

Jackson Hole Wildlife Park: An Experiment to Bridge Tourism and Conservation

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Jackson Hole Wildlife Park: An Experiment to Bridge Tourism and Conservation – Summary

My paper documents the history of the Jackson Hole Wildlife Park (JHWP), created on Rockefeller-owned lands in northwestern Wyoming shortly after WWII. A collaboration between Laurance Rockefeller, president of Jackson Hole Preserve, Inc. (JHPI), the New York Zoological Society (NYZS) and the State of Wyoming, the park sought to educate the public about the need for conservation by creating a living exhibit of the West's major wild animals - primarily elk, bison, moose, antelope, and a variety of deer species. It was thought that if people could see these majestic animals in their natural environment versus the typical urban/suburban zoo, they would be more apt to become involved in the effort to save them and the habitats necessary for their survival. Almost simultaneously, the founders established a scientific research facility to enable studies of the area's animals, plants, watershed, and other features impacting the landscape.

A number of converging factors contributed to the decision to relinquish the project when it was enjoying wide success. First and foremost, when the land itself was incorporated into an enlarged Grand Teton National Park, it came under the control of the National Park Service whose policy prohibited artificial animal displays. Second, conflicting political interests caused the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission to refuse to assume management of the Wildlife Park. And ultimately, even though the representatives of the Zoological Society understood the value of the animal display, its priority lay with supporting the research facility. In the end, the two components separated; the Park Service took over the operation of the animal display and the NYZS assumed exclusive control of the research station. Today, even though the Society (now operating as the Wildlife Conservation Society) is no longer involved, the research facility thrives as the University of Wyoming-National Park Service Research Center. And though the Park Service committed to keeping the Wildlife Park going, by the late 1950s its interest waned. Eventually the last of the bison broke through the collapsing fencing. The herd has flourished ever since and now freely roams Jackson Hole.

Archival Research

I began this work several years ago while working on my master of art degree at Colorado State University. Because of the localized nature of the project, I exhausted the archives in both Wyoming and Colorado, starting at Grand Teton National Park. I also scoured the University of Wyoming American Heritage Center in Laramie and the State Archives in Cheyenne. My quest for additional information took me to the National Archives and Records Administration in Broomfield, Colorado and the Denver Public Library. I could have documented the Jackson Hole Wildlife Park on these sources alone, but since the primary sponsor of the park was the Rockefeller family, through Jackson Hole Preserve, Inc., I felt it was important to seek more information at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC). Perhaps records located there would provide a different perspective of the family's motivation and pursuit of this project.

As a research topic so narrow in scope, the number of RAC collections containing relevant information was limited. The collections that served my purposes the most were the Jackson Hole Preserve, Inc. records and those within the Cultural Interests records of the Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller. Documents in those collections corroborated, clarified, and at times added to information found elsewhere. Only once did I find documentation that disputed my other sources. All prior public and private credit for the idea of the Wildlife Park was attributed solely to Wyoming officials. However, correspondence found in Kenneth Chorley's papers in the RAC, dated five months prior to those officials soliciting Laurance Rockefeller, president of JHPI, for assistance, clearly demonstrates that associates of the New York Zoological Society and JHPI were seriously discussing and even planning a near identical venture. One letter also reveals concern about moving forward with the plan due to the policy statement of the Secretary of the Interior in opposition to artificial animal displays. Nowhere else is there any documentation of this idea in its earliest conceptual stage except in the Rockefeller Archive Center.

In almost all other cases, information gleaned from the records substantiated what I had already discovered in Wyoming and Colorado. Yet, some of the

correspondence and reports found in the RAC collections also provided a clearer understanding of the priorities of the different parties involved with the Wildlife Park. It became abundantly clear that the Wyoming contingent cared most deeply about the park as a tourist attraction. Rockefeller, the New York Zoological Society, and the park director's primary interest was its function as a conservation education center. They saw the wildlife display as a necessary tool for cultivating the interest of the public and the on-site research as vital to generating data necessary for assisting government agencies with making proper wildlife and natural resource management policy decisions. From day one, discussions in the correspondence and other documents repeatedly stressed the importance of conservation. I did not find the same volume of documents emphasizing conservation anywhere else.

In a letter to Kenneth Chorley, a trustee of JHPI, dated March 1945, Fairfield Osborn, president of the NYZS, stressed the importance of conservation to the endeavor. In it he argues that “the basic value of the project rests upon the fact that the public would be able to see what it is being asked to conserve.”¹ Months later Rockefeller made an indirect reference to conservation in his earliest known correspondence to Wyoming Governor Hunt about the proposed project. In the letter, he claims a “deep appreciation and feeling” for Jackson Hole and declares that he has “always been interested in the study of animals and believe[s] this can best be done in their own habitat.”² And in December 1946, just two months after being hired as the director of JHWP, Jim Simon drafted a document titled “The Jackson Hole Wildlife Park.” In the opening sentence he succinctly states the purpose of the park is “to further conservation through education and research.”³ He goes on to suggest various ways of promoting conservation among visitors, such as utilizing educational displays and distributing natural history pamphlets. These are just three examples of the priority given to conservation during the early conceptual and planning phases of the project. The topic arose repeatedly over the years, especially in Simon's bi-monthly reports which often highlighted the various studies being conducted at the research station, as well as the activities at the wildlife exhibit.

The men also understood that emphasizing conservation as it related to the animal exhibit would minimize any potential opposition. Many people within the

conservation community vehemently opposed the proposed wildlife park. Most conservationists supported tourism development when it did not interfere with the natural activities and movements of the area's animals. Therefore, they argued against the unnatural conditions of confining migratory animals such as elk, deer, antelope, and other ungulates within fenced areas. However, many of these same people supported the idea of an area for scientific study. With most press releases, newspaper and magazine articles, and other publicity mentioning, if not stressing, the integral conservation aspect of the venture, many organizations that originally denounced the Wildlife Park withdrew their objections even before the park opened in 1948. Some even gave endorsements—the National Parks Association, the National Park Service Association, the Dude Ranchers Association, and the local paper, *Jackson's Hole Courier*, to name a few. Even the American Society of Mammologists expressed its desire for the park to “abandon plans for any unnatural presentation of wildlife” but fully endorsed the “emphasis on research.”⁴ Many documents demonstrated that the alignment with conservation provided a significant positive impact on the public's attitude toward the Jackson Hole Wildlife Park and its research facility.

Another benefit of the RAC collections was finding in one place almost all of Director Simon's reports to the Board of Directors, from late in 1948 until it was transferred to the Park Service 1952—all in a single folder within the Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller records. Several additional reports from earlier in 1948 were located in another folder in the same collection. Being able to easily review the reports in chronological order proved to be very beneficial. I was able to easily envision the activities and developments surrounding the facility as it grew. Simon reported on everything from visitor numbers and sales figures at the Information Center to the condition of the animals, including those lost to poachers and coyotes. He wrote about the challenges posed by the weather during extreme winters and the problems caused by the cattle guards installed on the highway that ran through the Park. He explained why he felt it was necessary to expand the Park with the creation of a separate exhibit area for the antelope and the construction of additional facilities for the research station. He also shared information about ongoing publicity and marketing efforts, as well as the alliances he developed with the local community and the staff of Grand Teton National Park. And, as mentioned above, Simon proudly informed the board members

about the different research projects, especially when the researchers' reports were published in professional and scientific journals. Simon's reports provided invaluable insights into the functions of the Jackson Hole Wildlife Park.

Conclusion

Although narrow in scope, my research into the Jackson Hole Wildlife Park clearly demonstrates the Rockefeller family's commitment to conservation and natural resource management, and the importance it attached to the public's involvement. Without the personal sponsorship of Laurance Rockefeller, the park never would have come into existence and the thousands of people from across the country and around the world might never have witnessed those majestic animals in such an appropriate setting. And although I doubt any data exists to substantiate my claim, I firmly believe that the Jackson Hole Wildlife Park contributed to the growth of the environmental movement during its existence.

¹ Osborn to Chorley, March 19, 1945, Jackson Hole Wildlife Park 1945-47, Box 31, Series 1, FA476, Jackson Hole Preserve Inc., Rockefeller Archive Center (hereafter referred to as RAC), Sleepy Hollow, NY (hereafter referred to as JHPI 1945-47).

² Rockefeller to Hunt, August 24, 1945, Folder 20, Box 2, Series 1, FA067, Jackson Hole Wildlife Park Meetings 1945-46, Kenneth Chorley Papers, RAC (hereafter referred to as JHWP Meetings 1945-46).

³ James R. Simon, *The Jackson Hole Wildlife Park*, December 1946, JHPI 1945-47, RAC.

⁴ Simon Report to the Board of JHWP, February 1948, JHPI 1945-47, RAC; Donald F. Hoffmeister to Rockefeller, September 16, 1947, Folder 818, Box 88, Series E, FA314, Jackson Hole Wildlife Park 1945-1954, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller Records, RAC; and Hoffmeister to Newton Drury, September, 16, 1947, Folder 201-Correspondence, Box 1, NPS: Grand Teton National Monument, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Broomfield, Colorado.