



Vol. 10, No. 3, Spring 2013, 521-528

www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente

Reseña/Review

Wakild, Emily. *Revolutionary Parks: Conservation, Social Justice, and Mexico's National Parks, 1910-1940*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011.

Rebuilding the *Patria* through Conservation: Revolution and Recovering the Public Good

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Revolutionary Parks uncovers an important and forgotten moment in Mexican environmental history encompassing the first half of the twentieth-century. Linking seemingly incongruent discussions of conservation to the revolutionary processes of the Mexican Revolution, Emily Wakild offers readers an impressive work of great interpretation and significance opening us to a history of how national park creation became intertwined with the re-establishment of the Mexican national state

following the violence of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917). Using the lens of environmental history, *Revolutionary Parks* is a significant work in that it challenges the belief by historians that Latin Americans had little concern for conservation.¹ Efforts towards conservation actually began during the *Porfiriato* as foresters in Mexico (as *científicos*) hoped to create and conserve parks. Scientific reasoning, however, mattered little to the masses making it difficult for those impassioned souls to connect conservation with public good (96). The Mexican Revolution then offered a language through which proponents of environmentalism could connect social justice, national patrimony with the conservation of the landscape.

Wakild explores environmental history to examine the period covering the administration of Venustiano Carranza (1914-1920) and the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940). In this revolutionary moment, the author finds what she terms 'revolutionary conservation.' Utilizing recent teachings on social justice, the author uncovers a history connecting the Revolution from below to land and top-down implementation of the Revolution. Wakild argues that the national park project seems an unlikely focus for a government that first needed to consolidate power and quell the remnants of rebellion. Foresters spoke directly to national leadership as they attempted to marry their interests in conservation with the construction of a national identity. The Constitution of 1917 included environmental policies that aided in launching real efforts towards bridging campesino interests in land protection with leadership ideas on conservation. Article 27 of the Mexican constitution placed the state in-between citizens and natural resources. Supporters of the legislation viewed the origins of the Revolution as tied to the abuses of large landowners and disputes over property rights as giving rise to the agrarian problem. Moreover, Article 27 sought to place public good over private interests a factor that proved to be particularly destructive in after 1876 period. Leadership "connected social stability, economic productivity and landscape conservation" to the public good. While the Carranza

¹ The author cites the criticism of noted environmental historian Warren Dean and conservation ecologist John Terborgh who contend there are no deep roots of conservation in all of Latin America (153).

administration offered language through which foresters could push their agenda of conservation.

Scholarly attention on period focusing on the Revolution and power struggles at the national level tend to belie richer histories of ordinary life. These works take their cues from the excellent work of cultural historians who attempt to understand how national movements impacted local peoples and in turn understand how those negotiations influenced the national dialogue. Between 1926 and 1940 the Mexican government created 40 national parks, an interesting focus for a government in the aftermath of a devastating civil war. Wakild makes the argument that environmental histories traditionally dismiss the entire region of Latin America as one lacking historical environmental action. While this might not be completely accurate considering the innovative works by historians such as Chris Boyer, Stuart McCook, John Soluri and others, her point is that environmental historians should continue in their efforts to uncover obscured histories. Wakild's reexamination of the Cárdenas' era challenges the failings of his administration to penetrate the rural consciousness, most notable in his efforts at rural education as cited in the works of historians such as Mary Kay Vaughn. *Revolutionary Parks* lifts up a great crowning success of Cárdenas' socialist administration and shows his grand success in the little known arena of conservation and national park building. Wakild asserts that one can not find what one is not looking for, in this case she charges that previous scholars failed to look for "alternative types of environmentalism." (153) This is a book about revolutionary conservation, a type of environmentalism that is truly Mexican in nature.

Wakild breaks the book into thematic chapters exploring park creation from the standpoints of science, education, productivity, property and tradition – all components of the Mexican Revolution. The author's central questions address why and how the revolutionary government was able to make conservation a political priority. The answer lies in the overall political goals to keep rural peoples "rooted to the land" and the redistribution of *ejido* land was the key to this effort. After the end of the Revolution, foresters held the ear of presidents and tied Mexico's natural beauty and scientific worth to national beauty. (3) Wakild argues that the

creation of a national park system served the nation through a language of conservation that what was uniquely Mexican and aided in reconstructing the Mexican state. In fact, the Mexican context of conservation differs from the global history of parks. The national project of park creation in Mexico was about building national parks, not state parks. This is important to note, as national parks make political statements about cultural importance.

In this work, the author looks closely at four parks built in the Cárdenas administration to unpack five themes that she sees as tied to Revolutionary goals ranging from social justice to conservation including science, education, productivity, property and tradition. While the author's study of environmental history is in itself valuable, what proves to be Wakild's most notable contribution in this work is her discovery of forgotten interactions between national officials and marginalized campesinos in the construction of national parks. Wakalid convinces readers that environmental concerns shaped identity formation in the extended revolutionary period.

President Carranza declared the first national park at *Desierto de los Leones* but it was not until after 1932 when Plutarcho Calles created the National Party of the Revolution (PNR) as state planning came in vogue and the government looked to expand federal power. Under the administration of Cárdenas, proponents for conservation found a friend. Cárdenas lamented the loss of the great forests in his home state of Michoacán. It was in a forested area known as *Los Pinos* that Cárdenas courted his wife. (31) Refusing to live in Chapultepec Castle the residency for the leader of Mexico, Cárdenas built a new presidential home in Mexico City and named it *Los Pinos*. Foresters convinced Cárdenas that "conserving and restoring forests rebuilds the *Patria*" ultimately fulfilled the goals of the Revolution.

The expansion of *ejido* lands enabled the federal government to insert itself into rural communities reshaping the countryside as the government incorporated rural communities under tighter state control. Wakild uses Foucaultian thinking about state power and applies it to the natural world. Her evidence points to how the state began to craft

knowledge about natural spaces. National parks represented much more than cultural artifacts of Mexico's great history; parks became a space where the state could craft concepts of class and identity. Controlling nature and the wild wilderness lay at the heart of conservation efforts of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Combatting barbarism with civilization grew out of discussions about modernization and in particular, popular notions about indigenous peoples in Mexico remained a tangible reminder that the country was not modern. Most Mexicans identified their indigenous brethren as peoples resistant to a modern nation and backwards in their thinking, overall they were obstacles to progress.

The state used the opening of the Revolution to gain more control of the rural campesino and indigenous populations. Linking the 'wild' Indians with the wild countryside, elites harnessed the discussion about the true history of Mexican history of environmental degradation to the degeneration of their Indian populations. Both needed to be controlled in order to rehabilitate and to prevent further destruction to the nation. With demands about land as the foundation of the popular revolution, the author ties her research to the work of John Tutino who pushes the need to understand how federal policies impacted local communities throughout the long revolution. (39) The state spoke the language of environmental justice through the social claims of land tenure made by the Zapatistas. Wakild, however, finds that political powers understood the demands for the type of autonomy synonymous with for that existed before 1857. Leadership interpreted and redefined the demands of the rural people altering the original intentions of the Revolution in the end to fit the mold they envisioned. This was a new era that would be state driven, however this new period would never be successful without the cooperation of the campesinos.

This nationalist project of park creation involved several components. First, there needed to be the creation of federal policies. Often federal authority triggered debates over communally held lands. Park creation also needed to be an economically viable project through tourism. Lastly, for park creation to be successful, it needed to fit into the model of integrating the indigenous past into a new Mexican identity being

fashioned by elite leaders such as Manuel Gamío and José Vasconcelos. (14) Along these lines, parks used native names to honor and reimagine the indigenous past.

Building national pride in its indigenous past proved a significant move as the government appropriated lands in 1935 around the volcanoes Popocatepetl and Iztaccíhuatl, both natural features with deep ties to Mexican history. These parks became a template for other parks in the center of the nation. For instance, parks needed to be near adjacent cities in order to draw tourists. Parks could promote climate stability as they protected soils and restored surrounding forests. Parks could also promote enterprise as a “living museum to nature” and thus also bring tourism. Finally, parks could promote federal stewardship and left alone the country and inhabitants could suffer (71). These parks are however different from the other parks previously created. The forests surrounding the volcanoes are intensely rich from industrial (paper production), semi-industrial (resin producing), basic (charcoal), extractive (sulfur and firewood), and agricultural (cornfields). Cárdenas listened intently to the campesinos who lived on these lands and came to a compromise about the land ownership without taking away their livelihoods. In the end, the parks around Popocatepetl and Iztaccíhuatl tied park creation to industrial development and landscape and the depiction of a landscape filled with national wealth and historic value.

Land reform and park creation tied to communal lands allowed the state to use the accepted conversation of collective property to create a cultural patrimony and by extension national pride through the building of national parks. The Mexican experience of park creation differed from the building of parks in the United States in one significant way, the U.S. land grab for park space existed on the notion that the land was ‘empty’ lands, in Mexico were already claimed, often by campesinos and indigenous communities.

The most significant argument the author makes is in her discussion of the La Malinche park. Wakild uncovers the adroit attempts by the government to bring campesinos around to the thinking of the rational scientists in the government. Foresters utilized the language of civilizing

the wilderness to convince government officials about the dangers of leaving lands alone. Lands like people could degenerate. Influenced by the rhetoric of the glorified Mexican history and the dangers of the contemporary wild indigenous peoples, officials attempted to coalesce lands into parks however this was always a difficult endeavor due to the “fragmented social landscapes” and numerous defiant campesino groups (94). Time after time, officials negotiated and often conceded to local groups in order to bring them under the control of the federal government. The case with La Malinche simply proves this point for Wakild. Foresters were not unbiased individuals. They were products of Mexican racism. The difference is that they recognized the need to have campesino cooperation for their projects.

Lastly, the author focuses on the village of Tepoztlán in the state of Morelos, the heart of the peasant revolution, as a national park in 1937. The founding of the Tepoztlán site allowed reformers to consider the importance of rural traditions as a “shared component of national identity” (124). The park married the Cárdenista environmental and social policies into a park of national patrimony. It connected nature and culture together and “recognized the resilient local ties to a distinct landscape” (124). Later labeled a classic village, Tepoztlán became the focus of many academic studies looking at cultural change and continuity and became the national embodiment of what it was to be Mexican.

Conclusion

Historians believe that environmentalism for the public good began under the influence of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, however the silence is really about Mexico’s unique conservation tied to environmental justice for the poor stemming from demands of the Mexican Revolution. Wakild’s interpretation of interactions between forestry officials and marginalized populations living on or near the parks tell a different story of revolutionary state building and identity formation. This was not a period of total top-down implementation of conservation, but rather a moment that incorporated campesino needs through social justice in order to carry out the ultimate goal of environmental justice.

The overarching argument of this work is that Mexico's national parks were an "outgrowth of revolutionary affinities for both rational science and social justice". (1) The Mexican version of environmentalism was a "Mexico for Mexicans" and parks were a tangible representation of Mexican heritage and soaring beauty. Whether it was the Lagunas at Zempoalua, or the great volcanoes Popocatépetl and Itztaccíhuatl with their deep lore in conquest history or the contested park La Malinche, the creation of these parks deliberately attempted at help shape a new Mexican identity. Nature protection was folded into environmental justice to an unprecedented level under Cárdenas, particularly between the years 1935 and 1940. While this is a short window in which to find success, the discussions and history uncovered in these moments are no less important.