

The Future of Yellowstone

The Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. Redefining America's Wilderness Heritage. ROBERT B. KEITER and MARK S. BOYCE, Eds. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1991. xx, 428 pp., illus. \$45.

The Greater Yellowstone area consists of about 16 million acres of land in Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho. Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks form its core; its periphery includes parts of six national forests, two national wildlife refuges, additional public land administered by the Bureau of Land Management, and numerous private holdings. To emphasize the area's ecological cohesiveness, it is increasingly being referred to as the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE).

It is often claimed that the GYE is the largest relatively intact natural ecosystem in the contiguous 48 states. Much of the area, however, is administered under the philosophy of "multiple use," where mining, ranching, and timber harvest are legitimate activities on public lands; and decades of management blunders in the parks such as predator control, overprotection of elk, overbuilding of highways and visitor areas, and an inconsistent fire policy have left many wondering just how intact the GYE really is. On the other hand, the 2.5 million or so annual visitors to Yellowstone National Park are treated to many natural wonders, including geothermal features, waterfalls, sweeping mountain panoramas, and wildlife in profusion. Huge herds of elk and bison are always to be found; and the more observant visitor can usually see pronghorn, deer, moose, and maybe even a bear or two. There is definitely a lot here worth saving.

The questions are, What should be saved, and how should this be accomplished? Preservationists want to save it all. They feel that the natural processes that dominated the region in pre-settlement times should be allowed to reign as before. Wolves should be reintroduced to restore the original complement of natural predators on the ungulates, and naturally ignited fires should be allowed to burn unchecked. Nature should take its course, and people should interfere with this course as little as possible. Exploitationists see the area as a rich storehouse of resources to be harvested. Mountain meadows should be grazed by cattle; mineral and petroleum resources should be extracted from the ground; timber should be cut on

the most profitable rotation. Nothing should interfere with the orderly processing of the annual visitor bonanza, and elk produced in the parks should be killed by hunters, not wolves.

These views are reflected to some extent in the different mandates of the major land management agencies in the GYE—the National Park Service and the Forest Service. The Park Service is supposed to protect the parks' resources for future generations. To do this, it more or less follows a policy of "natural regulation," which allows wildlife populations to wax and wane with a minimum of interference and naturally ignited fires to burn as long as human life and property aren't threatened. But ungulate populations tend to grow large enough to overgraze their ranges and spill out of park boundaries, potentially spreading brucellosis (a disease that infects cattle) in the process. And fires, particularly during dry years, have a regrettable tendency to burn out of

control and destroy economically valuable timber and private property outside of park boundaries. The Forest Service, on the other hand, operating on the principle of multiple use, encourages grazing, timber harvest, oil and gas exploration, motorized recreation, and other activities that are generally incompatible with preservationist goals. When any of these activities are carried on anywhere near park boundaries they interfere in one way or another with the Park Service's mandates of resource protection and visitor enjoyment.

The first section of *The Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem* introduces and elaborates on the problems that result from the collision of preservationist and exploitationist philosophies. Duncan Patten takes a stab at defining the GYE, and co-editor Keiter outlines the problems. John Craighead, a long-time critic of Yellowstone's wildlife management policy, provides his perspective. Lockhart

Scenes from Yellowstone. [From *The Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem*]



