

# A mountaintop moment

by William L. Miller

Cadillac Mountain in Acadia National Park  
Photo by Rich Herrmann

**T**he sign read, “Trail closed, peregrine falcons nesting.” I remember running from the parking lot toward the trailhead. My father called me back and pointed at the sign. I would not have made it far anyways—I was afraid of heights, and peregrines have a propensity for nesting on steep cliff faces. A 9-year-old with a love of birds does not always heed his own inner fears. Luckily my father had a plan.

“Don’t worry. We can drive up!”

After scanning the cliffs for falcons, we loaded up the family van and drove to the visitor center on top of Cadillac Mountain.

Maine was the farthest I had ever been away from home. Twelve hours in a van felt like an eternity to a young boy, but when I stepped out of that van at the top of Cadillac Mountain, something in me changed. Rocky mountaintop and blue sea so close. Forests and pebble-strewn shoreline as far as I could see. Before we left home, I had

watched an old National Park Service VHS tape my parents had bought for me about Acadia National Park, but I never imagined it would look like this.

Wide-eyed, I remember asking, “Mom, can we move here?”

She looked at me with a small smile and chuckled, “It is something, isn’t it?”

Acadia National Park serves as a mountaintop moment, both literally and figuratively, in my life. Mountaintop moments are times when God seems to demand our attention. In this case, God was asking me to dream big—pushing me toward the person I am today.

That week was full of birding north woods trails, walking rocky shorelines, and exploring coastal villages. My parents even tricked me into eating a lobster! From one of those small towns, we took a boat to an offshore island to see a colony of nesting Atlantic puffins. I remember being huddled in a shack watching puffins hop from rock to rock and arctic terns dive at passing guests. It was one of the coldest, and

happiest, experiences of my life!

The mission of the National Park Service is to “preserve unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations.”

Acadia changed me. When leaving Maine, I exclaimed to my parents that I was going to be an ornithologist for the National Park Service. I had never been so sure of anything in my entire life. That was 1998. While my path deviated slightly to a career in Christian higher education, the course set on that journey to Acadia stayed true. Today, I am a professional wildlife biologist tasked with training the next generation of ecologists and wildlife professionals.



Just a few weeks ago, on the other side of our country, another mountaintop moment occurred. A cadre of National Park Service employees climbed Yosemite’s El Capitan to hang an

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American flag upside down on the face of the mountain. God seeks our attention in interesting ways during times of trouble. A flag displayed upside down is a sign of distress. It signifies an emergency—a call for help.

By now reality has set in for many. These weeks have brought a mass firing of federal employees across many government agencies.

Thousands of workers have been terminated from all agencies responsible for care of this nation’s environmental and cultural resources, including the National Park Service.

Workers were told, “Based on your performance, you have not demonstrated that your further employment at the agency would be in the public interest.”

I have students who have gone on to pursue careers in conservation agencies. I work regularly with conservation biologists across multiple federal agencies. I can assure you this is a deeply dedicated and passionate group of public servants. Environmental professionals work long hours for modest salaries because they care so much about this nation and its environment.

Their jobs were an act of public service, and one that we all benefit from. To claim that their termination “was based on performance” was not only factually wrong, it was also disrespectful and cruel.

The public was told that cuts were necessary to combat the ballooning federal deficit. I am sympathetic to the need for a balanced federal budget. As a father, I do not want to leave my daughters with an insurmountable federal debt. However, I feel a moral imperative to also leave them a clean environment and national park system that will be there to inspire them, their

children, and their children’s children to care for God’s creation.

As someone from the Anabaptist tradition, I also think we should be cognizant that the federal deficit has ballooned in part because of decades of long wars fought half a world away.

In a time of climate and biodiversity crises, it is critical to consider the gains to be had in reducing the environmental stewardship infrastructure of our nation and ask ourselves whether it is possible that these cuts are ideologically, as opposed to financially, driven. Perhaps it is time that we collectively consider prioritizing care for the planet God has gifted us with before allotting billions in subsi-

dies to the oil and gas industry or companies focused on colonizing Mars.



A critical question on my mind is what role the church has in all of this.

Christians in the American context commonly use the term “stewardship” when discussing our collective duty to care for God’s creation. Analogs for the term stewardship appear in the biblical text 26 times, none of which are in direct reference to care for the environment. To be a steward consistent with these biblical references is to hold a political position—it is someone who cares for a lord’s household on their behalf.



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Yosemite National Park  
Photo by See Do Teach / flickr.com

The term gained popularity in the American church following the Revolutionary War as a way of promoting tithing, since the government was no longer a primary funder of church activities. In this context, stewardship took on an economic connotation. It was not until the latter half of the 20th century that the term became more widely used in relation to the environment. Scholars interpreted the creation mandate of Genesis 1:26-28 to be a model of delegated dominion. Humans were to exercise responsible care over the cathedral of creation.

The vocation of steward is one that is taken seriously in the biblical account. For example, Isaiah 22 tells the story of Shebna, a steward to King Hezekiah's household. In this story, God calls for the dismissal of Shebna, who used the resources he was given charge over for selfish gain. In the parable of the talents (Matthew 25), Jesus uses the analogy of wise investment and financial stewardship to highlight the importance of using one's spiritual gifts and resources in service to God. Taken together, these examples highlight that a steward is to act in the best interest of God's kingdom and not to abuse their position for personal gain.

In the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, wildlife resour-

ces are not property of the individual, as they were in the old estate-style conservation systems of Europe. Instead, wildlife is managed in public trust, meaning that these resources do not belong to one sole owner and are instead managed collectively on behalf of the citizens of the United States. Thus, employees of the National Park Service (and other agencies) steward the national resources delegated to them on behalf of the American people.

The National Park Service manages 250 million acres of public land, an area just slightly smaller than Montana. In 2023, the park system stewarded this land on an operational budget of about \$3.5 billion. Collectively, the national park system supported about 415,000 jobs, through direct employment and engagement with local economies. Many of these jobs were in rural areas. In that same year, the park system generated over \$55 billion in economic benefits to the nation. Like the first two characters in the parable of the talents, they have paid our monetary investments back with interest!

The National Park Service manages more than financial investments in congressionally approved budgets; it also stewards environments providing critical ecosystem services. "Ecosystem services" is a term that

ecologists use to refer to the benefits that humans derive from healthy ecosystems. These can be direct services, in the form of food, water, minerals, and lumber. They can also be indirect services, in the form of ecological functions like pollination, stormwater absorption, nutrient cycling, and climate regulation.

While these services are difficult to quantify since they are provided freely by healthy ecosystems, scientists estimate that the monetary value of ecosystem services exceeds \$140 trillion annually, far more than the global gross national product (about \$87 trillion in 2020). Our parks are preserving sensitive ecosystems that provide important services to the American people, and beyond.

But our understanding of the value of nature should not be solely predicated on the economic value of nature to humans. We are God's image-bearers, and our relationship with other creatures and the land should reflect the relationship that God shares with the entirety of creation. In the Genesis 1 creation account, God saw both humans and the non-human creation as good—a statement of inherent value. Thus, we value and invest in the care of creation because God values and cares about the creation.

“ I pray that our choices do not shoulder our children with an insurmountable ecological debt. ”

However, as the discussion of ecosystem services highlights, care for the least of God’s creatures can often produce unexpected value to human society as well.



In his essay “The Land Ethic,” Aldo Leopold, one of the forefathers of the modern conservation movement, wrote: “In human history, we have learned (I hope) that the conqueror role is eventually self-defeating. Why? Because it is implicit in such a role that the conqueror knows, *ex cathedra*, just what makes the community clock tick, and just what and who is valuable, and what and who is worthless, in community life. It always turns out that he knows neither, and this is why his conquests eventually defeat themselves.”

The battle for parks represents a critical junction in our collective lives as both Americans and Christians. Will we take the road of the conqueror, which would see the valuation of land, water, wildlife, and even people as lines on a spreadsheet? Down this road, national parks exist only if there is not a more profitable use of the land. Creation gives way to idols of human enterprise. This road neglects not only the intrinsic value of creation, but also important ecosystem services—gifts from God. This road is self-defeating and eventually leads to desolation (Leviticus 26).

Or do we walk the road of the peacemaker, invest in the community of creation, and commit to responsibly stewarding the resources gifted by God? In a time stamped by climate and biodiversity crises, I pray that our choices do not shoulder our children with an insurmountable ecological debt.




Looking southeast from Cadillac Mountain, you may notice a small cove. This cove is unique. Most beaches in Acadia National Park are pebble beaches common along the New England coast. This beach, however, is a sand beach.

Recently, park staff and their allies answered the distress signal that originated in Yosemite. They took to the beach and inscribed the words “Save Our Parks” into the sandy substrate. Other parks followed suit across the country. Flags hung in distress on entrance signs. SOS signs were posted

at trailheads and access roads.

I do not want to be the third servant from the parable of the talents, afraid and complacent. John Muir once famously wrote, “The mountains are calling, and I must go,” a statement that has become something of an unofficial motto for the park system. Muir was an American environmentalist who played an instrumental role in the establishment of Yosemite National Park.

This is a mountaintop moment. It is time for all of us to answer the call. 

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