

## PERSPECTIVE

## Conservation of Cultures

James A. Roberts

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Welcome to Yangmingshan National Park!

Have you had a chance to enjoy the magnificent azaleas? Have you had a chance to hike on some of the trails to enjoy the views of Taipei? Have you had a chance to hike the "butterfly trail"? If you have not, you should make the most of this opportunity. This National Park is one of the treasures of the world. The Portuguese were right when they named this island "Formosa." It is beautiful!

You will also have the opportunity to visit Toroko Gorge. When you do, be sure to walk the highway that parallels the river. Listen to the sound of the water! View the spectacular 2,000-foot high walls of marble! Feel the mist from the falls . . . or, if it is raining, and we are approaching the time of the "Plum Rains" . . . marvel at the scenery from the protection of the former road that was carved into the mountain-side. The road itself is a work of art, but it is dwarfed by the beauty of the gorge!

But we are not here to wax eloquent about the beauties of Taiwan. Suffice it to say, from when I first came here in 1979, to my opportunities to work with the National Park system and the Construction and Planning Administration of the Ministry of Interior for most of the year in 1989 (and again, for several months, in 1999), I have had the wonderful opportunity to watch a country realize the importance of its natural treasures at the same time it was realizing economic growth and prosperity paralleled by few other countries.

Why are we here? Let me answer that with three specific examples of why I believe in the importance of *Conservation of Culture*. It is not merely for the conservation of wildlife, the conservation of marine ecosystems, the conservation of mountains, the conservation of habitats. We are here to explore the conservation of ways of life; if not, why does anyone bother about "conserving"?

## The Black-shouldered Kite and the American River Parkway

In the late 1960s, subdivisions were exploding onto the landscape along the American River, which runs through Sacramento, California. Walnut orchards were cut down to make room for houses. Hops fields were taken out to make room for schools, instead of providing one of the ingredients for beer. Levees were built on both sides of the river to constrain the annual flooding of snowmelt from the Sierra Nevada. In short, changes were made to the landscape! We bought a home in the area in 1973. Despite the changes, we still enjoyed walking along the river. But where were the birds?

At about the same time, some very farsighted people conceived of the idea of having a "parkway" along the entire river . . . some 50 miles from downtown Sacramento to the very toe of the Sierra Nevada. At first, it was a matter of creating a paved bike-path to provide a way for people to be "in" the area . . . and to try gently to get them to stay on the path and not wander all over the flood plain. It worked!

Soon, some of the small animals—mice, voles, squirrels—came back. And with them came a wide variety of birds! First, it was the migratory birds who found that there was food and cover! Then it was the resident birds who found that there was plenty of food and space for them year 'round. Then it was the migratory raptors who found the food supply! Then, one spring morning as we were walking along the bikeway, we saw two birds hovering like helicopters over the fields. Kites! Black-shouldered kites. They had found their way back to the riverside.

As the years have passed, we first watched one pair raise two of their fledglings. The

numbers grew! This past spring, we were treated to the flights of more than a dozen adults and their young. We even had the fun of watching one pair of adults "drive" their young away . . . for several mornings we had watched the adults teach the young how to dive, how to hover, and how to hunt. Then, all of a sudden, one of the adults landed on what we have come to call the "kite tree." When the juveniles tried to land, it drove them off! It was time to be on their own. The next day, there were the adults, but the juveniles were on their way to their own area!

What a treasure this "island" of nature is, right within the city of Sacramento. What insight those people had when they thought, "why not create a natural area, not just protect the community from flooding." It is working! It is a *Place for People*.

## Pele Defense Fund and Volcano National Park

Next, I would like to tell you about a friend of mine who was part of the founders of the Pele Defense Fund in Hawaii. A number of years ago the Pele Defense Fund ran an ad in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. It was a full-page ad asking for donations to help in their fight against unrestrained development—maybe an illustration of "blind progress"?—of the geothermal resources of the Big Island of Hawaii. As the ad said, to the native Hawaiians the pipes drilled into the island for geothermal development was like a rape of their goddess Pele.

Two days later I arranged to go, where I stayed with several native Hawaiian families, ate both native foods and western foods, and saw the island from their point of view. One of the people with whom I worked was Palekapu Deadman, one of the leaders of the native Hawaiians on the Big Island. Palekapu asked me if I would like to see some of the values that they have. We visited places that I cannot describe . . . I could, but promised him I would not give details. Suffice it to say, I saw burial grounds, special food value areas, and a forest of green with birds of every hue. It was magnificent.

While we were traveling together, Palekapu did not say too many words. One thing that

I do remember was his saying that he hoped that his son, then not yet a teenager, would be able to have some of the things that he, Palekapu, loved. But he also was happy that his son would have the chance to enjoy the many “new” things that have come to the islands.

At the end of three days together, we stopped for lunch. As usual, I used the time to take out my daybook and make notes of our travels. Most of all, I make notes of my feelings about what I am seeing or experiencing. In this case, I asked Palekapu if I could tell him what I wrote about what I understood as his dream. He asked me to tell him. I did. What I had written was: “*Not instead of, but also.*”

### Yosemite National Park

This past January, my wife and I took a quick trip to Yosemite National Park (it is about three hours’ drive from our home). We had the park almost to ourselves! For two days, we walked among the oak and pine trees and followed the Merced River through the meadows. We were walking in a Valley filled only by the spirits of the past. The falls were not as full of water as in the spring, but the ice that formed every night filled the air with a sound that we never hear in the summer: the sound of ice falling to the Valley floor as the sun heats the granite walls. A chunk of ice falling from nearly 2,000 feet makes a “thunder” that we had never heard before.

But what of Yosemite? The first people there, the First Nation, were the Ahwahneeche, a Miwok people. They lived in a

Valley rich with acorns from the oaks, deer, fish, and plenty of the supplies they needed. Unlike our winter visit, they would spend the coldest and darkest part of winter at a lower level in the Sierra Nevada. They were there long before the California Gold Rush of the mid-1850s. But they were driven out of their homes by the arrival of the miners. Not a pleasant part of the history of Yosemite.

Over the past years, there has been a concerted effort to make the Valley floor more natural, more like it was when the Ahwahneeche lived there. The greatest part of the Park is wilderness, but the Valley had become a tourist attraction. In the mid-1990s, there was a major flood that took out many of the campsites; they have not been rebuilt. Now the current proposal will remove even more of the facilities for people. The number of campsites, already reduced from 849 to 475 by the flood, will be further reduced to 465 campsites.

True, the Ahwahnee Hotel, an upscale and beautiful building that provides some 120 rooms, will be retained. The Yosemite Lodge—a somewhat less pretentious, but nevertheless expensive, accommodation—will be expanded from 245 to 386 rooms. But Camp Curry, which has long provided reasonably priced tent cabins, will be reduced from 628 to 428 units. The Housekeeping Cabins—tent-like structures with concrete block walls on three sides and a canvas roof, which are also inexpensive and available to low- or middle-income visitors—will be reduced from 264 to 52 units. Is this equitable?

Not many families can afford the luxury of the Ahwahnee or the comforts of the Yosemite Lodge. They can, however, afford the facilities of Curry Village and the Housekeeping Cabins. It is the latter, along with camping sites, that give everyone the opportunity to enjoy Yosemite National Park.

There is a growing voice saying, “parks are not just for rich people.” One might say: “*Parks are places for ALL people.*”

### Conclusions

There are three points that we must remember:

1. Plan to *bring nature back* into urban and industrial developments;
2. Consider the needs and interests of the First Nations: “*Not instead of, but also*”; and
3. Remember that parks are Places for People, *Places for All People*.

I would like to conclude with the following short quotation from John Muir, which appeared in an advertisement for the National Park Foundation in the February 4, 2002 issue of *Time Magazine*: “Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul alike.”

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