

# Defining Places: Literary Nonfiction and the National Park Movement, 1864-present



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## Abstract

The canon of American "Nature writing" has long been recognized for its influence on environmental policy, but the role of specific works in shaping environmental discourse and altering material circumstances has yet to be fully understood, especially from a rhetorical perspective. In response, this dissertation explores how works of Nature writing have functioned as persuasive arguments of definition within the National Park movement. It analyzes how literary nonfiction texts promoted a public understanding of specific landscapes and redefined them as worthy of preservation. The idea of rhetorical ecology underlies this analysis: rather than relying on the commonplace idea that a single author writing a single text can influence an environmental policy, the dissertation traces how a work of literary nonfiction operates within a complex system of texts, writers, readers, institutions, objects, and history. The four main case studies demonstrate how new definitions of place have emerged through works of literary nonfiction, each acting in relationship to a larger campaign that led to the preservation of an American landscape as a National Park: Yosemite, Great Smoky Mountains, Everglades, and Voyageurs. In these landmark campaigns, a prominent work of Nature writing, by a prominent author like John Muir, Horace Kephart, Marjory Stoneman Douglas, and Sigurd Olson, built upon and contributed to a definitional discourse that enabled people to see a specific landscape differently than it had been seen before. These cases also indicate that, as a landscape changes, the available means of persuasion change, too. Each chapter explores the lines of argument that can be emphasized by rhetors when the place in question defies traditional notions of beauty, grandeur, and purity. Campaigners can rely more or less on aesthetic, economic, scientific, historical, or recreational arguments, depending on the nature of the landscape itself and the rhetorical situation of the campaign. Finally, the last chapter explores the ongoing campaign for a Buffalo Commons National Park on the Great Plains. It follows a recent park debate as it evolves into a discourse of sustainability, and demonstrates how contemporary discussions about sustainable actions are inflected with the discourse of historical campaigns for preservation.

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an open carriage. On March 1, 1872, President Ulysses S. Grant had approved the establishment of Yellowstone National Park “as a public park or pleasuring-ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.”<sup>1</sup> Yellowstone was the first “national” park. Learn about national park history from NPF, a charitable partner of the National Park Service. See where it all began with the signing of the Yosemite Grant by President Abraham Lincoln in 1864, the first parkland to be set aside by the federal government for preservation and public use. The official nonprofit partner of the National Park Service. As the official nonprofit partner of the National Park Service, the National Park Foundation generates private support and builds strategic partnerships to protect and enhance America’s national parks for present and future generations.