



# H-Environment

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## H-Environment Roundtable Reviews

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Jacob Darwin Hamblin

**Emily Wakild, *Revolutionary Parks: Conservation, Social Justice, and Mexico's National Parks, 1910-1940* (Arizona, 2011). ISBN: 978-0-8165-2957-5**

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**Introduction by Jacob Darwin Hamblin, Oregon State University**

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**O**n the eve of the Second World War, Mexico led the world in number of national parks. The Mexican government designated hundreds of thousands of hectares in fourteen states as national parks by 1940, during a time when the country was still recovering from the tumultuous revolution and civil war of the century's second decade. Although the idea of national parks is typically associated with being the "best idea" of the United States, it was Mexico that led the way in the 1930s. Why Mexico?

In *Revolutionary Parks*, Emily Wakild tells us that the parks communicated the ideals of the social revolution in Mexico, espousing social justice while implementing the tools of rational science. It is true that the parks protected forests and watershed, but they did so with rural communities in mind, permitting agricultural uses and refusing to force people to vacate land. To Wakild, the parks not only were in keeping with revolutionary ideals, they were expressions of them. She shows how the parks created in the 1930s absorbed the lessons of economic conservation while also treating the work of rural people as morally valuable and worthy of protection.

In Wakild's telling, the creation of national parks in Mexico differed from those in many other countries by allowing for the expression of radical opinions about living in a just and equitable society. Rather than draw from elites' sensibilities about preserving wilderness, she writes, Mexican parks sought to establish a "common cultural patrimony of nature."

Our first commentator is **Sterling Evans**, the Louise Welsh Chair of History at the University of Oklahoma. A specialist in environmental and agricultural history in Latin America, Evans has a particular interest in the relationship between commodities, ecology, and social structures. In his book *Bound in Twine*, he shows how a particular fiber from the Yucatán, henequen, provided the twine not only to "bind" wheat but also to bind the lives of those who exploited land and workers. While focused on a Mexican commodity, he shows how henequen was linked to global markets, its fate rising and falling with the fortunes of American and Canadian wheat production.<sup>1</sup>

**Adrian Howkins** is Associate Professor of History at Colorado State University, Fort Collins, where he teaches courses on environmental history and Latin American history. He has spent years exploring the intellectual and political dimensions of distant, often-inaccessible places. Like Wakild, he is concerned with the role of political ideology in governing land use. His studies of territorial claims in Antarctica

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<sup>1</sup> Sterling Evans, *Bound in Twine: The History and Ecology of the Henequen-Wheat Complex for Mexico and the American and Canadian Plains, 1880-1950* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2007).

have highlighted the anti-imperial elements of political discourse in Chile and Argentina. He notes that these countries struck a delicate balance between their anti-imperial idealism and their own expansionistic goals.<sup>2</sup>

**Curt Meine** is an expert on Aldo Leopold and is a scholar of conservation principles. He shares with Wakild an interest in the creation of parks as expressions of political ideals. He reminds us that in the United States, Theodore Roosevelt's presidency blended conservation with other motives, including political reform and economic justice. Not only was Roosevelt the leading advocate for national parks, he also set his political weight against the actions of "mighty industrial overlords," and his conversation ideas should be considered part of an attempt to revive democratic principles.<sup>3</sup>

Our final commentator, **Cynthia Radding**, is Gussenhoven Distinguished Professor of Latin American Studies and Professor of History at the University of North Carolina. The author of many publications in Latin American environmental history, Radding has excelled at comparative approaches. Her juxtaposition of the deserts of Sonora with lush Amazonia, from the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries, offers opportunities to see similarities in cultural and economic exchange in two distinct environments. She reveals that as indigenous peoples' and colonizers' interactions with the natural environment evolved, their identities changed as well, altering conceptions of territory and property over time.<sup>4</sup>

Before turning to the first set of comments, I would like to pause here and thank all the roundtable participants for taking part. In addition, I would like to remind readers that as an open-access forum, *H-Environment Roundtable Reviews* is available to scholars and non-scholars alike, around the world, free of charge. Please circulate.

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<sup>2</sup> Adrian Howkins, "Reluctant Collaborators: Argentina and Chile in Antarctica during the International Geophysical Year, 1957-58," *Journal of Historical Geography* 34:4 (2008), 596-617.

<sup>3</sup> Curt Meine, "Roosevelt, Conservation, and the Revival of Democracy," *Conservation Biology* 15:4 (2001), 829-831.

<sup>4</sup> Cynthia Radding, *Landscapes of Power and Identity: Comparative Histories in the Sonoran Desert and the Forests of Amazonia from Colony to Republic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

### Comments by Sterling Evans, University of Oklahoma

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It is most fitting that Emily Wakild's *Revolutionary Parks* is the first book in the University of Arizona Press' "Latin American Environments" series co-edited by environmental historians Chris Boyer and Lise Sedrez. The series is also the first in the English-speaking world (and perhaps anywhere) specifically to focus on the environmental history of Latin America and the Caribbean, so Wakild, the series editors, and the Press should be heartily congratulated for this important launch! Those of us in this field will look forward to other important "Latin American Environment" titles to follow.<sup>5</sup>

Wakild's *Revolutionary Parks* is important in many other ways, too. It is a well-researched and well-written book that explores case studies of four national parks in Mexico established during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940). The book argues that establishing parks in Mexico was more than merely for conservation goals. National parks were "revolutionary" by including local peoples, were located near large population centers for the benefit of urban residents to enjoy, and were not established to exclude agricultural practices, in fact local *campesinos* played active roles in some parks. Moreover, differing from national park development in the United States and perhaps elsewhere, conservation in Mexico was bent on ecological (often, hydrographical) restoration, ensuring forest cover for soil and water protection, often for the benefit of agriculture and urban zones. Thus one of the most compelling arguments of the book is Wakild's attention to comparative conservation, especially with that of the United States. Parks in Mexico were relatively small, attracted urban day users, and represented a form of ecological restoration novel for the 1930s anywhere in the world.

However, this argument would have been more powerful if Wakild had included analysis of more than her case study parks. Can we make these kinds of assumptions about Mexican conservation by only examining four national parks? What of the many others established since the 1930s? Are they equally as "revolutionary" in seeking to be as inclusive to a wide variety of people and economies? Did other presidents continue Cárdenas' rather enlightened lead on this matter? According to the Conclusion, no. Wakild is quick to point out how some forty national parks were established during the Cárdenas era, assuredly more at that point of time and in so few years, than elsewhere in the world. But here we only learn of four, and all fairly centrally located near Mexico City. This selectivity dilutes the thesis of how Mexican parks in general are "revolutionary," and prevents readers from evaluating whether parks established then in other areas of Mexico, or since then, have followed suit.

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<sup>5</sup> The second book in the series, Christopher R. Boyer, ed., *A Land between Waters: Environmental Histories of Modern Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012) is also a useful contribution to this genre of Latin American history and could be used for classes on Mexican history or Latin American environmental history in tandem with Wakild's *Revolutionary Parks*.

Some scholars of modern Mexico, especially those experts of the Mexican Revolution, may very well wonder about the connections between the Revolution itself and these Cárdenas-era park designations. On the one hand, there is no clear evidence (at least presented in the book) that earlier revolutionary leaders (Francisco Madero, Venustiano Carranza, Emiliano Zapata, Álvaro Obregón, or Pancho Villa) who outlined revolutionary policies ever advocated for conservation—even in vague, general ways, not specifically for national park designations. Nor is there a direct link from the Constitution of 1917, arguably the Revolution’s most concrete representation, to national park development or conservation policy. Now before everyone starts academically pummeling me, I know very well that this is not exactly the point here—that Wakild is arguing that *concepts* of the Revolution, especially those of land reform, development of communal-style *ejido* agriculture, and weaving together a more inclusive society—can be viewed as successfully represented in Cárdenas’ conservation efforts. More direct links to the Revolution itself may have strengthened this argument, but readers still can appreciate that Cárdenas and his advisors were making strident efforts to improve land tenure policies in general, especially given the elitist bent of the *Porfiriato* and the general inaction of the early “revolutionary” presidents.

The most important of the presidential advisors during these years was Miguel Ángel de Quevedo—a hydrologist and first director of the cabinet-level Forestry Department so instrumental in earmarking national parks in Cárdenas’ government. Wakild in some ways casts Quevedo as a kind of revolutionary hero in this regard, and picks up with more insightful research and analysis where historian Lane Simonian left off on earlier research about the role of this individual in Mexican conservation history.<sup>6</sup> But was Quevedo so “revolutionary”? Wakild evidences his elitist background and French educational background in forestry (one based more on industrial forestry than conservation), and admits that at age seventy-three in this position he “supported revolutionary promises unenthusiastically.” She also asserts that he agreed to the nomination for the directorship out of a “certain amount of self-righteous egotism” (p. 33). And following Wakild’s footnotes, we read that many of the “revolutionary” ideas for forestry espoused by Quevedo and other Mexicans were generated not in Mexico but from transnational sources (France, the United States). There is certainly nothing wrong with any of that, and I very much appreciate Wakild’s excellent coverage of the transnationality of this part of the story, but this aspect does little to support how conservation was “revolutionary”—Mexican style.

One important transnational aspect of Wakild’s important story seems to have been left on the cutting room floor, however. In Chapter 1, she alludes to how Quevedo and other Mexican leaders struggled with U.S. initiatives to create border parks

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<sup>6</sup> See Lane Simonian, *Defending the Land of the Jaguar: A History of Conservation in Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), especially Chapter 4 “Miguel Angel de Quevedo: The Apostle of the Tree.”

(similar to the friendship parks on the U.S.-Canadian border). Negotiations, unfortunately, broke down for these ideas ever to get off the ground, but Wakild stops short of explaining all of this here. She certainly does elsewhere, in a remarkable essay entitled “Border Chasm: International Boundary Parks and Mexican Conservation, 1935-1945” that appeared in *Environmental History* a few years ago, and which I rank as one of the most important and useful essays on comparative North American and borderlands conservation history ever published.<sup>7</sup> So I was surprised that most of that research for the article, on that same time period as *Revolutionary Parks*, was not included in the book, especially as, at around 170 pages, the book is relatively short and could have supported a non-Mexico City area chapter. The decision by the author or the press to omit this analysis here could well have been due to a desire to stay in the Valley of Mexico region (where the four case-study parks are located), or because the border parks were never created. As discussed thoroughly in Wakild’s article, due to the very nature of Mexican conservation at this time period border parks to protect wilderness or for U.S. tourism initiatives would not have incorporated many local Mexicans, could have interfered with the ranching economies of the area, and would have provided little access to Mexican urbanites. Likewise, Quevedo and his team of foresters did not identify border areas as in need of ecological restoration. Fair enough, but according to this analysis then, can parks only be “revolutionary” if they are centered near heavily populated areas or that are areas that need to be restored? Apparently so, as Wakild admits, “Revolutionary conservation privileged forestry, and it focused on the country’s geographic center” (p. 23). Thus, I think it is fair to be critical of that model and argue that it perhaps was not the kind of “revolutionary environmentalism” (p. 152) that Wakild would have us believe.

Still, there are so many strengths about *Revolutionary Parks* that I will continue to assign it for coursework for years to come. It begins with an excellent introduction that includes a thorough discussion of parks and conservation theory (with a deep and useful review of that literature—of which graduate students and others should especially take note), a good synopsis of the Mexican Revolution, the historical trajectory of Mexican conservation, and analysis of the “interdependence of social and environmental policy” (p. 15) as that would apply to Mexico. Chapters one through five are the case studies of individual parks. But more than outlining their histories, these chapters are also complete with information on Mexican silviculture, forestry and restoration science, comparative conservation policy (especially with that of the United States), the beginnings of what might be considered environmental justice, and very important, the role of the state in this Mexican conservation model. The conclusion also offers some excellent points to ponder, especially the questions that Mexican conservationist Enrique Beltrán asked in the 1960s. He wondered if Mexican parks were too small, how subsequent park development after the 1930s was “notoriously deficient,” and how there continued to be problems involving “compromises between use and conservation,” and he

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<sup>7</sup> See Emily Wakild, “Border Chasm: International Boundary Parks and Mexican Conservation, 1935-1940,” *Environmental History* 14:3 (July 2009), 453-475.

argued for conserving different ecological and “differentiated use” zones for parks (p. 155). These are important questions regarding the legacy of Cárdenas’s and Quevedo’s “revolutionary” parks that need even more attention in the years to come and in future studies. Wakild has given us an important work to begin that discussion.



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**Comments by Adrian Howkins, Colorado State University**

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This is a highly original history of the creation and development of national parks during Mexico's initial revolutionary period from 1910-1940. The book's main focus is on the administration of President Lázaro Cárdenas in the second half of the 1930s, which promoted the creation of numerous national parks in keeping with the revolutionary agenda of social justice. By the end of Cárdenas' tenure, Mexico had more parks than any other country in the world. This fact provides Wakild with an opportunity to think comparatively and explore the meaning of national parks in Mexico and Latin America more generally. Mexican parks were not only revolutionary in the sense that they were directly connected to the Revolution, but also because they offered the world a model of inhabited, accessible, national parks which often permitted extractive activities and tended to cluster around urban areas, especially Mexico City. This contrasted starkly with the wilderness preservation model developing in the United States and other settler colonial societies, where parks tended to be much larger and far more remote.

The main body of the book examines the creation of four specific parks near Mexico City: Lagunas de Zempolala National Park, Popocatepetl-Iztaccíhuatl National Park, La Malinche National Park, and El Tepozteco National Park. Ecological motivations and the desire to protect nature were certainly present in the creation of each of these parks. But the big question after the active phase of the Mexican Revolution (roughly 1911-1920) was how to construct a national identity out of the ruin and animosities created by ten years of bloody civil war. In much the same way that Mexican muralist painters famously created an ideology of the revolution through their public artwork, Wakild shows that park creation offered another important medium for creating a revolutionary society. "It is striking," writes Wakild, "that Mexican politicians, scientists, and citizens did not create a cluster of city or state parks or even management reserves. They consciously created *national parks* as cultural products, political statements, and environmental gestures (4)." All four parks studied in this book were fundamentally "national" in that they were created to construct and reflect the new meaning of the Mexican nation and what Wakild calls the "Common Cultural Patrimony of Nature."

Wakild shows that some of the expertise for national park creation – especially through the science of forestry – survived from the period of positivist rule of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries known as the Porfiriato. Since rebellions against this regime had been the initial cause of Revolution, this continuity perhaps helps to explain some of the lingering resistance to park creation into the 1930s. But as Wakild shows in her case study of La Malinche National Park, resistance to national park creation could occur within even the seemingly most benign of political structures. There are some mentions of the role played by the Revolution itself in the history of the places that became parks: Tepoztlán, for example, had been a focus for Zapatista fighting during the conflict. But given the



importance of the Mexican Revolution to the history of the creation of parks in Mexico, perhaps a little more background information could have been provided for what was taking place in these places during the period of violence in the 1910s. Were any of the other places that became parks the sites of fighting or massacres during the conflict? Or was Tepoztlán an exception? How, in other words, did the Revolutionary history of these places shape the way they were thought about in the years that followed? Answers to these questions at a time when these memories were likely still raw and visceral might contribute to broader literature on the politics of memory within national park history.

More broadly *Revolutionary Parks* offers excellent opportunities for comparative thinking about national parks. Although there may not be anything startling in the finding that early Mexican parks never followed the U.S. wilderness model, such an argument makes an important case for the distinctiveness of Mexican environmental history, and perhaps Latin American environmental history more widely. Any comparative perspective, of course, depends largely on where your view comes from. The Mexican model of inhabited parks is perhaps a little less revolutionary if seen from an African, Asian, or European perspective instead of the United States. But even from these places the idea of parks being founded primarily for the benefit of the people living in and around them may come as something of a surprise.

In the conclusion Wakild mentions William Cronon's famous "The Trouble with Wilderness" essay. One important critique of wilderness in the US context is that it tends to locate "pure nature" in places where humans are not, always, by definition, somewhere else. As well as maintaining a human-nature dichotomy, such an idea can function to devalue the environment in populated regions. Here, perhaps, the distinction between Mexico and the United States is not quite as stark as it might first appear. Even though Mexican parks were created close to urban areas, they tended to be located outside cities. Given Mexico City's reputation as one of the world's largest, densest, and most polluted cities, a question can be raised as to whether the surrounding parks contributed to a lack of concern for parks and green spaces within the city limits. Mexico City's rapid growth over the twentieth century had multiple factors and often exceeded the capacity for planners to keep up, but it might be interesting to speculate about whether the presence of nearby national parks reduced the perceived necessity for the retention of urban open space.

Even at their relative numerical peak around 1940, national parks in Mexico covered a much smaller area than parks in other parts of the world. The relatively small size had implications for nature conservation in Mexico, and by the second half of the twentieth century many Mexican parks were outside the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's standard definition of what national parks should be. Wakild includes an extended discussion of the concept of "paper parks" in the conclusion, and is not entirely convinced by the utility of this term. Nevertheless, there is an abiding sense of missed opportunity: "The slow and silent failure of this revolutionary model of conservation arose in part because of the

flexibility of the park program (151).” Mexico’s Revolutionary Parks – just like the Mexican Revolution itself – were not an unqualified success story. But Wakild’s excellent book convincingly demonstrates that the Mexican experience of national parks offers a fascinating alternative to conventional thinking about conservation and protected areas.

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**Comments by Curt Meine, Aldo Leopold Foundation**


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**E**mily Wakild’s study of Mexico’s “revolutionary” national parks comes along at an auspicious time in the evolving discussion of parks and other protected areas—their role and value in conservation, their changing use, their social and ecological context, their history and their future. Most are by now familiar with the core dilemma in the discussion. On the one hand we have the classic view of national parks, as (in Wallace Stegner’s phrasing) “the best idea we ever had. Absolutely American, absolutely democratic, they reflect us at our best rather than our worst.”<sup>8</sup> We might call that the “white hat” view. On the other hand, we have the postmodern, postcolonial view of parks as an *imposed* idea and as segregated space, burdened by a long history of alienation. In Mark Dowie’s words, “Over the last century, the conservation movement has created some beautiful parks—and millions of refugees.”<sup>9</sup> That would be the “black hat” view.

And there are still other hands (and a wide variety of hats) to consider. National parks have been essential tools in sustaining biological diversity; but many of our most important parks were not established with biogeographical principles or biodiversity conservation goals in mind—often before such principles and goals had been formulated. National parks provide us with valuable baselines of ecological information; but in the face of climate change, “novel ecosystems,” and “no-analog” environmental conditions, baselines are (by some accounts) obsolete. National parks were established to serve a public that yearned to find relief from modern, industrial, urban reality; but the world as a whole is urbanizing, a post-environmental millennial generation of Americans is now moving into cities, park visitation is flat, and people are flying personal drones into Yellowstone’s thermal pools. National parks have long been the well-intended creation of privileged white elites; but we have more and more examples of indigenous communities adopting, adapting, and transforming the park idea to protect native lands. In short, the model and narrative that came out of the experience of creating the great national parks of the American West is not so definitive in its origins, its current realities, its evolving expression, or its implications. It is no longer so clear just who is wearing the white hats or the black hats. We see a lot more gray now. We in fact can see hats of many colors.

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<sup>8</sup> Stegner, Wallace. *Where the bluebird sings to the lemonade springs: Living and writing in the West* (New York: Wings Books, 1995). For an explication of the phrase, see Alan MacEachern’s posting, “Who had ‘America’s Best Idea’?,” <http://niche-canada.org/2011/10/23/who-had-americas-best-idea>.

<sup>9</sup> Dowie, Mark, “No Natives Allowed,” *Boston Globe*, 3 May 2009 ([http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2009/05/03/no\\_natives\\_allowed](http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2009/05/03/no_natives_allowed)). Dowie’s critique of parks and other protected areas is summarized in *Conservation refugees: The hundred-year conflict between global conservation and native peoples* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

Wakild's study helpfully complicates the narrative of parks even further. She explores a history little known or appreciated, even among those focused on the development of conservation in Latin America: "For a brief span of time, roughly 1935-1940, Mexicans tried to blend nature protection and environmental justice in a way that rarely happened afterward or elsewhere" (1). This episode stands out in important ways. It grew out of—not despite—revolutionary ferment: "Parks were not whimsical oases for wealthy urbanites... [but] became tangible representations of how revolutionaries nationalized their natural territory" (10). The vision for the parks "did not involve evicting resident campesinos or extinguishing economic activity altogether," but realized them as "as part of daily life as dynamic, contested, and inhabited sites with multiple patrons" (11). This counters facile arguments about the export and imposition of the American "wilderness ideal" in shaping parks (14). Mexico's park movement can be seen as an especially early attempt at integrating conservation goals, "a precursor to contemporary ideas of sustainability because it constructed a compelling and inclusive vision for the interdependence of social and environmental policy" (14-15). Clustered around Mexico City in the Valley of Mexico, these parks sought to connect the landscapes, needs, and political roles of urban and rural dwellers alike. Their creation did not erase the story of the region's native people, and in some cases purposefully sought to promote "integration of the nation's indigenous past into notions of nationalism" (16).

To explore these distinctions and tensions, Wakild follows five thematic threads—science, education, productivity, property, and tradition (17)—through the stories and landscapes of four of the newly created national parks. Amid the forested lake country of Lagunas de Zempola National Park, a non-agricultural landscape, urban and rural dwellers alike were brought toward "the nexus of moral renewal" (49), a place for civic, personal, and ecological restoration. Under the iconic volcanic peaks of Popocatepetl and Iztaccíhuatl National Park, park creators sought to combine, moderate, and guide development goals: "[T]he combination of extractive industries alongside a venerated landscape defined the park's purpose as a program integrating rural groups into a national patrimony, while simultaneously seeking to reform and modernize them" (72). For her third case, Wakild turns to the contested territory of La Malinche National Park, where issues of property, jurisdiction, and forest health collided. It became "the most controversial of all [Lázaro] Cárdenas's parks because its creation entered into long-standing local disputes over land redistribution" (93). El Tepozteco National Park comprised a landscape of eight villages and the intertwined values of natural beauty, indigenous culture, and Catholic tradition. As Wakild notes, it was here "that federal reformers began to recognize the importance of rural traditions as a component of a shared national identity.... [The park] connected nature and culture by recognizing resilient local ties to distinct landscapes" (124).

If I have one reservation about Wakild's selection of park stories, it would be that some discussion of the parks created beyond the Valley of Mexico would have provided an even broader range of contrasts. The 1942 map of national parks (2) makes me yearn to know the back story of isolated parks in Chihuahua, Coahuila,

Nuevo León, Oaxaca. As is, her four park case studies serve well her central purpose: to understand how such a revolutionary (in all senses of the word) approach to conservation arose as it did, when it did, where it did. She is also clear-eyed in seeing these as (in her concluding chapter's title) "Just Parks: A Silent Failure with Enduring Lessons" (149). Mexico, along with the rest of the world, became increasingly populated, urbanized, industrialized, and beholden to a narrow and powerful concept of economic growth and resource development. Its delicate experiment in an alternative approach to conservation suffered "slow and silent failure" (153). The parks remain, but the explosive growth of Mexico City has left them as isolated "vestiges of green" (166) amid the megalopolis. Exploring that post-Cárdenas, post-World War II fate is beyond the scope of Wakild's book. Her work here though is a necessary foundation for understanding the special accomplishments of a particular conservation *program*, as well as the inherent limitations of that program absent a more universal shift in the conservation and development *paradigm*.

Wakild does extract hard and valuable insights from her focused study. The Mexican model ambitiously sought to achieve "democratic parks," yet "the focus on inclusive management in parks also left open the door for their destruction" (154). As attention shifted within conservation to sustaining biological diversity, and as economic and demographic pressures on parks mounted, the limitations of the Mexican experiment in integrated planning emerged. Wakild is especially strong, and sensitive, in placing the Mexican experience in the context of the ongoing critique (and defense) of wilderness and the "conventional histories of protected areas" (160), noting that many of the issues driving contemporary debates in conservation "were... issues [that] Mexican revolutionaries confronted decades earlier" (158). She strives to find passage through the phalanxes of white and black hats:

Some human actions are more intrusive than others, and it would serve park proponents and objectors alike if conservationists gave more focus to large-scale land conversion enterprises, the lack of economic alternatives for impoverished people, and climate change as the largest threats to wild nature. By pitting scientists against local people, polarizing debates over conservation detract from the larger possibilities that come with parks. Rather than accepting this division, for conservation to move forward the antecedents of the current debates must be unpacked with attention to the way societies have articulated claims to their natural patrimony.

Wakild does not romanticize anyone or anything here: neither wilderness, nor parks, nor conservationists, nor social justice advocates, nor local people, nor rural livelihoods, nor scientists, nor progressive bureaucrats. Nor the past. Her summary of lessons for the present is succinct and worthwhile: include the opinions, desires, and activities of local people in conservation planning; acknowledge that, without responsible stewardship and active enforcement, "protected" landscapes degrade and natural values erode; develop policies involving nature protection and social

reform together; don't assume that societies that have experienced political chaos or even eruptions of revolutionary violence cannot advance conservation aims—indeed such disruption can set the stage for positive change; and, however real the tensions can be between conservation advocates and local people, recognize that they face the same common and profound threats of concentrated wealth, political corruption, short-term development schemes, conscience-free consumerism, and myopic economics. Wakild has provided a significant analysis of a unique and underappreciated chapter in conservation history. What do we finally learn from it? The creation of parks, in the case of Mexico and no doubt elsewhere, may well not have been the best idea we've ever had, nor was it the worst; it was and is *an* idea, emerging from varied sources, seeking varied goals, and still evolving as social and ecological realities change. It is not, and never has been, a simple black-and-white proposition.

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**Comments by Cynthia Radding, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill**

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**R***evolutionary Parks. Conservation, Social Justice, and Mexico's National Parks, 1910-1940*, appearing in 2011, was selected as the inaugural book in The University of Arizona's Latin American Landscapes series. It was awarded the Elinor Melville Prize in Environmental History by the Conference on Latin American History, for the best book published on Latin American environmental history. *Revolutionary Parks* is beautifully written; it develops a strong argument regarding the role of national park formation in Mexico's post-Revolutionary federal policies in a clear sequence of chapters. This monograph was thoroughly researched in a number of national and provincial archives in Mexico as well as in libraries and university collections pertaining to modern Mexico in the United States. Its originality is centered in Dr. Wakild's ability to integrate themes relating to science and environmental concerns with the complex issues that surrounded the Revolution of 1910. This is no mean feat, when we consider that the historiography on the Mexican Revolution and its outcomes – the pivotal event of twentieth-century Mexico – is voluminous with diverse threads of interpretation. By selecting the theme of national parks, Dr. Wakild captured Mexico's revolutionary promise of social justice and its partial successes in the context of the nation's uneven capitalist development. Her study radiates out from the axis of Mexico's national park system to science and education, linked in turn to the core historical themes of land tenure, economic productivity, and peasant culture.

The Introduction sets up the question that leads readers into the book: Why should Mexico, a cash-strapped country struggling to re-establish internal governance and a national platform after a major social upheaval, undertake a vigorous program of creating national parks? Wakild answers this question with three major points in what she calls "the construction of a common cultural patrimony of nature." The founding of national parks strengthened the hands of federal officials and their allies in civil society to advance their ideological vision of socially responsible development; parks enabled federal officials to establish control over natural resources and assert the authority of the state in the management of the commons, which was perceived as a parallel path to the thorny issues of land reform that were at the center of the revolution; park creation enhanced the cultural program of the post-revolutionary period, implemented in art, literature, and public education. At the same time, Wakild distinguished Mexico's program of park formation from the model of U.S. National Parks, conceived as wilderness reserves, in that the formation of national parks in Mexico necessarily grappled with the issues of resource use by indigenous peoples and other groups within the broad sector of *campesinos*. One of the principal theses of this study is the distinction between exclusionary national parks, created for the preservation and enjoyment of "nature," and inclusionary parks that (ideally) involved local communities in the responsible use of forests and waterways.



The following chapters develop the themes of science as applied to resource conservation and national park development, education, productivity, property, and tradition. To make the study manageable, Wakild organized her research around four national parks located mainly in central Mexico. Each chapter reveals, in different ways, the difficulties of carrying into practice the goals of an inclusionary program of park formation and, in particular, the uneasy marriage between science, with its proposals for environmental conservation and social reform, and the concrete interests of local communities. Moreover, a radical shift in federal policies after 1940, emphasizing industrial development and slowing the pace of land reform, meant that the national parks established in forested lands surrounding the national capital fell into neglect. Conservation gave way to clear-cutting, even as the exponential increase in rural-to-urban migration expanded the urban imprint of Mexico City and gave rise to alarming rates of water and air pollution. The Conclusion explains the gravity of the losses incurred with the collapse of the national park program of the 1930s, established under the extraordinary leadership of President Lázaro Cárdenas, in the following decade. In her final chapter Wakild extends the meanings of both the promises and the failures of that program beyond Mexico to policy questions concerning the models for environmentalism in Latin America and beyond. This is an important work of scholarship and a valuable book for teaching the history of Mexico and environmental history, at both the graduate and undergraduate levels.

Wakild's study emphasizes the thorny issues surrounding land reform and conflicting claims to property. To be sure, land tenure is a familiar theme in Mexican (and much of Latin American) history from the colonial period into modern times. In particular, it dominated the dense historiography surrounding the Mexican Reforma of the mid-nineteenth century and the Revolution of 1910, arguably the two great watershed developments of the Mexican nation-state with their constitutional foundations regarding citizenship and the definition of property. Emily Wakild's *Revolutionary Parks* reopens the time-worn themes of land tenure and usufruct with a fresh perspective from the vantage points of conservation, management of the commons, and real-life struggles over land occupation and peasant agrarian practices. Chapter 4 analyzes these issues related to property focused on La Malinche National Park in Tlaxcala, where Cárdenas's conservation policies clashed with local disputes over land redistribution. The majestic landscape of the Malinche volcano and its forested slopes dominated the geography of Tlaxcala, a small state wedged between the central plateau and the Sierra Madre Oriental, but one with a deep history of indigenous autonomy and peasant resilience. Mexico's post-revolutionary scientific program of conservation was obliged to alter its discourse here to meet campesino demands half-way. The boundary survey of La Malinche National Park "meandered around communities in the region" (98), and those communities that did remain within the park's designated territory retained ownership of their lands but were subject to forestry regulations. This was not an easy compromise to maintain in practice.

In the decades following Cárdenas's innovative experiment, combining local use with scientific management and conservation, Mexico's national parks fell into budgetary neglect. By the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mexican scientists and administrators began to embrace the idea of wilderness, influenced at least in part by the U.S. Wilderness Act of 1964. Yet, Wakild argues that the "silent failure" of Mexico's initial policies for founding national parks holds lessons for environmentalists in different political settings and ecological regions – in both temperate and tropical zones. Her study provides an innovative response, albeit indirectly, to the challenge that Ramachandra Guha delivered to North American environmentalists over two decades ago, to refocus their studies away from the ideas of pristine nature that had shaped a wilderness ethic of conservation and to inform their passion for conserving nature with a conviction for social justice. Guha's many published articles and essays and his classic monograph on the Chipko movement, *The Unquiet Woods*, accomplished this for India. Wakild's *Revolutionary Parks*, has brought similar concerns to bear on the environmental history of modern Mexico.

### Response by Emily Wakild, Boise State University

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Let me begin by thanking the generosity of the four reviewers for not only reading the book but taking the ideas seriously and giving of their time and insight to this public exchange. It is a privilege to be able to respond in writing and further this conversation. I also appreciate Jake Hamblin for including my book and editing the roundtable reviews. My ideas here serve more to clarify my choices while writing the book rather than to debate their thoughtful comments.

Since I began thinking about this book (as my dissertation), Latin American environmental history has come of age. Latin America is consistently the second or third largest area of concentration represented at ASEH meetings and SOLCHA (the Society for Latin American and Caribbean Environmental History) sponsors a vibrant meeting itself. Several Latin American journals have dedicated special issues to it and every major graduate program now has dissertations (many of them superb) written on environmental topics. As Evans noted, there is even a book series now dedicated to the subfield, and this was its first book. Without a doubt, it's an exciting time to be an environmental historian of Latin America.

Broadly then, I hoped to show that Latin American environmental history had some in common with its neighbors to the north but also character of its own. At least some of these threads come through in the generous reviews. Radding took away the analysis of how social justice was intertwined with environmental concerns and calls it a fresh perspective on real-life struggles over land tenure, conservation, and common lands. Howkins noted the sense of missed opportunity that echoes through the examples. Meine nicely portrays the cacophony of debates over conservation—white and black hats—and cedes me territory in the middle ground. And Evans mentions the text as part of a broader discussion of comparative conservation policy.

As I began to research this topic in earnest, I realized that I had no interest in writing an institutional history of national parks; I wanted to write a social history about why the parks existed, who the parks affected, and what the parks meant to different groups of people. I could do this because of the excellent ground laid by Lane Simonian's *Defending the Land of the Jaguar*, which sketched out the most important contours of Mexican conservation history. With this backdrop, I could look more carefully for experiences, anecdotes, and illustrations of the parks' meaning as much as the policy efforts to make them happen. But what I gave up was a thorough synthesis of all parks or an exhaustive discussion of transnational origins for actions, things that Meine and Evans would have appreciated.

National parks have appeal as objects of study because they are both finite and flexible. One can talk about them as a general phenomenon but also ground specific examples in places that are not purely configurations of the writer. They have institutional markers: dates of origin (and sometimes of expiration), maps of territory, and often specific management guidelines. But as I found, their more

interesting components had to do with how they carted social values in their very existence. Rather than a chronological sequence, I committed to case studies early on when I became aware at how difficult it would be to write generalizations about the parks without them; the trouble comes in with the decision of just which parks make the most illustrative case studies. I hoped for three and compromised on four for both practical and analytical reasons. As most Latin Americanists have experienced, the documentation I sought had hardly been touched by historians, it had no finding aid or archival guide, and it existed embedded in the larger files of the many iterations of the bureaucratic divisions that made up roughly the Secretary of Agriculture. In some instances this serendipity drove the case studies. I didn't choose Lagunas de Zempoala as much as I located so much documentation on that park, the choice was obvious. My case selections evolved over time as I began to understand why so many parks were concentrated in the central corridor and I wanted to have variety in terms of park purposes, relationships with local communities, and national significance.

The easy response to Evans' question as to why the book left out the border park is that since I'd written an article about it, the case was already in some senses, covered. I gathered all the sources and ideas thinking that the non-park might make it into the book but once I wrote the article, I felt I'd said what I wanted to say. Additionally, because the border areas didn't become a park until much later, it was an outlier and in some ways a distraction. An important one, certainly, but not one that told us more about the core reasons for creating the parks in this period. Along these same lines though, Meine suggests that other parks on the periphery might have made interesting and important case studies, too. I agree. I seriously considered Cumbres de Monterrey, the second largest park in area and one with a unique relationship to the large regional center. Ultimately though, I included those I thought were the most representative rather than those I deemed unique or exceptional. Would another scholar choose differently? Undoubtedly and I would welcome such a study more than anyone. But I hope that by linking the specific with the general themes that I have done some justice to the events and individuals involved.

Another answer is that, perhaps hubristically, I limited the cases and the years because I decided that I wanted to focus on a moment rather than a movement. What seemed to me the most novel and relevant aspect was the burst of park creation and the context that allowed it to happen. And frankly, I didn't want to tell another story of decline—'once upon a time Mexico created national parks but that time is over and now they are ruined.' I couldn't figure a way out of that teleology without limiting the span of the book so I told myself I'd tell the parks' story in two volumes. I don't know that I will ever write the second volume (or that we need it) but I cleaved off entire decades and regions with this excuse in the back of my mind. Does that compromise the story? I don't think so. I think the moment is worth excavating and reflecting upon if only to nudge conservation history out of a rut that channels parks too narrowly into divisions like those described by Meine.

Does this limitation of time period and case studies compromise the argument about their revolutionary nature? I hope not. Early into this project, a dear friend who is a historian but not a Latin Americanist, asked me in earnest why Mexicanists append the word “revolutionary” (or worse, “postrevolutionary”) to the front of every activity that took place after 1910. This was an innocent question but implicit is a fair critique, one similar to that levied by Evans. In both the title and throughout the book, I make use of the double meaning—that Mexico’s parks were both part of the social reforms of the revolution and were radical formulations on the world stage of conservation. But, I concede that Evans is right in pointing out that perhaps this argument can be over extended. Indeed, the title itself is not even my own; I owe it to the editorial staff.

There are reasons why the description ‘revolutionary’ might not work. Evans points out, for example, that there is no clear evidence that revolutionary leaders advocated specific conservation policies or for the parks. If you ignore President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940) as a revolutionary leader, yes, that is true. But I tried hard to show that invocations of conservation—of forests, waters, and other lands—were not entirely absent from the projects these earlier leaders advocated. Nor were they absent even in the Porfiriato. Zapata’s *Plan de Ayala*, for instance, directly addresses the tenure and care for these resources. Was he John Muir or Gifford Pinchot? Certainly not. But, a different sentiment, one still rightly called conservationist and perhaps even conveying the idea of sustainability, existed and made its way into staying policy. Indeed, as I tried to demonstrate in the book’s conclusion using the lives and words of Miguel Ángel de Quevedo and Enrique Beltrán, the conservation they enacted is much closer to the community conservation strategy that many major organizations today advocate as a better approach than the so-called fortress model. I make no claims that soldiers gave up their lives to have national parks created, but these parks nevertheless emerged from the tidal wave of social reconfiguration following the cataclysm and that matters to both how we think about parks and how we think about social change.

Evans’ larger point here is a matter of debate among scholars of Modern Mexico and much of the division comes down to pivotal point of how one dates the revolution. Was it only 1910-1920 or did it last to 1940? Evans seems to cut the date at 1920; I fall in the latter camp because I see the difficult work of social change and bureaucratic policy reform as the fulfillment of the early revolutionary ideals. Although conservation was not front and center for the revolutionary generals (Villa, Zapata, Obregon, etc.), it clearly mattered to Cárdenas. If one takes a long view of the revolution and sees it as much about rebuilding society as tearing down the old order, than it’s hard to gloss over the existence of conservation in this process. The question raised by Howkins about political memory after the fighting raises another interesting facet. Other than the legacies of battles around Tepoztlán, I did not see any evidence of memorializing the revolutionary fighting along these lines but there were many invocations of times and places related to the war for Independence in both the naming of parks and the siting of them. Perhaps the battles were too fresh to leave that legacy.

Evans also questioned the classification of Quevedo as a revolutionary. I wanted to make clear that neither he nor his ideas were revolutionary but the atmosphere and collective context forced his bureaucracy to be so. I grappled for a long time with how to portray Quevedo and with questions of what his legacy means for conservation in Mexico more broadly. While it is now de rigueur to point out the biases and even racism of early conservationists (for example, see the recent piece on John Muir in the *Los Angeles Times*), this strikes me as wrongheaded because it misses the context of their lives built around systemic racism.<sup>10</sup> Quevedo was not a closet revolutionary but a thinly veiled Porfirian and yet Cárdenas could hire him because Quevedo knew conservation. Cárdenas could and did expect that the demands of campesinos and working Mexicans kept Quevedo in check. For Mexico, this had another facet in that it limited conservation's ability to push rural people aside in favor of protecting nature (for better or for worse, depending on your perspective). As Radding mentioned, social justice has been part of environmental concerns in the Mexican case. These social conflicts have come to mean more to the fate of conservation than almost anything else. It's worth excavating how such contradictions played out in different times and places. Beyond the Mexican case, I am optimistic that the surge in new work on Latin America will further our understanding of parks in the region as well.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.latimes.com/local/california/la-me-rethinking-muir-20141113-story.html#page=1>

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### About the Contributors

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