Samantha Strunk-Hintz

HIS 299

Dr. Childers

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Source Analysis: Great Basin National Park

A vast mountainous region covering approximately 200,000 square miles in Eastern and Central Nevada, Southwest Oregon, parts of California, Idaho and Wyoming, the Great Basin National Park presents a remarkable panorama of North American beauty.[[1]](#footnote-1) It preserves a historical image of the American West, including both the potential opportunities seen by Anglo settlers and the scenic homeland of the Native Americans who once lived within the territory. This picturesque landscape was not always a National Park however; it was not until October 27, 1986 that it was legally declared a National Park under Ronald Reagan’s presidency.[[2]](#footnote-2)The struggles to convert the vast region into a National Park lasted several decades, and the reasons for and against the conversion are documented in a series of letters and statements between Grant Sawyer and Darwin Lambert in the year 1959.

The first of these sources is a memo from Hugh A. Shamberger, the director of the State of Nevada’s Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR), to Governor Grant Sawyer of Nevada. Drafted in June 25, 1959, the memo speaks of a meeting regarding the proposal to include the Great Basin as a National Park, a meeting attended by several government officials including several judges and attorneys of law. The document details the opposition of several groups of people to making the area a National Park, namely local stockmen and sportsmen due to the fact that the conversion would eliminate hunting and grazing in the area. There is also an implication that the biggest opposer to the proposal was the United States Forest Service, though no apparent reason for this opposition is given.

The next source is a formal letter to Governor Grant Sawyer, drafted several months later on October 2nd, 1959 by Darwin Lambert. A native of the Great Basin region, Lambert was treasurer of the DCNR (evidence of his position is seen in the previous source) as well as an employee of the National Park Service[[3]](#footnote-3). In the letter, Darwin Lambert sheds light on the opposition of the Forest Service mentioned in the first source, documenting his anxiety surrounding C.J. Olsen who was the Utah state park director and who had had a long association with the Forest Service.

We are a bit worried about the attitude of some influential people in Utah concerning the park – probably inspired by C. J. Olsen… [who] does not appear to approve making a national park from Forest Service ground. If in your judgment you can help the park project through Utah contacts, we would be most grateful for such help.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This letter suggests that Lambert’s understanding was that if the neighboring states did not work together on the project, then there would be little chance of success. He also writes of the discovery of Beryllium discovered in the area, saying that “the berylium (sic) can be mined and make its possibly important contribution to the economy of this county and of Nevada.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Less than one month later, on October 28, 1959, Governor Grant Sawyer responded with a letter of his own. The letter documents Sawyer’s personal support of the proposal to create the Great Basin National Park, stating that “this project can only bring prosperity to our State.”[[6]](#footnote-6) He mentions as well the support of other government officials, but reveals some concerns for the project that are not specifically mentioned. The document is short and to the point yet implies that the Governor is continuing to work on the proposal, and that several government officials are on board with the creation of the Great Basin National Park.

On November 18 of the same year, Governor Grant Sawyer received a notice from Senator Alan Bible, regarding hearings that were to take place the following month, in December. Senator Bible advised Sawyer to either show up in person or mail in a statement in his absence about his views on the park proposal. The hearings were to be about the legislation behind the creation of the National Park, and so the fact that Senator Bible is writing to the Governor of Nevada implies that the governor wished to testify on the park’s behalf.

The final document in the series is the formal statement from Governor Grant Sawyer to the Subcommittee of Senate Interior for the hearing regarding the Great Basin National Park. The bill was being taken up by the 86th Congress of the United States, and the hearing would last three days: December 5th, 7th, and 8th of 1959. In his statement, the Governor declares his support for the establishment of the national park, saying “The withdrawal of large areas of public domain for special purposes is a matter of concern which I share with many people in the West.”[[7]](#footnote-7)While he also addresses the concerns other people have about the establishment, such as the issue of water rights and of domestic grazing, Sawyer states that “These are comparatively small matters when weighed against the many recreational and educational features offered by the proposed park area. I presume satisfactory solutions to these problems can be found.” [[8]](#footnote-8)

While historians know that the Great Basin National Park was not officially established until almost thirty years later, in 1986, this series of primary documents between the various government officials gives historical insight to the long process behind the park’s creation. We can confirm these documents as primary sources due to the fact that each of the writers played an active role in the attempts to make the Great Basin region a national park. Though each individual source may not be able to complete a story on its own, the series of documents together could have the potential for answering several historical questions: How can we understand the process behind the creation of national parks? How can preserving large areas of land in the form of a national park help a state’s economy? What can preserving large areas like the Great Basin tell us about past events and societies? And perhaps even more importantly, the documents give insight into the tensions between National Park Service and the National Forest Service.

From looking at other sources and using the benefit of hindsight, we know that the people writing these documents were unsuccessful in their attempts to create the national park. But these primary sources also lead us to the reason the proposals were unsuccessful until 1986: opposition from the National Forest Service. *The Great Basin*, a historical research study published by the U.S. Department of the Interior and the National Park Service in 1990 reinforces the claim that the National Forest Service was the greatest opposition: “The remainder of the present park…was incorporated in the forest when its boundaries were enlarged and adjusted by presidential proclamation. Thus, the present park area was administered by the U.S. Forest Service until establishment of the national park [in] 1986.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Using these primary sources and combining them with various secondary sources, we can see that there was a lot of tension between the National Forest Service and the National Park Service. Both agencies had the same goal of preservation; however they were very different in their motives for preserving the land. The Great Basin National Park was no exception. Looking at the context for this time period, the increased tensions between the National Forest Service and the National Park Service were a product of the early environmental movement, which led to numerous debates about public land management. In the case presented by these primary source documents we can see that much of the debate is centered on not just differing ideas of preservation but also of commodity versus recreation. “The environmental demand for wilderness designations and aesthetic management met with severe opposition from professional foresters interested primarily in wood production.”[[10]](#footnote-10) This comes from an article from the *Journal of Forest History*, and would definitely supplement the information found in the sources on the Great Basin National Park proposal.

The correspondences between the Governor and Darwin Lambert are original documents written during the time of the debates concerning the creation of the Great Basin National Park that provide an inside view as well as direct evidence, that can answer questions about the time period, the environmental movement, and the project of creating the park. Correspondences, letters, and legal documents are all classic examples of primary sources. However, one could also argue that they can serve as secondary sources as well due to the fact that some of the documents discuss and interpret information from government agencies that the actors are not involved with. Whether or not these documents should be used as primary or secondary sources depends on the type of research being done. Looking at these sources alongside other secondary sources published later was extremely helpful in backing up the information taken from the primary documents, creating a more complete picture.

1. U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *Basin Range: A History of Great Basin National Park,* by Harlan D. Unrau, (1990), xi [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., xiii [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ArtfulpersuasionPress, “Darwin Lambert: 1916-2007,” 2011, [http://www.darwinlambert.org/#](http://www.darwinlambert.org/) [accessed February 24, 2012] [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Darwin Lambert to Hon. Grant Sawyer, Nevada, October 2, 1959 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Grant Sawyer to Darwin Lambert, Nevada, October 28, 1959 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Subcommittee of Senate Interior, *Hon. Grant Sawyer Statement on S. 2664,* 86th Cong., 1st sess., 1959, 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. U.S. Department of the Interior, *Basin Range,* 231 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Samuel P. Hayes, “The Environmental Movement,” *Journal of Forest History 25,* no. 4 (Oct, 1981): 219 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)