

# ”Devil’s Bargains ?” An environmental history of tourism in the Sierra Nevada.

Hélène Schmutz

► **To cite this version:**

Hélène Schmutz. ”Devil’s Bargains ?” An environmental history of tourism in the Sierra Nevada.. Première Université d’Hiver Internationale du Labex ITEM, Jan 2014, Sarcenas, France. <hal-00952360>

**HAL Id: hal-00952360**

**<http://hal.univ-grenoble-alpes.fr/hal-00952360>**

Submitted on 29 Apr 2014

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

**« *Devil's Bargains ? An environmental history of tourism in the Sierra Nevada* ».**

**Hélène Schmutz**

Hal Rothman, an American historian, wrote a book entitled *Devil's Bargains : Tourism in the Twentieth Century American West* in which he contends that the transition to an economy based on tourism came with socioeconomic costs that were paid by the local inhabitants with insufficient access to capital (Rothman, 1998). One of his leading ideas was that they were led to become *faux* of themselves in order to match the tourists' expectations. It is a critical vision of tourism as a honey pot and an alternative to other less profitable trades such as farming or mining. My goal in this paper is to take up his argument and question it as applied to the Sierra Nevada, both from an environmental and a social point of view. Indeed both questions are deeply intertwined, and researchers have increasingly looked at these two issues as two facets of one object, which we may call "socationature". The term was coined by British geographer Erik Swyngedouw, who was highly influenced by Marxist scholar David Harvey (Swyngedouw, 2003). Both work in the field of political ecology, which regards natural questions as the object of a power struggle in society. Their analysis is focused mostly on urban settings, but it can be extended to "wild" mountainous areas. In fact this research project requires an interdisciplinary approach, including the fields of environmental history, geography, sociology and ecology.

Tourism in the Wild West has deep roots in American history, which hark back to the founding of the first State Park in the country: Yosemite, in 1864. Traveling to the wild parts of the country has to do with the national identity of the United States (Figueiredo, 2005). Since the 1980s, American environmental historians have interrogated the relation between the land and those who people it (Cronon, 1996; White, 1999; Worster, 1992). They give as much importance to environmental factors as to human ones in the transformation of landscapes. I will apply this methodology, which is relatively new in Europe, to the study of two contrasting cases in the Sierra Nevada. The first one will look at the socioenvironmental evolutions related to the growing tourist presence in Yosemite National Park. That place, which is highly protected by federal rules, has nonetheless undergone major changes since the late XIXth Century. I will explore the differences, but also the similarities

between the park and the Lake Tahoe area, which is surrounded by ski resorts, 200 kilometers north.

## **I Into the wild?**

### 1- Historical background:

#### *- transcendentalism and the first parks*

Historian Stephen Fox explains that the beginning of the idea of environmental protection harks back to the peak moment of industrialization in the United States. Until then, preservation had never really been on official agendas, simply because there did not seem to be a use for it. When the first preservationist ideas emerged, most of the eastern part of the country was already developed. Parks and forests were mostly situated west of the hundredth parallel, where urbanization had had but little impact (Fox 1981: 131).

In the XIX<sup>th</sup> Century, preservationism was related to both transcendentalism and nationalism. Places such as Yosemite were attributed a meaning both as places where man could confront himself to the beauty and grandeur of the natural landscape and therefore have a spiritual experience, but also as the expression of the greatness of the American nation. They were the natural equivalent of European cathedrals.

In *The Machine in the Garden : Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, historian Leo Marx developed a fine analysis of the relationship between technological progress, industry, and the value of nature according to transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, which can be summed up into one sentence:

*The industrial revolution is a railway journey in the direction of nature* (Marx, 1964: 238).

The very transformation of nature by man is forgiven to him thanks to the direct contact it allows with that very nature. There was no philosophical contradiction between industrial development and the protection of natural sanctuaries.

#### *- democratization of tourism in the early XXth Century*

The democratization of tourism in the United States coincides with the birth of the National Park Service, in 1916, during the Progressive era. Parks became accessible to people from all walks of society, and the number of visitors increased steadily. This movement was backed by the big western railway industry, which considered the presence of the parks as a godsend. Led by the Great Northern Railway that promoted Glacier National Park as “America’s Switzerland”, they advertised the parks to upper-middle class Americans from the East coast who tended to prefer Europe as a tourist destination. The companies took advantage of World War I, which closed off overseas tourist travel. The boom period of tourism was the post-World-War II era. The highway system was developed, partly thanks to the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956. Increased access to wild areas facilitated by cars and highways was considered by some environmental groups such as the *Wilderness Society* as destructive, just as much as forest exploitation and mining for example (Sutter, 2002). Tourism in the parks became an alternative use of nature, and not an alternative TO the use of nature (Figueiredo, 2006).

Concurrently to the development of park use, tourists also increasingly went to other holiday destinations, among which mountain resorts and ski resorts. Skiing became a national pastime after World War II. People would buy army surplus skis, take their car and hit the highway to the pure air and grand landscapes of mountain resorts.

## 2- “The problem with wilderness or getting back to the wrong nature”: political ecology in the wilderness

Historian William Cronon titled an article “The problem with wilderness, or getting back to the wrong nature” (Cronon *in* Cronon, 1996: 69). He and others suggest in the book *Uncommon Ground: rethinking the human place in nature* that the nature researchers should look at in order to understand environmental problems is not at all the nature which is deemed “authentic”. In fact, there is no such thing as “authentic” nature as soon as humans set foot in it and begin to transform it, however lightly (Price, 1999). They suggest we switch our gaze to the questions of consumption, for example, and to urban areas, away from the wilderness, which has been the foundation of nature thinking in the United States since the XIXth Century (one could even go back to the first Puritan settlers in the XVIIth Century). The path first pointed at by Cronon and other environmental historians has been followed by a

large number of researchers, who focus on cities as places where nature exists, and not as antitheses of nature. In their work, nature is envisioned as an object of human transformation, both materially and in the realm of ideas. In other words it is not separated from the human spheres. Rather, the human sphere is encompassed by the natural one. Economic, political, social, and cultural questions have to be asked about nature. This is what the field of political ecology does. I contend that this approach, which is mostly urban, can be transposed to mountainous regions. I suggest we close the circle and take the questioning on nature back where it started, that is to say in “wild” areas, but using the new methodological tools available to think about nature in a more comprehensive way, which were developed in more urban environments. The two wild areas that I have chosen to apply this methodology to are Yosemite National Park, and Lake Tahoe, a ski resort also situated in the Sierra Nevada. Yosemite is the symbol, the epitome of wilderness protection, but also of wilderness tourism in the United States. This socionatural object, placed under the authority of the federal state, will be compared to another socionatural object which is managed by private entities in the form of ski resorts. In both places, tourism is a central activity and therefore transforming element both in the landscape and in society. In both places, tourists are consumers of a wilderness experience. They intend to find “authentically” wild places. But both the park and the ski resorts are the objects of economic, social, environmental and political stakes.

## **II Environmental issues: devil’s bargains**

### 1- overcrowding in Yosemite Valley: what’s left of the “wilderness experience”?

Even though the question seems more obvious in the context of a ski resort, Yosemite National Park faces a number of environmental issues. In fact, the two major problems are overcrowding on the one hand, and air pollution coming from the San Francisco area and from the West – the agricultural Central Valley – on the other hand, now also related to the transformations caused by global warming.

Concerning overcrowding, the National Park Service now estimates the time it takes to walk down Half Dome’s path depending on how much affluence there is. They make this data available on their website. A traffic forecast is also available for people who intend to drive through the park. The website says delays can be very

important (NPS 2013<sup>1</sup>). In order to avoid deterioration caused by overcrowding, Yosemite National Park, and in fact all wilderness areas are highly policed. The wilderness experience is therefore contained and created by a legal, administrative and cultural framework. Visitors have to remain in certain designated areas, and cannot extend their stay for example. This is the price that has to be paid in order to make the park accessible in a democratic way to Americans.

Environmental degradations coming from outside the park are also under the scrutiny of the Park Service, such as air pollution, coming mostly from the Central Valley and brought in by the westerly winds, but also global warming, which transforms the local biotopes.

What I want to show here is that the wilderness cannot be thought of as separated from the rest of nature. It is a continuum, from the wildest to the most urban, which should always be conceptualized concurrently with human activity. There is no such a thing as “authentic” nature in the context of national parks. Rather, nature is reinvented, refashioned and framed by humans.

The place, though originally “natural” – the term can be questioned since there were Indians in the Valley before the creation of the Park – has provided, since the birth of tourist interest in it, man-made experiences, which facilitate the wilderness experience.

Since the late XIXth Century, National parks, and Yosemite in particular, have repeatedly been saved from environmental damage caused by poor tourist habits or overgrazing for example, partly thanks to this legal and physical framework. With the advent of the science of ecology in the 1890s, a compromise was found between the democratic ideal, which is to facilitate a wilderness experience to the greatest possible number of Americans, and the ecological preservation of the area.

## 2- snow, water, biodiversity

Now a comparison can be made with another wild mountainous place, also situated in the Sierra Nevada: the Lake Tahoe area. Contrary to Yosemite National Park, it was not placed under government protection. A first conclusion has to be drawn, which is that the very existence of the specific wilderness areas considered as worth tourists’ while, is the consequence of a choice that was operated, to protect one

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nps.gov/yose/naturescience/environmentalfactors.htm>

area rather than another (the example of the Hetch Hetchy controversy in the 1910s is a blatant example). What has the socio-natural evolution been around Lake Tahoe since the beginning of tourist presence? First of all, the historical pattern of population is different from Yosemite's. If there were attempts at using the natural resources present in the Valley, The Lake Tahoe area became interesting and more largely populated during the Gold Rush period. The Comstock Lode, containing silver and gold, was discovered in 1859 in Virginia City, ten years after the Gold Rush. Practically all the trees around the lake were logged to provide wood for the tunnels and excavations between 1860 and 1890, when the lode was abandoned. Strip mining was also used. It consisted in washing down the mineral by using water. It not only polluted the water streams in the area, but stripped the mountains bare: no vegetation can grow there anymore.

In 1868, the Sierra Nevada was conquered by the iron horse. The Central Pacific Railroad cut through the mountains at Donner Pass – the famous pass where a party of pioneers headed to California had died in the winter of 1846. Since 1910 the area has attracted tourists of a new kind: skiers. The Lincoln Highway, which was the first transcontinental highway, was built in 1913, and also went through Donner Pass, which facilitated access to the Lake Tahoe area. The first ski slope was opened in Truckee in 1910. But the boom period of the ski resorts around Lake Tahoe was after World War II. In 1960, the Winter Olympic games were held at Squaw Valley. The event participated in putting the Lake Tahoe area on the map of American tourist destinations.

Concerning the environment, the most touched upon issue, both by scientists and leaders is that of the purity of the water in the lake. In the 1950s, a boom in the population number and visitors around the lake began to damage the water quality, with leaking sewerage mostly.

Global warming also has dire economic as well as environmental consequences in ski resorts.

Mark Williams, a snow hydrologist at the University of Colorado, has been studying the effects of climate change on future snowpack. His forecasts showed that snowlines -- elevations below which snow won't develop -- will move up more than 2,400 feet (700 meters) from the base of Aspen Mountain. His team has also predicted that if carbon emissions stay the same, average temperatures will climb by nearly 4 degrees Fahrenheit at

Aspen by 2030 and 8.6 degrees Fahrenheit by 2100. (...) The 2011-2012 winter season was the fourth warmest on record for the U.S., according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Colorado saw only half its average snowpack, making it the worst ski season in 20 years. The number of skier visits nationwide [dropped by 15 percent \(Jacobson, 2013\)](#).

[http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/climate-change/jan-june13/skiingprefont\\_02-27.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/climate-change/jan-june13/skiingprefont_02-27.html).

Global warming in ski resorts is a perfect example of the need to think about environmental and human – in this case economic – questions jointly.

### 3- Current responses

The response that was found to tackle the problem of pollution on private-owned land around Lake Tahoe was to transfer it to government supervision. Now 77% of the land is controlled by the National Forest Service.

The Lake Tahoe Basin spans 505 square miles and hosts millions of visitors annually. Passed over as a candidate for a National Park in the early 1900's due to a large percentage of property held privately, today, the United States government and other public agencies manage 87% of the land. During the days of massive private ownership, the watersheds were heavily damaged. As hundreds of visitors quickly became thousands and then millions, the infrastructure that rapidly developed caused enormous damage to the environment. Repairing previous damage and protecting against future harm is what Tahoe's Environmental Improvement Program (EIP) seeks to address (Tahoe Fund Website, "Protecting Lake Tahoe").

Concerning ski areas, they all contend to have eco-responsible conducts, with the use of solar and wind energy for example, or developing public transportation. A number of the resorts also sell "green tags", which are meant to offset carbon emissions due to tourist activity in the resorts, promote mass transportation, carpooling, recycling, re-vegetation and erosion control for example (Ski Lake Tahoe website, "Our Environment").

Ski Area Citizens' Coalition is a citizen association which applies a grading system to ski areas in the United States under the four following categories: "habitat protection"; "protecting watersheds", "addressing global climate change", and



“environmental policies and practices”. For example, Alpine Meadow’s overall grade is 87,6%, an A (Ski Area Citizens’ Coalition website).

In both Yosemite Valley and the Lake Tahoe area, the most pressing environmental issue is that of overcrowding. Both places attract visitors because they allow recreation in the wilderness. Since the 1970s, and mostly since the beginning of the XXIst Century, measures have been taken to reduce the environmental impact of tourism in those areas. Mostly, local, state and federal authorities have tried to allow recreation and sustainable biotopes to coexist. Indeed, the human and the environmental question are interrelated. For example, there is a strong correlation between climate change and the loss of jobs in the tourist industry, and more specifically the winter sports industry:

Elizabeth Burakowski, a climate scientist at the University of New Hampshire, co-authored a report, published by the Natural Resources Defense Council and non-profit Protect Our Winters, analyzing the economic impact of a low-snow year. She found that the losses rippled out beyond the resorts. "When you have a lower than average snowfall winter, you've got about \$800 million dollars of unrealized revenue in the United States, and it can cost the U.S anywhere between 13,000 and 27,000 jobs," she said (Jacobson, 2013).

But one question which is often overlooked and however fundamental to understand the way decisions are made in those areas is that of social differences regarding access to those resources.

### **III The right to the mountains: re-reading Lefebvre**

Hal Rothman has looked at the question of the power relation, but not in the terms of economic, as much as cultural struggle, with the main contention that the local inhabitants of tourist destinations in the West acted in conformity with what they thought the Eastern tourists wanted to see. But the power relations that exist in those wild areas are exactly the same as those witnessed in other types of industries. Indeed, one talks about the tourism industry.

#### **1- Climbing bums and the price of a skipass. The process of gentrification**

The industry of tourism is different from other types of industries, in that nothing is made. Or rather, what is man-made, such as ski-lifts and scenic drives, and artificial snow, is meant for visitors to enjoy the “natural” – though that word is

problematic because of those very human interventions – areas to which they come for a few days. The question of work is correlated to that of gentrification. The correlation is mostly visible for seasonal workers in ski resorts, who cannot afford housing. Here, we come back to Hal Rothman's *Devil's Bargains*: the locals become victims of their own success when secondary homes or week rentals make it impossible for them to afford housing.

The process of gentrification has been studied in the United States, as well as in the rest of the world, mostly concerning urban areas. The main geographer who tried to understand that phenomenon was Neil Smith. However, attention has also been given to rural gentrification. Ethnographer J. Dwight Hines suggests that what we are facing now is postindustrial middle-class people leaving the city to go to the countryside to have an “authentic” life experience by living closer to nature, and in a small-town environment (Hines, 2010). The economic pattern of the concerned areas changes, with a shift to the service industry, and a decreasing importance of agriculture or the extractive industry (wood, etc). We can distinguish three types of newcomers in the areas whose added value is to be close to/ immersed in wild nature: people who actually move there from the city (whom Hines addresses); people who buy second homes and come over week ends or for a few days to enjoy the natural qualities of the area; tourists, who rent apartments for just a few days. The three elements participate in increasing property values.

The median value of owner-occupied houses in the counties surrounding both Lake Tahoe and Yosemite National Park is very high, but lower than the median house price in California (\$421,600). Inyo (\$271,100), Mariposa (\$248,900) and Tuolumne (\$304,700) Counties around the park; El Dorado County (\$409,400) and Placer County (\$387,400) on the Californian side of Lake Tahoe. However Mono County's (east of Yosemite Valley) house values is higher than California's (\$428,600). On the Nevada side of Lake Tahoe, Douglas County (\$346,600) and to a lesser extent Washoe County (\$257,400) the median house price is higher than Nevada's (\$225,400). The US median value is much lower: \$186,200<sup>2</sup>.

These statistics confirm previous studies that have shown that housing prices tended to increase, causing gentrification in areas surrounding wilderness areas in Vermont, or near Yellowstone National Park (Rasker and Glick 1994 *in* Darling,

---

<sup>2</sup> US Census Bureau, 2007-2011 <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06/06017.html> 27/11/13

2005:1028). House prices are comparable around Yosemite and Lake Tahoe. They are not related to the type of activities that can be undertaken, but rather to the presence of wild areas, whose value is deemed superior to other areas.

The other criterion that can be used is that of accessibility on a day basis. The entry cost to Yosemite National Park is \$20 per car. Indeed, one of the ideas contained in the Wilderness Act 1964 and other legislation dealing with federal management of wild areas, democratic access is a central concern. A day ticket to Squaw Valley, Alpine Meadows, Northstar or Heavenly, the largest resorts surrounding Lake Tahoe is worth on average \$95. The activities that are allowed in the park – mainly hiking, rock climbing and touring in a car – require, when compared to ski resorts, very light infrastructures. Moreover, National Parks' goal, being federal property, is not profit but ecological protection and democratic access.

The *National Park Service Act 1916*<sup>3</sup> provides the following definition for national parks:

(...) to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.

The creation of wilderness areas is meant for a user. Here is an extract from the Wilderness Act 1964 :

Except as otherwise provided in this Act, wilderness areas shall be devoted to the public purposes of recreational, scenic, scientific, educational, conservation and historical use. (...) Commercial services may be performed within the wilderness areas designated by this Act to the extent necessary for activities which are proper for realizing the recreational or other wilderness purposes of the area.

The wilderness is meant to educate the American public. Its main value is supposed to be cultural. But visitors should also be allowed « recreational use » for the American public at large. That is not the case for ski resorts, which are privately owned.

Considered on a day basis, there is a crying difference between Yosemite National Park's and the Lake Tahoe ski areas' accessibility. However, when looking at residence, the wilderness is, in both cases, more accessible to the wealthier classes.

**Conclusions:** Yosemite National Park and the Lake Tahoe area, when observed through the lens of socionature, face similar questions, which are

---

<sup>3</sup> United States Congress. *National Park Service Organic Act 1916* (2008). Dernière visite 20 juillet 2013.  
<http://www.nps.gov/legacy/legacy.html>.

interrelated. Their becoming tourist destinations profoundly transformed them. They were shaped by the image of what was and is expected of such wild areas. Their added cultural value impacted their economic value: the price of housing and passes reveal that men are not all equal in the face of the natural resource.

After all, this is an Alpine conference: although I have been interested in issues existing in an American context, the same questions can be asked regarding tourism in the mountains, and more generally the relation of alpine peoples to that resource. For example the Mont Blanc is highly prized for its aesthetic as well as natural values, but it is under no legal protection at all. And in order to be able to go and enjoy the beauties of high mountains, one has to pay 50 euros to board a cable car that will take them almost 3000 meters higher in just a few minutes.

### **References:**

#### **Books:**

Cronon, William, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, London and New York: Norton & Company, 1996.

Fox, Stephen, *The American Conservation Movement, John Muir and his Legacy*, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1981.

Marx, Leo, *The Machine in the Garden, Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1964.

Price, Jennifer. *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America*. New York: Basic Books, 1999.

Rothman, Hal K., *Devil's Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth Century American West*, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998.

Sutter, Paul. *Driven Wild: How the Fight Against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2002.

Swyngedouw, Erik, Chapter 5, "Modernity and the Production of the Spanish Waterscape, 1890-1930", in Zimmerer, Carl S., Bassett, Thomas J. (eds), *Political Ecology: an Integrative Approach to Geography and Environment-Development Studies*, New York, London: The Guilford Press, 2003.

White, Richard. *The Organic Machine, the Remaking of the Columbia River*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1999.

Worster, Donald. *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

#### **Articles:**

Figueiredo, Yves. "Aux sources du débat écologique contemporain: l'expérience américaine". *Revue française d'études américaines*. 2006. 3/109. Last accessed April 2014.

[http://www.cairn.info/article.php?ID\\_REVUE=RFEA&ID\\_NUMPUBLIE=RFEA\\_109&ID\\_ARTICLE=RFEA\\_109\\_0069](http://www.cairn.info/article.php?ID_REVUE=RFEA&ID_NUMPUBLIE=RFEA_109&ID_ARTICLE=RFEA_109_0069)

Hines, J. Dwight, "In Pursuit of experience: the postindustrial gentrification of the rural American West", *Ethnography*, 11:2, 2010.

<http://eth.sagepub.com/content/11/2/285>

Jacobson, Rebecca, "Shrinking snow means steep slide for ski industry", *PBS*, 27 Feb. 2013. Last accessed April 2014.

[http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/climate-change/jan-june13/skiingprefont\\_02-27.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/climate-change/jan-june13/skiingprefont_02-27.html)

Rasker and Glick 1994 in Darling, "The City in the country: wilderness gentrification and the rent gap", *Environment and Planning*, 2005. vol. 37.

**Theses:**

Figueiredo, Yves, *Du Monumentalisme à l'écologie: politique et esthétique de la nature en Californie, 1864-1916*, Université Paris 7 Denis Diderot, UFR d'Etudes Anglophones. Thèse soutenue le 10 juin 2005.

**Websites:**

Ski Area Citizens' Coalition, "Alpine Meadows Ski Area Report Card", last accessed April 2014.

[http://www.skiareacitizens.com/index.php?nav=report\\_card&de=4](http://www.skiareacitizens.com/index.php?nav=report_card&de=4)

Ski Lake Tahoe, "Our environment", last accessed April 2014.

<http://www.skilaketahoe.com/area/our-environment>

Tahoe Fund, "Protecting Lake Tahoe", last accessed April 2014.

<http://www.tahoefund.org/about-tahoe/help-protect-lake-tahoe/>

**Legal documents:**

United States Congress. *National Park Service Organic Act 1916* (2008), last accessed April 2014.

<http://www.nps.gov/legacy/legacy.html>.

-----*Wilderness Act 1964*, Public Law 88-577 (16 U.S.C. 1131-1136), 88<sup>th</sup> U.S.Congress, Second Session, Sept.1964.