

A Chronicle of the Age of Consequences

Chapter 6

Prisms

I am a conservationist, which means I try to make sense of the world through the prism of our relationship to nature.

While the particular light I study is refracted into narrow beams of interest, including land health, ranching, local food, conservation history, and the nature of work, the overall prismatic pattern reflects my desire to understand one topic: how to improve human well-being.

I've had this desire since I was a boy, undoubtedly influenced by my father, who was a doctor. His prism was neurology and he used it not only to heal but to explore his fascination with his fellow human beings. Although he didn't talk much about his work, his obvious humanism and profound kindness towards others were deeply motivating to me. People fascinated my mother as well, especially the lives and works of writers. However, her view of human nature, likely reinforced by her reading material, was not as sanguine as my father's. Still, her passion for human creativity made a deep impression on me at tender age.

These were prisms I inherited. Eventually, I discovered some of my own, including archaeology – with which I began to study the relationship between humans and nature. I read voraciously about past civilizations, learning in the process about the possibilities of human accomplishment and well-being. It was fascinating stuff, even if the stories often ended tragically. But it was on an archaeological survey in my late teenage years, hiking across the desert, that I gained a rare opportunity to study the fine line between nature and culture first hand, usually under a broiling sun.

It was on those surveys that the prism of conservation first began to take shape.

Over time, I gained other prisms – husband, father, westerner, author, activist, businessperson – and each helped me see different aspects of the human/nature continuum as well as contemplate the question of well-being. My children, for example, are a powerful prism. The light they refract raises big questions: What sort of natural world will they inherit? How will they use it? Will they be well? Have I done enough to fill their future with the joy and curiosity that I experienced as a child? What will they remember? What prisms will they inherit? Which ones will they discover on their own?

And by watching them grow, I am reminded that memory is a powerful prism too, though often a highly distorting one.

It's not just my prisms – I am constantly amazed how a single object or idea can be viewed in so many different ways by other people.

Take a tree in a forest, for instance. An economist examines it for its market value. An ecologist studies it with scientific intent. An environmental activist might chain herself to it. An artist might be inspired by its beauty. A farmer might rest in its shade. A hunter might creep through

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its shadow. An Internet-addicted urban kid might be awestruck by its majesty. A birder might see it as the home of an elusive species.

A tree is all of these things, of course, and none of them. After all, it's just a tree. But that is what's so fascinating about prisms – it's not the tree that matters ultimately. It's how we perceive it and what we do with that knowledge.

Take a national park – Yellowstone, say. In August, my family and I spent five days there soaking up the sounds, smells, and sights of that magnificent landscape. Sitting at a picnic table in a wooded grove near Old Faithful Geyser, I thought: Yellowstone is a prism too. Shine a light through it – America's love affair with the great outdoors, for example – and watch what it reveals. Or shine the environmental movement through it, or our national obsession with cheap mobility, or climate change, or the Age of Consequences, or a personal biography, and study the illuminating colors that are created.

For example, take what I could see and hear from the picnic table that sunny day. Despite nearly \$4 gas and \$5 diesel (and a boatload of bellyaching across the nation this summer), I saw a huge parking area packed with cars, trucks, RVs, and motorcycles. It wasn't just the lure of the famous geyser either, almost all of Yellowstone's roads were jammed with vehicles. It took us nearly four hours to drive the ninety miles from Jackson, Wyoming, to our reserved camp site along the Madison River. And when we arrived we were greeted with a sign that read "Campground Full."

There were even long lines at the bathrooms!

Then there was the noise. While sitting at the picnic table I heard: a helicopter flying nearby, the plaintive siren of a police car, and the steady hum of cars coming and going. I also heard the low, unearthly growl of what had to be a herd of dinosaurs or trolls approaching the parking lot. It grew louder, and more menacing, causing my son to look up from his sandwich to say "What *is* that?"

It was a herd alright – of choppers. An endless stream of Harley-Davidsons rode into view, each occupied by graying, leather-clad men and women, apparently on their way to a monster rally in South Dakota. The distinctive 'braaaap' of their machines filled the air.

There were other noises. At precisely 6am every morning, for instance, delivery trucks began rumbling past our campground on their way to the restaurants, gift shops, bookstores, hotels, gas stations, visitor centers, and cafeterias that festoon the park.

The only time we found genuine peace-and-quiet was in the Lamar Valley, in the northern stretch of the park, where we found a different herd – 300 to 400 bison grazing in a gorgeous meadow. When we shut off our engine to listen, the silence rushed at us like a cyclone. The only sound was the occasional grunt of a bull bison in the distance.

During our visit, we could also see, and smell, the evidence of fire. Three wildfires burned in the park, filling the sky with a woody opalescence. Meanwhile, all around us were signs of previous fires, especially the Great Fires of '88, which burned nearly half of the park, creating a media

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firestorm to go along with the flying cinders. “By God, Yellowstone is being destroyed!” was the general tenor of reporting, as I recall. It was also the opinion of the local merchants who depended on the tourist trade for a livelihood. But twenty years later, much of the black caused by the fires has been replaced by green – a vigorous growth of lodgepole pines, densely packed and uniform, looking very much like a thick, green shag carpet. Nature, as usual, had the last word.

Despite the hand wringing the tourists never stopped coming, of course. That’s because the geysers never stopped geysering and the wildlife never ceased ambling along the roadways. We saw moose, mule deer, osprey, bald eagles, squirrels, marmots, geese, bison, coyotes, pelicans, fish, and elk, but no bears, bighorn sheep, or lynx. Alas, we didn’t see a wolf either, much to Olivia’s disappointment, though we came close once.

It is this particular part of the ‘outdoor’ prism that Yellowstone shines brightest. The human fascination with wild things is an ancient one. Unfortunately, in the 21st century, thanks to sprawl and other contagious forms of industrialization, the opportunity to see animals in the wild has diminished dramatically. There are only a handful of easily-accessible landscapes around the planet that can almost guarantee an up-close-and-personal experience with wildlife. Kenya’s safari-country is one, Yellowstone is another.

I can attest to the consequences of this fascination. One morning, I edged our truck too close to a bison bull who appeared to be sauntering nonchalantly down a road. Suddenly, he turned and expressed his annoyance by head-butting us, leaving a horn-sized dent in the side of the truck. “Good for him,” I thought, before speeding away, chagrined.

The fires and the wildlife reminded me that there is another light that can be shined through Yellowstone. I’m referring to the American conservation movement, of which Yellowstone is a pioneering emblem. This prism can also suggest how this important movement will respond to the advent of the Age of Consequences.

For any conservationist worth his or her salt, Yellowstone’s story is a familiar one. Unsettled and largely unexplored for most of the 19th century, the cold, high headwaters of the Yellowstone River, sometimes called “Colter’s Hell” for a tall-tale telling mountain man, revealed its mysteries to three successive expeditions, beginning in 1869. The colorful geysers, waterfalls, valleys and lakes astonished every explorer who saw them. When the various reports, photographs, and paintings produced by the expeditions became public, they astonished lawmakers and the American people as well. Shortly, a clamor went up to protect this unique place. With astonishing speed, Congress passed a bill to do precisely that.

On March 1, 1872, President Ulysses S. Grant signed a bill creating the nation’s – and the world’s – first national park.

It was a benchmark moment in American history. The decision to reserve, rather than exploit, a natural landscape was almost unprecedented. And it was just the beginning. Within two decades, Congress created the national forest reserve system (now our national forests), and designated

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additional national parks. Private efforts, such as the Boone and Crockett Club and the Sierra Club, were initiated as well.

All of this paved the way for Teddy Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot, John Muir and the florescence of American conservation after the turn of the century.

Yellowstone was seen by all as the flagship of this movement and its birth became a beloved ‘creation myth’ retold by countless conservationists, including Vice-President Al Gore in 1997, during the park’s 125th birthday celebrations. The story was the same one: the dark forces of commercialism had been defeated by the bright light of altruism.

Of course, all prisms are distorting to one degree or another. Historians now believe the park’s creation had more to do with behind-the-scenes maneuvering of the profit-minded Northern Pacific railroad, which had designs to carry tourists right to the edge of Yellowstone Lake, than the high-minded principles of scientists and nature advocates. But that doesn’t change Yellowstone’s impact on the conservation movement, though it sharpens our understanding of the role tourism played early in the development of the national park idea.

Yellowstone continued to set conservation trends. For example, from its inception park managers suppressed all forest fires, thereby setting a pattern that the federal government followed for many decades. At the same time, the park embraced tourism. Hotels were built, roads paved, and gift shops installed. Cheap fossil fuel did the rest. This had the consequence of conflating nature appreciation with physical convenience and non-stop shopping among the average American visitor – a pattern that also solidified into stone for decades to come.

In the 1960s, Yellowstone blazed yet another trail when park managers reversed course a bit and adopted “naturalness” as their goal. This meant taking a “hands off” approach to wildlife and other natural resources, including fire. Fishing off Fishing Bridge ended, for example, as did bear-feeding at garbage dumps, much to the disappointment of long-time visitors (as well as the bears).

Yellowstone began to be seen by the Park Service and its allies in the budding environmental movement as something “pristine” in a world that was becoming increasingly sullied by the toxic and noxious effects of pollution, accelerated exploitation of natural resources, and the spread of sprawl.

In the 1970s, this “pristineness” idea picked up support from wildlife biologists and ecologists who worried that the park was threatened by logging and other commercial activities on the surrounding national forests. Their concern ignited an effort by environmental activists in the early 1980s to protect the ‘Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.’ This, in turn, stoked an ‘ecosystem approach’ among land management agencies across the nation.

New conservation priorities took root: the protection of roadless areas, expanded efforts to curtail logging, mining, and livestock grazing on public lands; the embrace of outdoor recreation; the creation of conservation easements to protect open space on private land; and the reintroduction of the gray wolf. This latter event, which took place in 1995, was considered by many

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environmentalists to be a watershed moment in the movement's history – and Yellowstone, once again, occupied center stage.

But something important had quietly changed in the meantime. Beginning with the Great Fires of '88, perceptions of nature and “naturalness” began to shift. The fires themselves demolished the myth of the park's “pristineness” – because of the large role humans played in them. Not only was nature not static, the fires suggested, but the larger world itself was changing under the influence of humans. Climate change, for example, has profound implications for the park, as it does for natural systems across the globe. The hand of man, suddenly, seemed to be everywhere.

Rocky Barker, in his history of the park, titled “*Scorched Earth: How the Fires of Yellowstone Changed America*” puts it this way:

“No matter what Park Service officials said, the fires destroyed a sense of innocence not only in the general public but in the environmental movement as well...All the spin in the world couldn't make people love fire any more than they could love a tornado, a flood, a hurricane, or a volcano eruption. But they could learn to place it in the realistic concept of their lives on earth. The Yellowstone fires were, for many, the beginning of this lesson at the end of the twentieth century.... The fundamental dividing line between preservation and use in the environmental paradigm, in place since the days of Muir and Pinchot and Hetch Hetchy, was broken. Man and nature, civilization and wilderness, could not be separated neatly.”

Once again, Yellowstone led the way. But let's replace this prism with another for a moment. As I sat at the picnic table that day, I wondered: what can Yellowstone tell us about the Age of Consequences? How will it fare under climate change and energy depletion, for example – which I consider to be the two great challenges confronting us? What can it teach us about the possibilities of improving human well-being, which I believe will be the focus of conservation in the 21st century?

It's too early to say. The refracted light from this prism is largely unfocused at this point, though some outlines are discernable. Higher energy prices will likely mean less tourists in the park, it's safe to say, though it might mean more choppers! Less tourists means less economic activity in neighboring towns, which means less tax revenue to support essential services. If the federal government feels the tax pinch, it might mean less money to administer Yellowstone. And so on.

There will be ecological changes as well, though no one can say exactly what they will be. It is likely that environmentalism will change too. That's because if (when) human well-being declines, conservation priorities will shift from wilderness and wildlife protection to food production, water availability, and sustainable use of our forests. And if (when) things begin to contract economically, there will be an increased emphasis on ‘local’ – local food, local energy, local resources, local people – and local conservation.

These are just guesses. As I said before, prisms can be bewildering.

Sitting at the picnic table that day, however, I had to lift one more prism to my eye. I had been at this table before – twice in fact. In 2004, I sat here with my family, pretty much at the same time

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of day, eating the same sort of lunch, surveying a similar scene in the parking lot. The only important difference was that Sterling and Olivia were four years younger then, which for children is practically a lifetime. They had grown so much in the interim, evolving from giddy kids up to the edge of becoming thoughtful young people – passing from the gosling stage of childhood to something more independent.

A wave of sadness washed over me. I missed my goslings.

Life is all about change, I know – nothing stays the same. Yellowstone knows all about it too. Raising children means confronting this fact of life head-on. Eventually, it also means letting go – which is why, I suppose, memories are so important; places too, especially if they mark the passage of time.

Visits to Yellowstone correlate with important stages in my life. I was here in 1990, conducting my own exploring expedition around the West. I vowed to return only when I had children. I passed through in 1986, during a tumultuous period of aimlessness and frustration. Gen and I camped here in 1980, on our way to college to begin our junior year together. It was a voyage of discovery for us – discovering the West, discovering each other. We were not yet twenty and the world was definitely our oyster.

But it was my first visit that refracts the strongest light. It was July, 1977, and I sat at the very same picnic table (or an earlier incarnation). I came to Yellowstone to backpack – part of a mind-blowing summer of hiking, camping, and traveling with friends that included Zion, Arches, Grand Tetons, Glacier, Sequoia, and Yosemite National Parks. I scarcely knew these places existed before that summer, and I was unprepared for what I saw. By the end of the last hike, I was transformed.

Sitting at that picnic table in 1977, I was vaguely aware that I had been handed a prism of unusual value. Eventually, I understood that its vivid colors had much to teach me – about beauty, open space, history, land and people, starting with our nation’s crown jewels. A British observer once declared that national parks were the “best idea” Americans ever had. At the tender age of sixteen, I couldn’t agree more. Today, the colors are just as vivid, though they have shifted somewhat over time as subtler hues came into focus. Still, whenever I visit Yellowstone, I think of this prism.

I intend to never put it down.