do this not to promote the parks, but to promote the tourism industry that brings them so much money. Michael Frome, an avid supporter and harsh critic of the National Park Service notes that, “National parks reflect society. They tend to become what the public wants them to be, through usage as well as laws” (Frome, 1992). Media highlighting the parks’ most exquisite features encourages a mindset that these features are accessible... for they are the only features we recognize and expect. The park service therefore manages land to fulfill these expectations.

There is an inherent danger in this precedent. It seems that the standard path a National Park follows once becoming official is this: 1) Advertisements show the most beautiful areas of the park, 2) Tourists come to the park expecting to see only these features, 3) the National Park Service builds roads so that the tourists can view said features easily, 4) the features get degraded due to heavy use and unnatural development.
This is especially relevant today. The floor of the Grand Canyon, along the Colorado River, is one of the most iconic images from what may be America’s best-known national park. Each year thousands of tourists hike to the floor of the canyon to see the layered rock walls jetting up along the banks of the Colorado. Images looking out into the Grand Canyon have become iconic and essential to understanding American identity. Currently, the Navajo nation and private investors are discussing an immense development project along the east rim of the canyon.

Tourists who may not otherwise be able to visit the floor of the canyon could ride a gondola to the confluence a mile below. There they would stroll on an elevated walkway and take in the stunning view from stadium-style seating (Crawford, 2014).

The project is being called the Grand Canyon Escalade, “a billion-dollar development with hotels, restaurants, shops, and a Navajo cultural center” (Crawford, 2014).

This project is legal because part of the Grand Canyon lies within the Navajo Reservation, and therefore is not subject to management from the National Park Service, which, despite the aforementioned complaints, does not generally allow private development.

The Grand Canyon Escalade provides a great case study regarding the negative impact media can have on land management. Media has introduced every American to the Grand Canyon. Each visitor to the canyon has his or her expectations shaped by the media that has come before. Visitors “measure their satisfaction by the degree to which the canyon conforms to the expectations in their minds” (Sommers, 1993). If we allow media to define our experience, it is no
wonder development will follow. An image is just a representation. Projects like the Grand Canyon Escalade seek to recreate a popular representation of the canyon because that is what we expect it to be. This is not only unnatural and impossible, but I believe incredibly unhealthy and unsustainable.

So why is this important? When I bought my postcard of Mesa Arch, I had to realize that the image of the arch on the postcard was not what I would see when looking at the arch in person. Trying to recreate such an image in real life would require me to change the sun's position, the clouds, and even some of the geologic features of the canyon below the arch. It is impossible to recreate an image in real life; even a photo is just a snapshot of a specific place at a specific time. When development projects try to appease tourists by recreating images they are familiar with, they are chasing an impossible goal.

I believe that images have the ability to inspire and initiate change. So if visual media can inspire us to protect certain places, how can we utilize this tool more effectively today? I spoke with Rich Fedorchak, the chief of interpretation at Rocky Mountain National Park, to explore the use of media in the park today. As chief of interpretation, Mr. Fedorchak’s job is to facilitate a meaningful connection between park visitors and the park. In other words, Mr. Fedorchak is responsible for “giving the park meaning.”

“The history of the park service,” Mr. Fedorchak explained, “is the history of artists.” According to Mr. Fedorchak, personal value, or meaning, is derived from an intellectual and emotional connection with a place or thing. So while an image might
inspire a visit, or even an emotional connection, it is unlikely to inspire a real attachment. Many of the externalities attached with high visitation can be attributed to a lack of personal value people have with the site they are visiting.

Media has failed in that it stops short of inspiring an intellectual connection between the image portrayed and the viewer. While the viewer may appreciate and connect with the image, he or she must be given more to reach a point where the physical site has personal significance. Mr. Fedorchak sees modern technology, especially social media, as a way to overcome this disconnect. Social media allows millions of people to come together to and share meaningful stories and experiences. In an age where most cell phones come equipped with cameras, it is easier than ever for people to circulate images.

Social media provides a forum in which people can share images of experiences they found value in. This forum allows for personal connection and the exchange of information—it is no longer an image being shared, but a story. Perhaps even more importantly about this development is the diversity of imagery that can be shared. “We need diverse art for diverse people,” Mr. Fedorchak told me. The most circulated imagery associated with the national parks is often incredibly reminiscent of the romantic art of the manifest destiny era. Not only did manifest destiny displace hundreds upon thousands of people, but it is also deeply entwined with the experience of white expansionists in the American West. That this style of art is deeply troubling to some is entirely legitimate; the fact that many people have difficulty relating to it is no surprise.
Media has yet to catch up to the current demographic transition, social media helps to pick up the slack. Social media has essentially democratized the publication of imagery, allowing more perspectives to be seen. A simple web search shows the new diversity of images being posted online by park users. On Instagram, an online photo sharing platform owned by Facebook, a quick search for #findyourpark, the hashtag currently being promoted by the National Park Service, turns up over 210 thousand photos at the time of writing. While some of these photos are in the same style of the romanticized images discussed earlier, many others highlight petroglyphs, vegetation, and park users. In many ways, these photos are more intimate, personal, and relatable.

The further diversification of media and imagery published and circulated is one key step to the more effective use of media in land policy. The ability to associate and share personal experiences that are connected to visual media will be another important tool in eliminating some of the negative externalities that imagery is associated with.

There have also been changes in the more formal world of Western art and photography that provide valuable insight into creating personal meaning from imagery. The most noticeable trend in the photography of the American West is the rephotography movement. The premise behind rephotography is to retake a photo from the nineteenth century American West while trying to match the original framing as closely as possible. Juxtaposing the modern photo with the nineteenth
century one provides a sort of “then and now” perspective that allows the viewer to see how the landscape has been impacted and evolved over time.

I spoke to John Fielder, a prominent landscape photographer who has published several rephotography books. Mr. Fielder is quick to call himself an activist and environmentalist, but, despite his professional success, he is reluctant to call himself an artist. “The power of rephotography is its ability to tell a story,” Mr. Fielder explained. “People are interested in rephotography because they can see how the landscape has changed, for better or for worse.” As a self proclaimed activist, Mr. Fielder has used rephotography as a way to inspire environmental consciousness. In his view, rephotography can inspire people to take a closer look at their relationship to the landscape, and the way they shape it.

What if our media highlighted human impact more frequently? Not only does rephotography educate the viewer, but it also causes him or her to recognize his/her impact on the landscape. This creates both an intellectual and emotional connection, the exact connection Mr. Fedorchak described as essential to creating meaning.

The bulk of my thesis has shown that effective use of visual media has inspired us to protect certain places and further examination of various other National Parks would undoubtedly tell the same story. I chose the examples of Yellowstone and Canyonlands because they represent vastly different periods of time in American history but still show incredibly similar trends. A detailed study of any of other national parks would reveal a similar trend.
But, to use media responsibly in land management, we must realize that visual media is meant to show us the state of a specific place at a certain time. When we seek to physically recreate these moments we risk actually harming the place. We must allow media to inspire us, to activate our imaginations and creativity, and realize the many different potentials of a place. If we then try to recreate one of these potentials, we harm them all. Diversifying and democratizing media is the essential next step in the use of visual media for public land management. Similarly, using rephotography as an example for developing an aesthetic that is both pleasing and thought provoking has the potential to create meaningful media.
Appendix

Thomas Moran. *Great Springs of the Firehole River, 1871*

Thomas Moran. *Cinnabar Mountain, 1871*


William H. Jackson. *Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone from brink of Lower Falls, 1871*

References


Deep ecology is the belief that humans are not separate from their natural ecosystem. Deep ecologists seek to turn away from traditional anthropocentric thinking, and consider the environment and ecosystem with their every action. Edward Abbey was a famous deep ecologist, and his book Desert Solitaire is perhaps his best-known work. Desert Solitaire, a series of essays from Abbey's time working as a park ranger at Arches National Park.

His essay, “Polemic: Industrial Tourism in the National Parks,” is very critical of the National Park Service for degrading the land in the name of public accessibility. I used many of Abbey's ideas and criticisms of the National Park Service in the final section of my thesis.


Peter Blodgett's article about the influence the railroad industry had on the National Park system provides a compelling case study of media's influence on values and culture. Blodgett argues that advertisements sponsored by the railroad industry were instrumental in connecting the National Parks to American identity. This work is notable in my research because the advertisements were mostly sensory appeals, using vivid imagery to promote the parks.


The Big Burn is a fascinating and detailed look at the foundation and legacy of the U.S. Forest Service. Written by Timothy Egan, a Pulitzer Prize winning author and contributing writer at the New York Times, The Big Burn discusses in great depth the beginning of the Forest Service, the relationship between American’s and public lands, and the various stages each have gone through. This book was essential to my knowledge of the U.S. Public Land system.


Regreening the National Parks is an argument against overdevelopment of the National Parks. I used ideas from Michael Frome's book to provide examples of overdevelopment, which I later connected back to media influence.


Jackson, W. H. (1871). Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone from brink of lower falls [Photograph].


Gareth E. John’s 2007 article goes into details the response and impact of the painting Thomas Moran produced from his tour of the Yellowstone region with Ferdinand V. Hayden. John argues that Moran’s work represented a new way of viewing Yellowstone and helped legitimize it in the eyes of the American public.


Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase “the medium is the message.” He is esteemed in his field of cultural studies and his work is rarely discounted when discussing modern media.


Moran, T. (1871). Great springs of the firehole river [Painting].

Moran, T. (1872). The grand canyon of the Yellowstone [Painting].

[Northern Pacific Railroad brochure back cover]. (1913). Yellowstone’s Photo Collection: Brochures and Guides.


Charles Peterson is a Utah based historian. His book, *Look to the Mountains: Southeastern Utah and the La Sal National Forest*, describes the founding of the La Sal National Forest in San Juan County, Utah. In writing this book, Peterson describes in great detail the cultural history of the region, which I then used to discuss the creation of Canyonlands National Park. Peterson reasons through historic events and the effect they then had on the culture of the region. He coined the phrase “hole-in-the-rock mystique.” Peterson has won many awards for his writing. It should be noted that his book was published by the Bingham Young University Press, and therefore may be susceptible to a pro-Mormon, and pro-Utah, bias.


Although this article was published by the official website of the state of Utah, it provides a fairly unbiased, though a little romanticized, historical account of the hole-in-the-rock expedition.


*From Controversy to Compromise: The Administrative History of Canyonlands National Park* is by far the most detailed history of Canyonlands National Park I could find. Author Samuel J. Schmieding, a former history professor at Arizona State weaves a vivid history of Canyonlands National Park, starting nearly a century before the park became a reality. Schmieding history is incredibly holistic, making note of seemingly everything happening in Southern Utah in the wake of Euro-America’s discovery of the Colorado Plateau. By painting such a holistic picture, Schmieding allows the reader to fully realize the obstacles that stood in the way of Canyonlands National Park, and why media was so important in its ultimate founding.

The National Park Service commissioned Schmieding’s research, so a slight bias expected. That being said, it is minimal and more or less negligible, as Schmieding presents facts rather than opinions. His work is relevant to my thesis because he details very clearly all the
media related to Canyonlands and its effect. My research will focus on the first three chapters, as the last four are related to the administration and management of the park, not its founding.


Nancy Sommers essay *Between the Drafts*, is an argument for using personal experience in academic writing. Sommers talks about how expectations have come to define the level of satisfaction we feel during our experiences. I used these ideas in the final section of my essay to discuss the negative effects media can have.
