

# Transnational Connections, International Conservation Co-operation, and the Construction of the National Park Idea as 'America's Best Idea' during the Cold War

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My dissertation “Transnational Connections, International Conservation Co-operation, and the Construction of the National Park Idea as ‘America’s Best Idea’ during the Cold War” examines the international work of the US National Park Service, the influence and context of transnational national park co-operation, and the Cold War meaning and importance of the national park idea more broadly. The study is centered on two broad questions, focusing on how the national park idea became constructed as an “American” idea globally and what larger themes were connected to this, and the significance of transnational influences and international connections to the development of the national park idea.

Studying national parks in transnational/global perspective is a current, vibrant research interest among environmental historians.<sup>1</sup> Diverging from past studies, which have mainly been interested in explaining the implementation of the national park idea worldwide and examining whether national parks in other countries were directly influenced by American national parks and directly followed the example of the world’s first national park, Yellowstone, created in 1872, I am examining how the park idea was constructed as an American invention in international national park work. Instead of trying to establish Yellowstone’s actual primacy or direct influence (whether the park idea spread abroad after its creation), I am interested in how it assumed this importance—a process which, in turn, is connected to important broader themes. During the Cold War, the national park idea was more forcefully articulated as a positive, American contribution to world culture and international nature conservation. National parks were not just national means for nature protection but they were largely created and developed within an international framework through transnational influences. Parks were not just about nature, as along with exporting the technical knowledge of park management, American park programs connected the park idea with modernization, democracy, and being part of a group of civilized nations.

While my work mostly focuses on the US National Park Service, I am interested in finding other actors to this story as well to more fully examine how Yellowstone assumed the status of the mythical beginning of all parks worldwide, by looking at who participated in enabling this international work. This led me to research at the Rockefeller Archive Center, as I wanted to find out more about the financial side of international conservation co-operation. How were the programs and conferences that helped construct the park idea as an American invention funded? What was the importance of foundations in enabling the transfer of American park knowledge? What role did the Rockefeller Family, the Rockefeller Foundation, and other philanthropic foundations play in this?

Other archival source materials hinted at the importance of Rockefeller Foundation grant programs in enabling conservationists and park officials from foreign countries to visit the United States in order to learn about American national parks and conservation practices. It is well known that members of the Rockefeller family, most notably Laurance S. Rockefeller, were deeply interested in national parks and also supported the National Park Service, through donations of land and money, as well as by appearing in important events and committees related to national parks. With this in mind, I spent 6 days at the Rockefeller Archive Center in September 2016, examining files related to international conservation and natural resources, national parks, and grants related to international conservation co-operation and meetings.<sup>2</sup>

My general sense based on the records I consulted was that despite their personal interest in national parks, and despite funding many international conservation-related things, the Rockefeller family and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund did not seem to have a consistent or special interest in foreign national parks as such but supported American conservation efforts abroad through somewhat more general contributions for conservation associations or regions (such as Latin America, for example). I found a great deal of material on the general support for IUCN and its many projects, which undoubtedly also contributed to strengthening American leadership in park matters. In just six days at the RAC, however, it was not

possible to get a full picture of the entire general situation of the Rockefeller and other foundations' work in funding international conservation-related projects. I decided to focus on gathering some examples where foundation funding strengthened the NPS's and other conservationists' efforts to promote international park co-operation. In this research report, I focus on a few such cases.

One important way in which foundations were prominent actors in aiding the construction of the park idea as an American invention was through the support for participants for international programs, such as the World Conferences on National Parks and the International Seminars on National Parks and Equivalent Reserves.

The First World Conference on National Parks, organized in Seattle in the summer of 1962, was a major event in international conservation co-operation. Harold J. Coolidge from the IUCN wrote to the Ford Foundation for support for foreign participants of the 1962 conference. He mentioned Yellowstone as the beginning of parks worldwide, noting that "The United States was chosen as the site for the meeting in recognition of U. S. leadership in the national parks field where the first national park for public good was established..." Coolidge's list of results expected from the meeting included of course the transfer of knowledge and technical information to those countries that needed it, but also more idealistic goals: "World attention will be focused on the contribution of national parks to the cause of international peace by the role they can play towards the inspiration, culture, and welfare of mankind, in addition to their values for economic and scientific purposes." He then outlined the budget of the conference and stressed the need for foundation support for the travel of foreign delegates. After all, the First World Conference on National Parks was considered of crucial importance for many countries which "have inherited parks and reserves from colonial regimes, and are now making an appraisal as to whether they should be continued or whether the areas should be turned over for agricultural use and the wild life that inhabits them slaughtered." Coolidge hoped travel grants could be

secured for foreign participants, such as those from African countries, to help in this transition and make sure national parks and any progress in nature conservation would not be dissolved. The conference would be very important, as “this program will have an impact on foreign nations that look to the United States as source of inspiration, guidance, and assistance.”<sup>3</sup>

The Ford Foundation granted \$15,000 of funding to IUCN for bringing participants from Central and South American, African, Asian and Middle Eastern countries to the conference. This, however, was only a portion of the needed funding amount and would “enable the representatives of ten or more additional developing countries to attend the conference”.<sup>4</sup> In writing to the foundation after the Conference, Coolidge noted that the success of the event “can be attributed in no small measure to the participation of the foreign members, many of whom received support from the Ford Foundation grant we had,” also providing an impressive account of the achievements of the conference as well as a list of foreign participants funded with the grant.<sup>5</sup> It is interesting that in seeking support for the 1962 conference, the importance of American leadership in national parks was stressed to American foundations. In this way it could be said that American foundations were participants in creating the narrative of parks as a great American innovation.

The Rockefeller Brothers Fund sponsored the travel of foreign representatives to several international programs aimed at distributing park knowledge, for example to the 1974 International Seminar on National Parks and Equivalent Reserves. This RBF support enabled five foreign participants to attend, including two participants from Guatemala, two from Honduras and one from Nicaragua.<sup>6</sup> Honduras and Nicaragua were represented for the first time at the seminar.<sup>7</sup> All in all, the 1974 seminar included 38 participants from 27 countries. One of the participants sponsored by the RBF, prof. Mario Dary from Guatemala, represented all seminar participants and delivered a speech at the graduation ceremony of the seminar.<sup>8</sup> In his address, Dary offered his conclusions of the

seminar, praising its usefulness. He noted, for example, that “National Parks are a form of rescuing and saving the world’s genetic patrimony” and that “National Parks constitute a legitimate and competitive use of the land”. His entire address was an apt example of how well the international seminar conveyed the worth of the national park idea and also communicated the usefulness and success of the seminar in itself.<sup>9</sup>

Representatives to the International Seminars on the Administration of National Parks and Equivalent Reserves were officials responsible for national parks and conservation leaders in their home country—therefore the seminar was a major way through which to help develop park ideas and management abroad. The purpose of the seminar was “to examine policies, administration, planning and other aspects of management of national parks and equivalent reserves ... Policies and programs of North American parks are related to those of national parks in other countries and participants are expected to participate fully in the seminar discussions ...”<sup>10</sup>

Funding this kind of park co-operation and development held great potential in positively impacting the participating countries. As J. Downs Herold, Director of Conferences and Institutes at the University of Michigan, mentioned when thanking the RBF for their support: “I am sure that this investment in Central America’s future will be very worthwhile.”<sup>11</sup> Funding Latin American candidates for the national park seminar was in line with the RBF’s general interest in the area. The Rockefeller Brothers Fund recognized the importance of the training program and the benefits it had had since the mid-1960s, also noting that Latin American countries had only recently taken interest in participating but lacked the funding to attend training that would equip them with important land management knowledge. “Thus, RBF staff believes modest fellowship support here constitutes a significant contribution toward a major new component for the Fund’s Latin American program (approved in 1972), now being developed to link the promotion of wise use of forests, watersheds, national parks and wildlife with

employment generation in rural areas of Central America.”<sup>12</sup> It seems as if this was more a part of a larger RBF interest towards Latin America rather than a special interest towards parks. In the 1970s, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund funded a large project on wildlands management in Latin America.<sup>13</sup> (The RBF, however, was unable to support the travel of foreign participants for the 1976 seminar “due to program priorities and limitations”.<sup>14</sup>)

In the mid-1950s, support was sought for a wildlife advisor to Southeast Asia, a project with relevance to national parks, with the hope that this kind of project would combine the interests of Rockefellers (John D. Rockefeller, III’s interest in Southeast Asia and Laurance S. Rockefeller’s interest in conservation) into one project, as Harold J. Coolidge suggested.<sup>15</sup> However, the application did not succeed, as it was not in line with the Fund’s program emphases.<sup>16</sup> The RBF did, however, also fund some similar sounding projects. In the early 1970s, the RBF supported a wildlife project in East and Central Africa. They made a grant of \$20,000 to support John S. Owen’s activities as a consultant to IUCN on conservation matters, particularly on national parks. In Africa, Owen surveyed national park problems in Kenya and Uganda, “inquiring into the general political background, the public attitude to national parks, and the organizational status of the parks including the financing and staff position with special reference to foreseeable trends in the future.” Owen also spent time in Zambia, Tanzania, and Sudan studying their national parks and progress made in conservation.<sup>17</sup>

All in all, these examples illustrate the important role foundations played in enabling international conservation meetings and the transfer of park knowledge.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Adrian Howkins, Jared Orsi, and Mark Fiege (eds), *National Parks Beyond the Nation: Global Perspectives on “America’s Best Idea”* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016); Bernhard Gissibl, Sabine Höhler, and Patrick Kupper (eds),

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*Civilizing Nature: National Parks in Global Historical Perspective* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> I examined materials in the following record collections: Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller records, Cultural Interests, Series E (FA314); Rockefeller Foundation records, field offices, Paris, RG 6, SG 1 (FA395); Rockefeller Brothers Fund records (FA005); Ford Foundation records, Grants H-K (FA732D); American Conservation Association (ACA) records (FA475).

<sup>3</sup> Harold J. Coolidge, International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, to Mr. F. F. Hill, Vice President, The Ford Foundation, 3 April 1962, The Ford Foundation, Reel 0659, Series: Ford Foundation Grants - H to K, Grant 06200330, Ford Foundation records, Grants H-K (FA732D), RAC.

<sup>4</sup> Program action, 24 June 1962; International Affairs, International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, First World Conference on National Parks, 8 May 1962, The Ford Foundation, Reel 0659, Series: Ford Foundation Grants - H to K, Grant 06200330, Ford Foundation records, Grants H-K (FA732D), RAC.

<sup>5</sup> Harold J. Coolidge, International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, to Mr. Joseph M. McDaniel, Jr., Secretary, The Ford Foundation, 8 October 1962, The Ford Foundation, Reel 0659, Series: Ford Foundation Grants - H to K, Grant 06200330, Ford Foundation records, Grants H-K (FA732D), RAC.

<sup>6</sup> Rockefeller Brothers Fund Grant, Expense Itemization, 25 September 1974, Folder 3362: "Michigan, University of - Ninth International Seminar - on the Administration of International Parks & - Equivalent Reserves, 1974-1976", Box 561, Record Group 3: Projects (Grants); Series 1: Projects (Grants), Rockefeller Brothers Fund records (FA005), RAC.

<sup>7</sup> William S. Moody, RBF, to Mr. Robert C. Milne, United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 30 January 1975, Folder 3362: "Michigan, University of - Ninth International Seminar - on the Administration of International Parks & - Equivalent Reserves, 1974-1976", Box 561, Record Group 3: Projects (Grants); Series 1: Projects (Grants), Rockefeller Brothers Fund records (FA005), RAC.

<sup>8</sup> Robert C. Milne, Chief, International Park Affairs, to Mr. William S. Moody, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, 27 November 1974, Folder 3362: "Michigan, University of - Ninth International Seminar - on the Administration of International Parks & - Equivalent Reserves, 1974-1976", Box 561, Record Group 3: Projects (Grants); Series 1: Projects (Grants), Rockefeller Brothers Fund records (FA005), RAC.

<sup>9</sup> Speech delivered by Mario Dary R., Representative for Guatemala and Elected President of the Alumni Association of the 9<sup>th</sup> International Seminar on National Parks and Equivalent Reserves, at the closing meeting, 6 September 1974, Folder 3362: "Michigan, University of - Ninth International Seminar - on the Administration of International Parks & - Equivalent Reserves, 1974-1976", Box 561, Record Group 3: Projects (Grants); Series 1: Projects (Grants), Rockefeller Brothers Fund records (FA005), RAC.

<sup>10</sup> "International Seminar on the Administration of National Parks and Equivalent Reserves: Background Information," 6/26/1974, Folder 3362: "Michigan, University of - Ninth International Seminar - on the Administration of International Parks & - Equivalent Reserves, 1974-1976", Box 561, Record Group 3: Projects (Grants); Series 1: Projects (Grants), Rockefeller Brothers Fund records (FA005), RAC.

<sup>11</sup> J. Downs Herold, Director of Conferences and Institutes, University of Michigan, to William S. Moody, RBF, 25 September 1974, Folder 3362: "Michigan, University of - Ninth International Seminar - on the Administration of International Parks & - Equivalent Reserves, 1974-1976", Box 561, Record Group 3: Projects (Grants); Series 1: Projects (Grants), Rockefeller Brothers Fund records (FA005), RAC.

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<sup>12</sup> Rockefeller Brothers Fund, 9 July 1974, “University of Michigan,” Folder 3362: “Michigan, University of - Ninth International Seminar - on the Administration of International Parks & - Equivalent Reserves, 1974-1976”, Box 561, Record Group 3: Projects (Grants); Series 1: Projects (Grants), Rockefeller Brothers Fund records (FA005), RAC.

<sup>13</sup> This is too sizable to address here. See Folders 2860-2868 in Boxes 470-471, Record Group 3: Projects (Grants); Series 1: Projects (Grants), Rockefeller Brothers Fund records (FA005), RAC.

<sup>14</sup> William S. Moody memorandum to RBF Files “The University of Michigan International Seminar on National Parks and Equivalent Reserves”, 9 August 1976, Folder 3362: “Michigan, University of - Ninth International Seminar - on the Administration of International Parks & - Equivalent Reserves, 1974-1976”, Box 561, Record Group 3: Projects (Grants); Series 1: Projects (Grants), Rockefeller Brothers Fund records (FA005), RAC.

<sup>15</sup> Harold J. Coolidge to Mr. John D. Rockefeller, III, 25 January 1956, Folder 2856: “International Union for Conservation of Nature- & Natural Resources, 1955-1969”, Box 469, Record Group 3: Projects (Grants); Series 1: Projects (Grants), Rockefeller Brothers Fund records (FA005), RAC.

<sup>16</sup> Robert C. Bates, RBF, to Harold J. Coolidge, Pacific Science Board, National Research Council, 5 April 1956, Folder 2856: “International Union for Conservation of Nature- & Natural Resources, 1955-1969”, Box 469, Record Group 3: Projects (Grants); Series 1: Projects (Grants), Rockefeller Brothers Fund records (FA005), RAC.

<sup>17</sup> Frank G. Nicholls, Deputy Director General, IUCN, to Mr. James N. Hyde, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, 31 January 1973, Folder 2857: “International Union for Conservation of Nature- & Natural Resources, 1971-1973”, Box 469, Record Group 3: Projects (Grants); Series 1: Projects (Grants), Rockefeller Brothers Fund records (FA005), RAC.