

UC Berkeley

Parks Stewardship Forum

Title

The Mountains Are Calling: Tourists and the Unmaking of Yosemite National Park (book excerpt)

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8v76s143>

Journal

Parks Stewardship Forum, 42(3)

Author

Childers, Michael W.

Publication Date

2026-09-14

DOI

10.5070/P5.69181

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

The Mountains Are Calling: Tourists and the Unmaking of Yosemite National Park *Michael W. Childers*

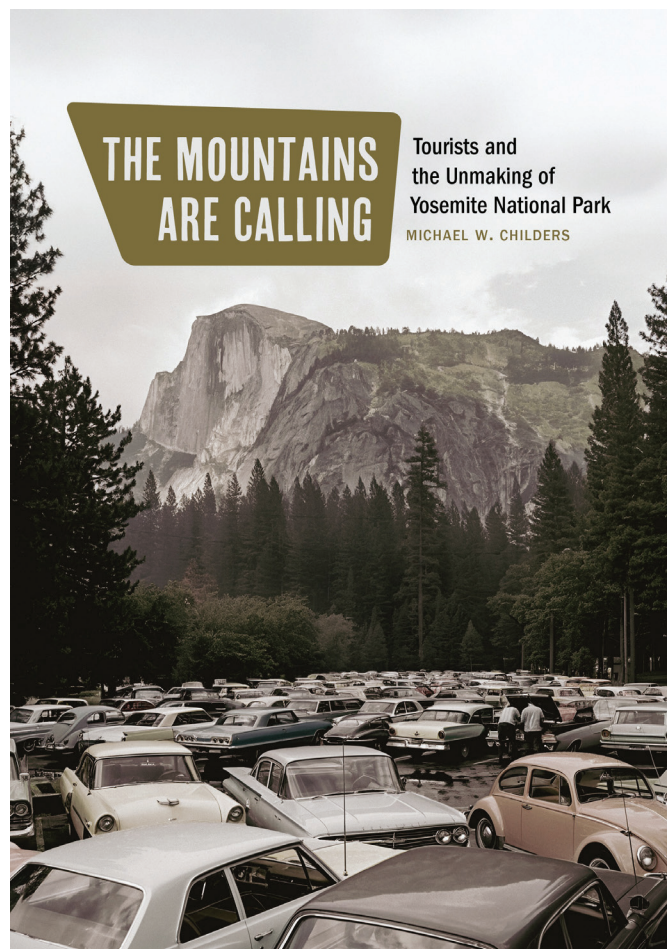
A handful of people were milling about the Tunnel View Overlook when my wife and I pulled into the parking lot on a June evening in 2015. It had already been a long day of travel, but after setting up our camp at Crane Flats, we had decided to take a quick drive to the western edge of the Yosemite Valley before settling in for the evening. We got out of the car and walked to the overlook's edge, where we silently took in the view. The valley floor was already cast in shadow, with just the upper portion of El Capitan still ablaze in sunlight. As I stood there, soaking in as much of the scene as I could, my wife snuck behind me and began taking photographs. After shuffling back and forth, angling for a shot of the valley with no one in the foreground, she finally gave up and took several with me standing among a few small knots of people. It was a telling moment. My wife, along with every other visitor standing with us, not only failed to capture an image of the valley without people, but also failed to recognize ourselves, and our fellow visitors, as an integral part of the moment.

The valley was teeming with people the next morning when we arrived back in the Yosemite Valley. After dropping my wife off at the Vernal Falls trailhead so she could hike to the base of the falls, I drove around the valley for the next half hour seeking a parking spot. I finally secured one, and our yellow lab, Bear, and I headed out for our own little adventure. We first crossed the Sentinel Bridge over the Merced River before turning down a ponderosa-lined trail to the Curry Village. Then we crossed the Merced once again, passing by the Stoneman Meadow before finally wandering into the Yosemite Village, where we sat down and watched the crowds of tourists stream by. Banners hung throughout the village celebrating Yosemite National Park's 125th anniversary, which, in part, explained the number of people. A family passed by debating whether they wanted pizza for lunch, while an older couple stopped a ranger to ask a question. Harried tourists bustled in and out of the small grocery store grabbing what I could only imagine were last-minute items for that evening's dinner.

My wife soon returned, exhausted but smiling from her hike. The crowds had been unbelievable, she said, but seeing the falls was well worth the frustration of walking in a queue to the bottom of the Mist Trail. She went on to describe how the hike was not as she remembered it from when, when she was a child, her family would spend a week every summer in Yosemite Valley. It was often the highlight of her year, she recalled. She and her brother would escape their parents' ever-vigilant gaze to explore the valley on their bicycles and wade in the Merced River, before spending evenings sitting around a campfire. Perhaps it was a trick of memory, but she remembered Yosemite as a bit less crowded.

Others have made the same observation. In the introduction of his book, *The Tourist in Yosemite, 1855–1985*, which in part inspired this book, geographer Stanford E. Demars

Excerpted from *The Mountains Are Calling: Tourists and the Unmaking of Yosemite National Park* by Michael W. Childers, by permission of the University of Nebraska Press. © 2026 by the Board of Regents of the University of Nebraska. Available wherever books are sold or from the University of Nebraska Press 800-848-6224 and at nebraskapress.unl.edu.



recalled when, in the summer of 1968, he and his wife were confronted with campgrounds so congested that visitors sat in line like vultures waiting to pounce on the next open site, the park's stores were crowded to capacity, and parking was so limited that many frustrated drivers had left their vehicles wherever they could find a spot, regardless of the signs prohibiting illegal parking. While we had reserved our campsite months in advance, the rest of the Demars's experience felt very similar nearly a half century later.¹

A record five million people visited Yosemite National Park the summer following my wife's and my visit. Like us, most spent the majority of their time in the Yosemite Valley, whose sheer granite walls and towering waterfalls have attracted tourists since 1855. Others crossed the Sierra Nevada on the Tioga Road, perhaps stopping at Olmsted Point then driving along Lake Tenaya's northern shore, through Tuolumne Meadows, before dropping into the Yosemite Valley. That year's record number of visitors underscored both Yosemite's immense popularity and its limits. Many commented Yosemite felt more like an amusement park that summer than a crown jewel of the U.S. National Park System. Crowds inundated the park's campgrounds, viewpoints, parking lots, trailheads, and rustic village—spoiling visitors' experiences and threatening Yosemite's increasingly strained natural environment. Following climate change, overcrowding poses the single greatest environmental threat to Yosemite. The tread of millions of feet has eroded and compacted the soil while trampling of vegetation has negatively affected water quality by hardening the surface and reducing water's ability to percolate into the ground. The sounds of cars, buses, and thousands of visitors often drown out the songs of birds. Although less severe than in urban areas, light pollution at night has dramatically impacted the behavior of nocturnal wildlife. Air pollution not only obscures the Sierra Nevada sky but also settles in Yosemite Valley. Human-wildlife interactions have caused the deaths of tens of thousands of brown bears and changed wildlife behavior. Additionally, the park's development has intensified the effects of floods, heavy winter storms, and wildfires, increasing their destruction of the park's infrastructure. All of which have unmade Yosemite in critical ways.²

To understand how we got to this point, we first need to look at Yosemite's past. But rather than just cast the park as an wilderness invaded by hordes of visitors, we need to step back and realize that Yosemite's story, in many ways, is that of its visitors. I attempt to tell some of those stories in the coming pages. By placing the stories of Indigenous people, tourists, innkeepers, soldiers, rangers, climbers, concessioners, inholders, and administrators in the foreground, I seek to tell a much more complete story of the park's history. Readers will no doubt recognize many of the personalities in the coming pages, including John Muir, Frederick Law Olmsted, and Ansel Adams. But they will also meet many who have not historically been included in Yosemite's story but are very much a part of its history.

In this manner, *The Mountains Are Calling: Tourists and the Unmaking of Yosemite National Park* is a book about placemaking, and the environmental consequences of that making. Visitors have experienced Yosemite in much the same manner since the first tourists entered the Yosemite Valley in the mid-nineteenth century. Drawn by its sheer beauty, they have come to camp, hike, swim, and, most importantly, find quiet moments of reflection within the park. Through their recreation, they have not just visited but actively crafted the story of Yosemite National Park's landscape and meaning. But that meaning brought greater numbers of both visitors and development, threatening the very beauty most came to experience.³

ENDNOTES

1. Demars, *The Tourist in Yosemite, 1855–1985*, 1.
2. Jeffrey Jenkins, "Science and the Evolving Management of Environmental Hazards at Yosemite National Parks," *Parks Stewardship Forum*, September 15, 2022, 540–555.
3. Nearly fifty years ago, geographer Yi-Fu Tuan noted that place is forged through experience, a premise that has served as a compass for generations of geographers and environmental historians in explaining how people's use of, understandings of, and connections to landscapes have shaped history. Tuan, "Place," 152.