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Admission Charges

The feet of countless tourists have partially obliterated a chessboard wantonly inscribed on the floor of the west portico of the Parthenon. Volunteers from the Sierra Club go into the mountains to clean up after careless campers. Some timber companies log selectively and then reseed. Thus erosion, repairs, and new growth conceal some of man's damage to natural and man-made monuments.

But not all. Even if ax, knife, and beer can were outlawed, man would destroy nature and his own earlier constructions. The Parthenon has suffered more from what at the time seemed reasons of state than it has from indifference to classic beauty. Parts of the wild Sierras have given way to railroads, highways, and reservoirs. Agriculture and industry have permanently destroyed much of the primeval forest. Much as one may regret the passing of great monuments of the past, they cannot all be saved. But some must be. We owe to our successors the opportunity to see a range of samples of the work of their ancestors and a range of samples of what the earth was like before those ancestors drastically altered its character.

The natural samples should be of three kinds, and they can be treated quite differently. Recreational areas must be easy of access. If intensive use and man-made improvements alter their topography and ecology, no matter. Their purpose is to provide good camping, fishing, swimming, and boating facilities. For such of these areas as are on federal land, Congress and Secretary Udall now propose an admission charge so that their number may be increased and their maintenance improved.

National parks preserve more distinctive parts of our heritage, and preserve them in more nearly their original form. Because they serve recreational and educational purposes, they require good roads and good accommodations, and an admission fee for those who enjoy their beauty is accepted and appropriate. But they must be expected to change. Yellowstone Park cannot serve millions of visitors and also retain unchanged the wild, natural character it displayed when Washburn and Langford conducted the survey that led to its designation as the first national park.

True wilderness areas are also needed. How best to preserve them has been the topic of many an article and debate. Without here considering the merits of the single-use and multiple-use doctrines or the other issues that have stalled federal legislation, we offer the small suggestion that the admission charge idea should be extended. But a simple money charge is not enough; if wilderness areas are to be protected from human damage, a different kind of admission fee is called for: access must be difficult. There can be no landing fields or highways or large tourist accommodations. (Perhaps signs reading "Rough Trail," "Mosquito Lake," and the like would also help.) The difficulty of access that protects may also be a source of pleasure. Anyone who has, with pack on back, explored such a primitive area as the interior of the Olympic Peninsula has earned a kind of permanent ownership. He may never return, but he wants it left so that other hardy souls can duplicate his joy of discovery. And if he has scientific interests, he wants some samples of the earth and its living communities preserved as they were without human interference. For these privileges, substantial admissions requirements are appropriate.—D.W.