

# UC Berkeley

## Places

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### Authors

Hester, Randolph T, Jr  
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# Y O S E

Perhaps nothing symbolizes the American landscape as clearly and concisely as the valley called Yosemite.

Consider its place in our present society: It is simultaneously a sacred icon for the environmental movement and a “must see” for more than three million visitors each year. Yet, as one of nature’s most splendid creations, it is etched in the American mind as unending wilderness. It is considered the gem of the national park system.

Yosemite also represents everything banal about human use of the earth. To many observers, it is overcrowded. Its parking lots, golf greens, supermarkets and automatic teller machines co-mingle in uneasy confusion with its shimmering falls and gleaming walls. Last year, Yosemite made the Wilderness Society’s list of the Top Ten Most Threatened National Parks.

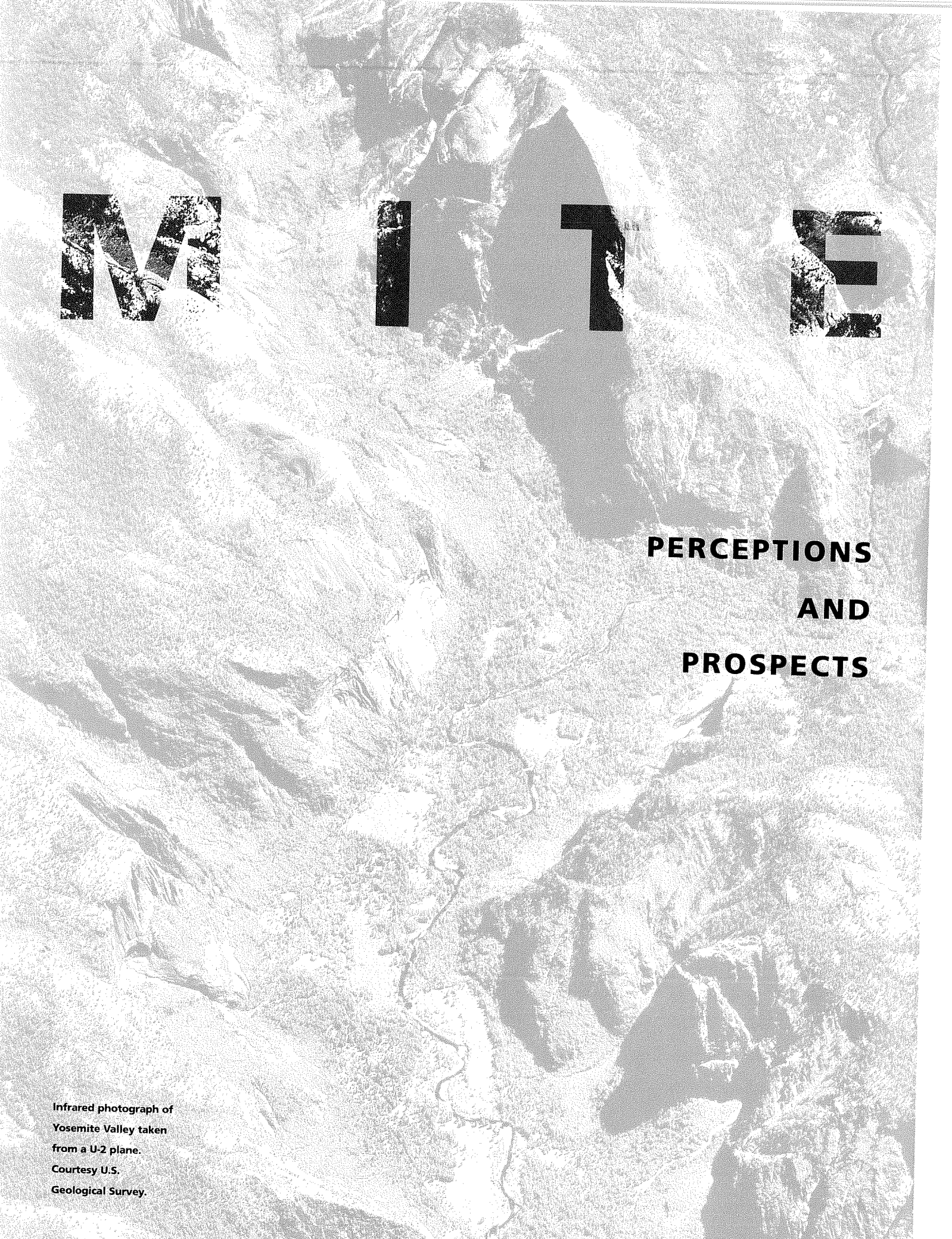
It is fair to say there is no other place like it in the world.

This year, some celebrate Yosemite’s 100th anniversary as a national park. Others point out that it is millions, not 100 years old. Yosemite’s age may be the least of the disagreements. Yosemite evokes passionate arguments because it calls up powerful contradictions: urbanized wilderness, abused jewel, paradise commercialized, unnatural nature.

The importance of these contradictions, both to Yosemite and to the American landscape as a whole, make Yosemite an appropriate subject for debate. This “information debate,” as Donlyn Lyndon describes it, is timely given the political battle unfolding over the 1980 General Management Plan and Yosemite’s future.

The opinions offered here are organized around two topics—cultural and visual perceptions of the Park, and how the Park is to be preserved and managed. Hopefully, the following debate will actively inform the battle, and help us to see the brute but delicate presence of Yosemite more clearly, to understand its complex democratic meaning and to take actions that will allow Yosemite to retain its sheer, awful power.

—*Randolph T. Hester, Jr., Guest Editor*

An infrared photograph of Yosemite Valley, showing a wide, deep valley with a winding river at the bottom. The surrounding mountains are rugged and rocky, with some snow patches. The overall tone is monochromatic, with high contrast between the dark shadows and the lighter, sunlit areas.

# Yosemite

## PERCEPTIONS AND PROSPECTS

Infrared photograph of  
Yosemite Valley taken  
from a U-2 plane.  
Courtesy U.S.  
Geological Survey.

Yosemite's grip on our hearts and our minds is profound. Perhaps the most consistent reaction it evokes is a desire to attach some meaning to such a place and to come to an understanding of our connection to it.

Several of the following essays attempt to rationalize Yosemite, to dissect it into a framework of components and processes that help us understand the sway the Park holds over us. Others search for Yosemite's significance in the meanings human cultures ascribe to it; several report on how Yosemite serves as an inspiration for human creation. One argues we should shift focus, that our attention to places of extraordinary beauty blinds us to the beauty of everyday places.

There is a despondence emerging, a suggestion that the actual experience of Yosemite leaves much to be desired. Several authors note that a visit to

**PERCEPTIONS...** Yosemite increasingly resembles a visit to a theme park, and they counsel that we would be better off approaching the Park as a pilgrimage.

One need not visit the Park to be touched by it, two of the essays argue; the issues that touch the Park touch parks and wilderness everywhere. Yosemite's reputation has been communicated worldwide via verbal and pictorial images; an environmental preservation ethic spurred by John Muir's passion for Yosemite has resulted in the creation of national parks and wilderness areas throughout the world.

Each of the essays reveals a facet of the challenges Yosemite poses to the human spirit, which ordinarily refuses to be dominated and more often than not triumphs against its adversaries. One author argues the deck is stacked against Yosemite. Nevertheless, because neither Yosemite nor humans are given to humility, it is likely that Yosemite will continue to be a source of powerful, raw inspiration.

Research assistance for the  
Yosemite Place Debate  
provided by Lori Pottinger.

Photo by David Robertson.

