

Is Yellowstone an Endangered Park?

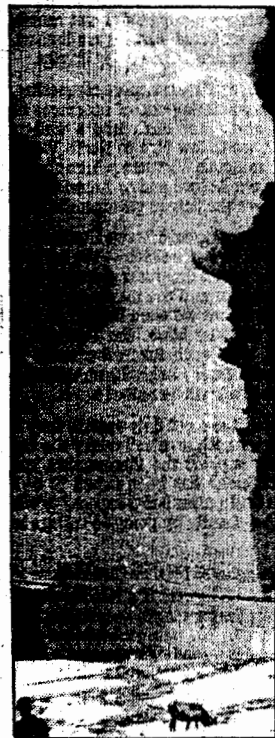
PLAYING GOD IN YELLOWSTONE: The Destruction of America's First National Park
By Alston Chase
Atlantic Monthly Press, 446 pages, \$24.95

REVIEWED BY BERT SCHWARZSCHILD

Playing God in Yellowstone, a first book by educator-environmentalist-writer Alston Chase, is a political bombshell — a well-documented indictment of the National Park Service for mismanagement and eventual destruction of America's first national park, Yellowstone.

Could such a crime have been committed by those friendly, helpful, green-uniformed Park Service officials and rangers right under the collective noses of two million unsuspecting park visitors who converge annually upon this "national jewel"? Yes, according to Chase, who, with a 30-year-plus association with Yellowstone, charges that through mismanagement the Park Service and its Yellowstone Park administration:

- Initiated and stimulated many cyclic elk population increases, followed by shooting hundreds of these magnificent animals which were then found excessive.



Old Faithful in winter

- Implemented the slaughter and near extinction of the park's predators: wolves, mountain lions, bobcats and coyotes, which had acted as natural controls of the park's elk and bison population.

- Caused the near extinction of the park's white-tailed and mule deer, moose, antelope and bighorn sheep after they were unable to compete with the increasing, dominant and more voracious elk population for food.

- Caused the disappearance of the park's once prolific beaver population.

- Caused the near extinction of the park's grizzly bear population and the decimation of the black bear population.

- Emphasized people management over ecosystem management.

- Initiated the establishment of a new overpowering visitor facility in an environmentally sensitive area.

- Downgraded the role and advice of scientists and discouraged meaningful park research on any sensitive or controversial park issues.

- Stifled criticism and questioning of prevailing park policies and demanded that loyalty for the Park Service be placed before the truth.

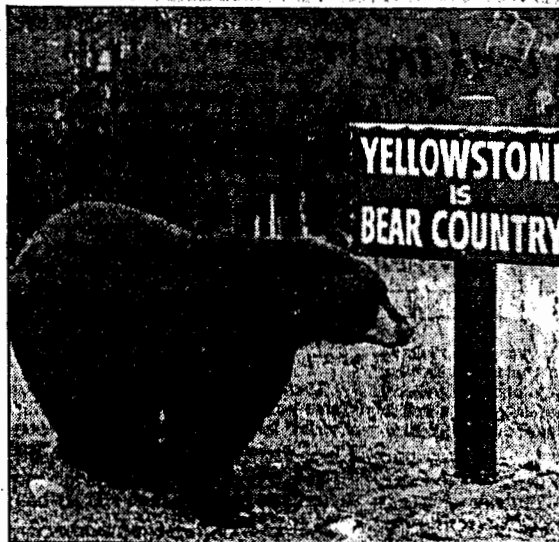
- Avoided blame for its part in the deterioration of the park by laying the blame on global changes.

- Used less professional, less qualified personnel than previously.

While the book's persistent critical tone is sometimes distracting, its strength lies in the author's many substantiating details. Eloquent and convincingly, he cites the many instances where park officials, politicians, hunters, commercial interests and environmentalists worked separately or together against the best interests of the park, its flora and fauna, its ecosystem. The list of 1100 "Notes and Sources," covering 50 pages and a 15-page index, testifies to the author's efforts to be thorough.

However, beyond the list of details and accusations, Chase's command of language is superb, and his presentation ranges from the anecdotal and lyrical to the critical and biting. Skillfully he weaves the many strands of the park's intricate web of life to describe its ecosystem. And he puts together a convincing case and bill of particulars to back up his "indictment."

Chase names villains, victims and heroes. But the many jigsaw pieces of evidence do not always



fall neatly into place. Maybe that has to do with the complex nature and magnitude of the alleged destruction; the passage of more than a century since the first known major acts of destruction were recorded; and the wide array of co-conspirators, many pleading innocence. According to the author, the chief accused — the park administration — still denies that

Yellowstone has been or is being destroyed.

In a larger context, "Playing God in Yellowstone" suggests to the reader that all of us, our nation, society, culture and species, are playing God on this planet. He reminds us that we have strayed from our pantheistic past, that we have become anthropocentric, bent on taming, conquering, con-

trolling or attacking our planet's ecosystem. The author's account of recent efforts to pierce the earth's "razor-thin" crust in Yellowstone — only two to six miles thick — is one dramatic example of humanity's assault upon the earth.

Unfortunately our options to restore and maintain the park as an ecological window to the past are few. Yellowstone has become an oasis, hemmed in by fenced land. As Chase points out, the migratory elk of Yellowstone have no winter range to migrate to anymore, unless they risk getting shot by a "firing line" of hunters eagerly waiting for them to cross the park boundaries. (During the 1983-84 winter, 1749 hunters killed 1631 migrating elk.)

Yet "Playing God in Yellowstone" confirms my own conviction that it is not too late. As the author reminds us, our hopes for Yellowstone's and the planet's future depend on the emergence of widely accepted life ethics ("bioethics"), welcoming rather than destroying the life forms that constitute the universal ecosystem. ■

Bert Schwarzschild has worked extensively with the National Park Service as a former director of both the American Youth Hostel and the Whale Center.

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REVIEW

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