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Le aree protette: un mosaico di esperienze, pratiche e rappresentazioni

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Giacomo Zanolin and Giampietro Mazza

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Remembering Yellowstone: Nature Conservation, Popular Culture and Belonging

Margherita Cisani

Università degli Studi di Padova

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ABSTRACT

Yellowstone is globally recognised as the world's first national park, but the depth of its meaning goes beyond the history of nature conservation. This paper presents the park as an assemblage of landscapes, memories and popular environmental discourses. It interweaves the debate around Yellowstone as a landscape idea with an analysis of its representation in popular culture, from *The Yogi Bear Show* to the more recent *Yellowstone* television series. Coupled with personal and subjective memoryscapes, the Yellowstone assemblage is presented as capable to inform the global debate on the role of protected areas, especially in relation to climate change, tourism and recreation, as well as matters of natural heritage kinship and belonging.

Keywords: nature conservation; Yellowstone; environmental discourses; memories; landscape.

1. REASSEMBLING YELLOWSTONE

Yellowstone is globally recognised as the world's first national park, and the National Park Service is commonly regarded as “America's best idea”¹. However, the depth of meanings associated with the park transcends the global history of nature conservation.

¹ Apparently originating from a 1912 comment by the British ambassador to the United States, this sentiment was popularised by a 1983 essay *The Best Idea We Ever Had* by Stegner (1998) and more recently by a 2009 PBS documentary (Weber and Sultana 2013).

The Yellowstone is, first and foremost, a river among the Missouri tributaries. Its initial section, located in northwestern Wyoming, runs through one of the densest and most feature-rich geothermal basins in the world. The Yellowstone National Park (YNP) is a piece of land belonging to Native Americans, even though the role of First Nations in shaping this landscape has been denied for decades and people have been expelled to make way for settlers' unspoiled nature ideal². YNP, founded in 1782 with almost all-straight and square borders, is encompassed by the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE, *Fig. 1*)³, a hotspot of biodiversity and a habitat for numerous iconic and endangered species. It is also a recreational⁴, as well as fictional, space of American wilderness.

Additionally – and crucially with respect to this article – Yellowstone, and more precisely a mobile home in the Yak Camp near Mammoth Hot Springs, is where I lived for a year from June 2011 to June 2012, working as an intern in the Spatial Analysis Centre of the Yellowstone Center for Resources. This experience considerably influenced my career as a geographer, and this article is my first attempt at translating into a scientific rendition some of the knowledge and reflections arising from that year and my subsequent experiences related to protected areas. Given the premises and circumstances surrounding Yellowstone and my engagement with it, it is possible to affirm that YNP is a landscape assemblage of materialities, environmental policies and discourses as well as collective and subjective memories. To this end, I decipher part of this assemblage, drawing from and interweaving a variety of academic, public and personal sources. I seek to understand what Yellowstone can tell us in relation to the global conservation movement, especially with a view to overcoming the nature-culture dichotomy and integrating the social sciences and humanities into the debate.

The paper is structured as follows: after an initial section dedicated to the theoretical and methodological framework, there follow two sections devoted to the evolution of the models that have guided the conservation of the park and to the discussion of some of the cultural representations that place the park or its human and nonhuman inhabitants at the

² There are currently 27 tribes formally associated with YNP (<https://www.nps.gov/yell/learn/historyculture/native-american-affairs.htm> [08/11/2023]).

³ <https://www.nps.gov/yell/learn/nature/greater-yellowstone-ecosystem.htm> [08/11/2023].

⁴ According to the 2022 report of the National Park Service, YNP ranks 7th out of 63 national parks in terms of number of visitors (<https://irma.nps.gov/Stats/Reports/National> [08/08/2023]).

centre of the narrative. The conclusion section, complemented by small accounts from my personal experiences in the park, draws a picture of Yellowstone's significance in relation to global conservation issues.



*Figure 1. – Yellowstone National Park and surrounding protected areas.
Source: National Park Service.*

To analyse Yellowstone as a landscape assemblage, I adopted a methodology that involves the examination of the literature, official documents and websites, as well as popular culture and the personal memories and experiences that I collected in Yellowstone between June 2011 and June 2012. This analysis is also grounded in a questionnaire, circulated among my then-colleagues in July to August 2023, that consisted of the questions listed in *Table 1*.

Table 1. – Structure of the questionnaire.

N.	SURVEY QUESTIONS	OPTIONS
1	Name and Surname	
2	Where do you live now?	
3	Did you work/volunteer in the Yellowstone Spatial Analysis Center (GIS Lab)?	Y/N
4	What was your role in the Gis Lab?	Permanent employee / Term employee / Volunteer
5	Which one is your point on the t-shirt?	
6	Do you remember why did you chose it?	
7	(Only if answered “No” to question n. 3) What where you doing in Yellowstone back in 2011/2012?	
8	(Only if answered “No” to question n. 3) What place in Yellowstone do you identify with? For what reason?	
9	(Only if answered “No” to question n. 3) Could you give me the coordinates of your chosen location?	
10	Which is your relation with Yellowstone now?	I still work here! / I live nearby but I do not work/volunteer anymore for YNP / I sometimes visit YNP as a tourist / I moved far away and never came back
11	What does Yellowstone mean for you nowadays?	
12	In your opinion, what are the main challenges that Yellowstone (as a National Park) is currently facing?	
13	What do you think Yellowstone represents globally?	

2. FRAMING YELLOWSTONE AS A LANDSCAPE ASSEMBLAGE

The architecture of the arguments and notions put forward in this paper are based on four theoretical perspectives: social nature theory, assemblage geographies, ecocritical geopolitics and the landscape debate on memory and mobility. These perspectives, although different and not without conflict and contradiction, in combination allow for a comprehensive interpretation of the complex nature of Yellowstone as a protected area and as a global wilderness idea (Jones 2012).

The first strand of research from which the current article draws its inspiration corresponds to the debate revolving around the idea of a social construction of nature (Demeritt 2002, 2005, 2014; Bonati *et al.* 2021). Yellowstone can be taken as a prime example through which to challenge the notion of nature, especially that of wilderness, as something objective and separate from culture, politics and society. This idea is demonstrated by Cronon (1996) via his reconstruction of how wilderness is “quite profoundly a human creation—indeed, the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history” (7). The social construction of nature therefore challenges “the apparent self-evidence and ontological fixity of nature” (Demeritt 2002, 768). Adopting this perspective advances the unveiling of the cultural and political roots of Yellowstone, which is not an untouched nature area (Jacoby 2014), and of all the parks and wilderness areas throughout the world (Neumann 1998; Kupper 2014; Zanolin 2021; Zanolin and Paül Carril 2021).

Alongside the recognition of the social nature of protected areas and the living beings and habitats that they aim to protect, the second area of debate that inspired this reflection allows us to comprehensively explore the role of human and nonhuman actors and the processes entangled in the way we relate to Yellowstone as a protected area. More specifically, apart from denaturalising nature, we also need to “desocietise” society, to make nonhumans matter, for example, through assemblage geographies (Robbins and Marks 2009). As recognised by Büscher and Fletcher (2020), many social scientists, including Donna Haraway and Noel Castree, are “starting to deal with the fact that reality is not *only* constructed” and that we need to stress the reality of the current Anthropocene era more forcefully (139). According to Page (2020), assemblage theory “has the potential to help explore geography as a topological (i.e. relational), rather than a topographical, subject” (225). Robbins and Marks (2009) speak of social and political outcomes determined by more than human beings and present assemblages as capable of emphasising the making

of socionatures in the form of relational networks of varying densities, intensities and consequences in different places. One of the four types of assemblages identified by the authors, the intimate assemblage, stresses the role of everyday practices of co-construction and the fact that beings do not pre-exist their relations (Robbins and Marks 2009). Here, the authors are referring, in particular, to the work of Donna Haraway and the notion of landscape as “the outward ‘natural’ reflection of stubbornly inward ‘social’ relations” (Robbins and Marks 2009, 184).

In addition to assemblage theories and more-than-representational approaches, “the materiality of a landscape – its physical form and function – must be taken together with the practices and discourses by which it is inscribed. Certainly, the way in which we experience a landscape typically combines our own embodied encounter with its materiality and the discourses and practices that frame and/or anticipate our response to it” (Cisani *et al.* 2022, 5). Discourses, and environmental discourses in particular, must be considered to understand the relationship between power and knowledge and, according to dell’Agnese (2021), “the power of representation over reality” (4). Combining the analytical tools of geography with those of ecocriticism, she proposes ecocritical geographies to “seek the power-knowledge mechanism in its discursive articulation” and to be particularly attentive to “seeing how the audience reacts” and “the effect that popular culture can have on the way we think about the environment” (25). Yellowstone, more than any other national park in the world, is at the centre of numerous narratives and representations that inevitably have to do with different ideologies concerning the relationship between humans and nature, from anthropocentrism to ecofeminist approaches.

Finally, given the crucial role that personal experience and memory play in structuring this article, it is necessary to better explain how the role of memories can be framed within the ways by which landscapes can be interpreted. Lynne Pearce’s recent work reminds us of the opportunity to consider the role that memory plays “in our ability to presence, or re-presence, our relationship with specific locations” (2021, 197) and in recognising that “our sense of connection with particular locations is unlikely to be limited to the instant of the encounter but predicated, instead, upon our experience of that place – or, one that it reminds us of – in the past” (205). Memory, constructed through recurrent movements or mobility to and from a place (e.g. Yellowstone), is constitutive of the possible sense of belonging and familiarity with that place. Acknowledging the political ambiguity of this approach, expressed by Wylie (2018) as the impossibility of fully owning or belonging to a landscape, Pearce

discusses the mechanisms that nevertheless allow for “at least the desire for, or need of, a phenomenological experience of being ‘at-home’” (202). Such moments of coincidence between the self and the world are experienced, ironically, through a bodily place memory that manifests itself in temporary instances of *déjà vu*, of feeling simultaneously in one place and in another, but also, as I will argue, in the intimate connection between Yellowstone humans and nonhumans. This connection persists over time and may be regarded through the notion of bodily place memory as a global homeland (Wylie 2018).

From this brief theoretical framework, landscape appears therefore, explicitly or not, as a key notion in interpreting the meaning of protected areas and of Yellowstone specifically. Therefore, in the following paragraph, the analysis begins with a description of how Yellowstone reflects historically and culturally changing ideas of “natural” landscape.

3. YELLOWSTONE AS A LANDSCAPE IDEA

The role and value of protected areas for the American nation, in ecological terms but above all in terms of identity and culture, differs considerably from what is generally the case in Europe (Zanolin and Paül Carril 2021). The concept of wilderness refers to land considered virgin and uncontaminated, and it originates from the myth of wild America, of frontier lands to be conquered and subsequently protected, within which to recognise one’s own subjective and collective identity through one’s relationship with the landscape and confrontation with nature (Nash 2014).

Over the past 150 years, successive governments in the United States have managed public “natural” lands on the grounds of three models: the park, forest and wilderness models (Carr 2000). Each of these models, although sometimes overlapping, has entailed different landscape management policies, accurately reflecting specific values that are also related to social and political circumstances. American attitudes towards public land management have changed over time according to changes in society’s relationship with the natural world. Landscape ideals are, in this sense, social ideals, which serve to define the essential character of American society through its relationship with nature, which is to be managed, exploited, enjoyed, exalted or left aside, depending on the ideals set forth. Following Carr’s reconstruction, a diachronic analysis of how

these models have evolved may be of particular interest today, at a time in history when new and often conflicting ideals of nature management are being formed.

The decade spanning 1830 to 1840 was characterised by a process of rapid urbanisation. Urban sprawl was increasingly preventing direct access to open spaces, and municipalities acquired several lots and lands to preserve them from building expansion. Thus, the first public parks were born to preserve but also transform nature for the benefit of the population. New York City's Central Park is representative of the idea of the park as both protection and enhancement. The park represents compensation for modernisation, the search for a lost or compromised harmony with nature. This ideology is reflected not only at the urban scale but also at the state scale, with the establishment of the first nature reserves in Yosemite Valley (1864), and at the federal scale, with YNP (1872). For early protected areas, the main mandate was to ensure that the (White) population could access scenic areas for their own well-being while preventing them from becoming a monopoly of the few.

The park model is not the only representation applied to the creation of protected areas. Public forests were an alternative for the management of vast territories, especially in the frontier lands of western states. In 1891, Congress passed the Forest Reserve Act, and within 20 years, numerous national forests were established. Unlike the ideal of conservation and enhancement symbolised by the park model, within national forests, the key word is "productivity". In 1897, Congress officially opened forests to timber sales, grazing and other commercial developments. The management of forest productivity through the work of forest scientists, engineers and biologists in this period replaced the romantic attention to views and landscapes that characterised the earlier approach.

The 1920s and 1930s saw the expansion of the national park system and the popularity of national parks, as well as the establishment of hundreds of state and municipal parks. At the same time, however, criticism began to arise in relation to the overuse of parks, leading to the emergence of a third management paradigm, inspired by the wilderness concept. For wilderness advocates, protected areas should not be conserved for utilitarian purposes (neither for recreation nor resource exploitation) but for their inherent value. By the 1950s, the number of visitors to American parks had grown exponentially, and this was beginning to cause a series of environmental problems related to the impact of cars, infrastructure and services. To cope with this situation and contain criticism from wilderness advocates, a plan called "Mission 66" was approved in 1956. This

plan was a ten-year spending programme intended to create new facilities and jobs within protected areas. However, instead of resolving the conflict between wilderness advocates and the Park Service, the funding of new facilities for the recreational use of protected areas only intensified the division. In 1964, environmentalists advocating total conservation without human intervention succeeded in having the Wilderness Act passed, which allowed for the establishment of numerous wilderness areas on the nation's public lands, mainly in national forests but also in sparsely populated areas far from cities, as well as in many national parks. Inspired by a romantic literary tradition (linked to the writings of Thoreau and Muir), the management of wilderness areas became nonmanagement, wherein nature is free from any human intervention. Nevertheless, the wilderness area reflected the exclusivity and isolation that made the new low-density suburbs popular among the middle class during the same period. As the landscape ideal of post-war America, the wilderness area reflected a general preference for private space and a solitary (often White and masculine) experience of nature.

National parks have then evolved into less traditional, cooperative, public-private, multifunctional and multilocal forms. In addition to conserving areas, structures and habitats, US parks are increasingly trying to connect conservation to people's daily lives⁵. The risk inherent in this path is that the primary and principal function of parks is lost, thus dissolving their role and significance into ambiguous models. Nevertheless, the continuous expansion of the American protected area system also demonstrates the desire for continuous renewal, which is expressed mainly in the transition from simple centralised administrative management to the concept of stewardship, of shared administration and care, of collective responsibility towards territorial resources and cultural landscapes.

Turning our attention back to Yellowstone, we can argue that the very foundation of the national park was conditioned, even before it was defined as a park, by its representation as a landscape through, above all, the majestic paintings of Thomas Moran (*Fig. 2*):

Yellowstone became known through all that was written and said about it and landscape, as a way of seeing, was an instrumental device in framing that knowledge. Investing the region with cultural and, by virtue of the increasing popularity of railroad tourism, economic value, the landscape

⁵ See, for instance, the NPS Urban Agenda: <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/urban/index.htm> [10/08/2023].

idea – informed as it was in Gilded-Age America by national politics, science, economic development, and geographical expansion and articulated through the practices of exploration – “pictured” Yellowstone as a development prospect, a laboratory for future science, and a national symbol, ultimately motivating the creation of the Park. (Gareth 2007, 12)



*Figure 2. – Thomas Moran, Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone
(Smithsonian American Art Museum, lent by the Department of the Interior Museum).
Source: public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.*

As Cronon (1996) also suggested, landscape conventions were crucial in the creation and transformation of various corners of the American map, including Yellowstone, as spectacular scenery for touristic consumption. These were equally critical in the formation of “institutional and discursive relations that invested western landscape with eastern capital and nationalist symbolism” (Gareth 2007, 9).

If Yellowstone is representative of the idea of the national park throughout the world, with a clear and distinct imprint related to its role “for the benefit and the enjoyment of the people”⁶, its management has been influenced by each of the abovementioned models. As for the wilderness model, 90% of YNP was recommended for federal wilderness designation in 1972. This recommendation was not acted on by Con-

⁶ This inscription is engraved on the monumental arch at the park’s northern entrance near Gardiner (Montana). See also Culpin 2003.

gress, so no areas of the park are designated as federal wilderness under the Wilderness Act. Interestingly, however, the “wilderness” page of YNP’s official website⁷ states the following: “Yellowstone National Park has always managed its backcountry to protect natural and cultural resources and to provide visitors with the opportunity to *enjoy a pristine environment within a setting of solitude*” (emphasis added).

Conversely, the forest management model is the one that principally inspires the management of public lands located outside the boundaries of YNP (Glick and Clarck 2013). Here, seven national forests, together with Grand Teton NP, three national wildlife refuges, Bureau of Land Management holdings, private and tribal lands, are included in the GYE⁸, a dense, highly fragmented political arena (Glick and Clarck 2013) where the management of ecosystem services goes hand in hand, not without conflict, with various resource uses.

Finally, since the late 1970s, Yellowstone has been internationally recognised by UNESCO as a Biosphere Reserve (1976) and as a World Heritage Site (1978). These recognitions, while having no substantial implications from the points of view of landscape planning and ecosystem management, add two layers to the stratification of meanings associated with the park. The first recalls the park’s significance as a dynamic laboratory devoted to the conservation of nature and scientific research, while the inclusion in the World Heritage List as a natural heritage site refers specifically to the presence of significant geological phenomena and processes, but also to its natural beauty and the presence of wild ecosystems where rare and endangered species thrive. Both layer of meaning emphasises Yellowstone’s outstanding and universal heritage value.

4. YELLOWSTONE IN POPULAR ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSES

Having thus broadly reconstructed the main park management models and framed Yellowstone as a cultural landscape idea, I now trace its presence within popular culture to identify its role in relation to contemporary environmental discourses (dell’Agnese 2021). More specifically, this section presents how Yellowstone enters into relations with three popular

⁷ <https://www.nps.gov/yell/learn/nature/wilderness.htm> [10/08/2023].

⁸ <https://www.nps.gov/yell/learn/nature/greater-yellowstone-ecosystem.htm> [10/08/2023].

products: *The Yogi Bear Show* (*Yogi Bear* hereafter), the science fiction movie *2012* and the TV series *Yellowstone*.

One of the most frequent associations between Yellowstone and popular culture is through the famous Yogi Bear cartoon, produced by Hanna and Barbera animation studios beginning in January 1961. Jellystone, the fictional park where the cartoon is set, is inspired by Yellowstone, and soon, Yogi is engaged by park managers in brochures and illustrative pamphlets aimed at indicating the correct behaviour for avoiding accidents with wildlife (one above all: Do not feed the bears)⁹. However, the effect of this campaign, as Wondrak Biel (2006) points out, was to confuse and blur the boundary between Jellystone and Yellowstone, between the harmless Yogi Bear and the danger of a close encounter with a grizzly: “The effect of all this was probably similar to Bart Simpson warning kids to respect their elders” (67). Eventually, bear feeding was banned in 1970, and the park has gradually implemented a bear management programme focused on reducing human – wildlife interactions. Nonetheless, the power of the Yogi figure remains. The Yogi Bear – Yellowstone story is an example of how popular culture and environmental management are sometimes directly connected. The history of the relationship between Yogi Bear and Yellowstone tells us much about the different anthropocentric ways in which it has been considered “normal” to relate to nonhumans (regarding them as a show to entertain visitors or spectacularising wildlife to communicate behavioural messages) and about the trend of anthropomorphising wild animals¹⁰.

A second strand of cultural representations in popular media corresponds to the narration of dystopic and catastrophic scenarios linked to the explosion of the supervolcano lying beneath the park. Searching for “Yellowstone” on YouTube, the second most frequently viewed clip (44 million views) corresponds to a scene from the disaster movie *2012*, in which the explosion of the caldera is staged. In the plot of the film, the eruption of Yellowstone is one of the main catastrophes in a doomsday sequence, with a nod to conspiracy theories and apocalyptic predictions. The fact that Yellowstone is a still-active volcano, capable of spewing more

⁹ Visitors to the park would often feed bears to attract them for viewing and photography, and they also commonly gathered at trash dumps and “feeding stations” to watch the spectacle of bears feeding in proximity.

¹⁰ This trend is also common in many other contexts. For instance, a car sticker sold in the Abruzzo Lazio and Molise National Park Visitor Centre portrays a drawing of a sitting bear and says “my friend the bear”.

than 240 cubic miles of magma¹¹, fuels the imagination and clickability of visual representations depicting its destructive potential. Yellowstone thus represents wilderness par excellence, uncontrolled and dangerous to the point of causing the end of the world. The danger, in these representations, is all internal to nature, to its being unregulated, unruly and unpredictable by mankind. If the explosion of the supervolcano is highly improbable, another kind of catastrophe is unfolding before our eyes in Yellowstone, and it is much less represented in the media. Anthropogenic climate change is, in fact, behind many of the transformations taking place in the park, from the destructive flooding in June 2022 to habitat change, from snowpack reduction to altered vegetation cycles.

The story of how Yellowstone is portrayed as a danger to humanity informs us of how easy it is to reverse the order of factors because, at present, it is exactly the opposite that is happening, with humans determining the main challenges that threaten the survival of the park's ecosystems¹².

Returning to a simple Google search using the term "Yellowstone" yields a TV series alongside references to the national park or the supervolcano. *Yellowstone* is an American neo-Western drama television series. In production since 2018 and now in its fifth and final season, the series follows conflicts along the shared borders of a large cattle ranch, an Indian reservation, Yellowstone National Park and land developers. Without delving too deeply into the show's plot and narrative choices, I focus on one illustrative scene depicting the conflict between the landowner (Kevin Costner), a bear and a group of Chinese tourists¹³. "This is America; we don't share the land here" is the catchphrase most appreciated by the audience, even in numerous YouTube comments, especially as it targets (Chinese) tourists. The clip, especially the remarks that it stimulates, reveals the popular geopolitics expressed by the series, which is particularly appreciated by the conservative region of the country¹⁴.

¹¹ Scientists from the Yellowstone Volcano Observatory believe that another caldera-forming eruption is theoretically possible, but it is very unlikely in the next 1,000 or even 10,000 years. Scientists have also found no indication of an imminent smaller eruption of lava in more than 30 years of monitoring (<https://www.nps.gov/yell/learn/nature/volcano.htm> [12/08/2023]).

¹² Yellowstone Supervisory GIS Specialist Ann Rodman (who was also my supervisor in 2011/12) describes the past, present and future of climate change in YNP in this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aGdE8JfluNY> [12/08/2023].

¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOrkILQmpRk> [12/08/2023].

¹⁴ For a political read of the series see, for instance, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/10/arts/television/yellowstone-taylor-sheridan.html> [12/08/2023].

It also alludes to the universal value attached to Yellowstone (and bears) as natural heritage and, therefore, to the contradictions of mainstream conservation. Such conservation often fails to address the complex and multifaceted tension between local/indigenous identities and interests on one side and pressures for conservation and heritagisation on the other, or, in alternative terms, between tradition and (sustainable) development.

5. “BELONGING, FOREVER BELONGING, NEVER ALONE”

As described in the previous section, the popular environmental discourse sees Yellowstone as framed by the humans-wildlife relations, its catastrophic representations and, finally, by the political conflicts arising in the management of the land between local/global and private/public interests. The assemblage or mosaic I propose here is though also composed by some other more subjective and emotional patches.

The title of this last section is from a song written by John Denver in 1997, entitled *Yellowstone*, and dedicated to the return (i.e. reintroduction) of wolves to the park¹⁵. The song is once again a representation wherein the cultural role of the park as an identity marker emerges. The songwriter himself explains that the lyrics also refer to a subjective sense of belonging to that place, to nature and to the world. This is why it seems useful to report some references to my personal experiences and the people I have met.



Figure 3. – The 2011 t-shirt of the Spatial Analysis Center.
Source: photograph of the author.

¹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YWtDHmUcBlk&t=0s> [12/08/2023].

The t-shirt in *Figure 3* represents the entanglement between Yellowstone and some of the people who have crossed and experienced it. It was realized at the end of summer 2011 by the team of volunteers and temporary employees of the Spatial Analysis Center of the Park. The goal of this self-produced and self-funded initiative was celebrating the team and the diversity of activities we carried out. Each one of us chose a georeferenced point within the Park and labelled it on the map, indicating therefore the place we identified ourselves with. Around the Park boundaries, several icons symbolise the various activities we carried out (from monitoring the Pika population to mapping the park's cemeteries).

Some of the individuals associated with this shirt responded to my queries via the online questionnaire reported in the initial section. The survey was not intended to provide any statistical information, as the number of respondents is limited to five persons, all being term employees of the Park (three GIS technicians and two biologists) at the time and now moved elsewhere, but it nevertheless offer qualitative insights on the subjective meaning of the Park. Almost all of them seem to remember vividly the reasons why they chose a specific point in the map on the T-shirt. Those who were not included – as not part of the GIS lab team – similarly described a specific place in Yellowstone they identify with. The connection, for all the respondents, is always linked to a particular job-related practice, either hiking to “collect bee bowls to sample pollinators” (A.C.) or staring at waterfalls in “a place I had been to while working on Trail Crew. It is a magical spot where you can sit in hot springs on the side of the river and let the waterfall spray land on your face” (J.R.) or wildlife monitoring “where I spent the most time during eight 30-day winter studies studying the Blacktail wolf pack” (R.R.).

In explaining what Yellowstone means to them today, many described Yellowstone as a “magical place” or associated it with spiritual values. Interestingly, these statements come from people with a high level of scientific background, demonstrating the power of this national park in people's imaginations and memories.

Referring to the current challenges faced by the park, climate change is recognized as a significant threat only in one answer, thus echoing the discussion on the catastrophic discourses in the previous paragraph, while there are more references to the pressures of tourism: one respondent (R.R.) writes “I feel like the park can be loved to death” and R.K. states “Still an amazing place. Too many tourist”. Interestingly, two respondents pointed out also the difficulties for employees “to find places to live near the park, or owning property, while maintaining the park as a natural

area owned by the government” (A.C.), highlighting the socio-economic problems surrounding the management of the Park.

The simultaneous presence of precise scientific considerations and subjective expressions, which convey the presence of a strong emotional bond with Yellowstone, is a trait that unites my experience and those of the people with whom I managed to come into contact. A bond that, on the basis of Pearce (2021), takes shape not only in the very moment of the landscape-place experience, but also through the exercise of memory and thanks to the complex role of the cultural representations that depict the park: as A.C. wrote “Yellowstone is a place humans can remember we are indeed a part of nature too”.

Reflecting on the possible pedagogical role of Yellowstone, as suggested by Zanolin (2022) in his analysis of Italian national parks, and on the ways that conservation strategies are changing (Adams 2020), it is possible to summarise the Yellowstone assemblage as simultaneously:

- a source of critical reflections on landscape and wilderness notions and popular environmental discourses;
- a commodified and mediatised landscape, where the meaning of adjectives, such as “natural”, “authentic” and “traditional” are rethought, especially in relation to ecotourism and recreation;
- a cultural laboratory of apocalyptic dystopias, where one can reflect on biodiversity, the climate crisis and related public awareness;
- a place of global and local identities and heritage, in which multiple and transcalar ecological but also subjective and emotional relationships collide.

Recognising that “many protected areas have a powerful virtual life in wildlife films, conservation websites, and tourism websites” (Adams 2020, 796) this paper discussed how Yellowstone can be considered at the forefront of this trend, exploring management models alongside popular culture representation and subjective experiences. Still, Adams recalls that “conservation’s dependence on such imagined spaces [...] drives an evolving political ecology of nature care” (796). It is therefore crucial to view Yellowstone, and other protected areas, as landscape assemblages of human and nonhuman actors, discourses and memoryscapes that play, or at least could play, a key role in the construction of a renowned and critical conservation approach anchored also in global kinship and care.

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