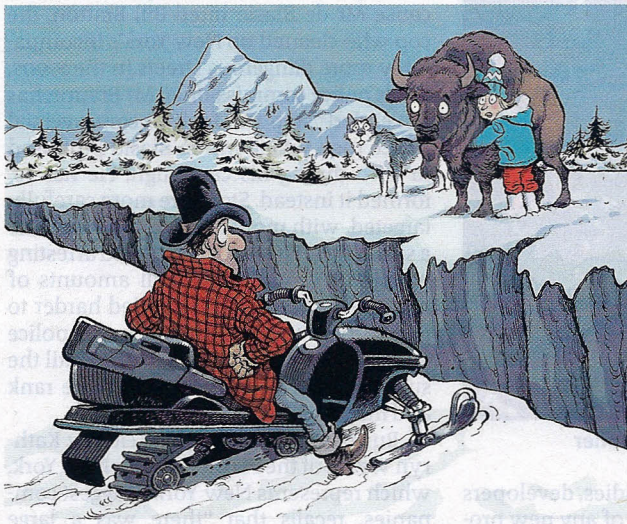


Lexington | Ranchers v bison-huggers

What the ceaseless rows over Yellowstone National Park reveal about America



THE most original political book of early 2015 is not formally about politics at all. Instead “The Battle for Yellowstone” by Justin Farrell, a young scholar at Yale University, ponders venomous rows that have shaken Yellowstone National Park in recent decades, and why they are so intractable. The rows turn on such questions as wolf re-introduction, bison roaming-rights and snowmobile access to that lovely corner of the Rocky Mountains.

It is nearly half a century since biologists first asked Congress to re-introduce wolves into Yellowstone, so that they might usefully eat some of the elk then lumbering about in over-large herds. Getting to the point of releasing wolves in the mid-1990s involved executive actions and directives from six presidents, debates in dozens of congressional committees, 120 public hearings, more than 160,000 public submissions to federal wildlife bosses and at least \$12m-worth of scientific research. Pro- and anti-wolf types drew up competing technical reports about the value of wolves as “apex predators”, economic costs to cattle ranchers, tourism benefits and elk ecology. This techno-rationalist arms race bought no peace: the wolf-wars blaze as fiercely as ever.

Yellowstone’s wild bison trigger ferocious rows, too, each time they amble outside the national park. Let them roam, cry fans of these last genetically pure survivors of the vast herds that once filled the West. Stop them, bellow ranchers who fear the bison will infect their cattle with brucellosis, a nasty disease. Tottering stacks of brucellosis research have not resolved the dispute. Since 1997 more than 5,000 volunteers—many of them young, affluent outsiders, some adopting such “forest names” as Chipmunk, Grumble or Frog—have catalogued countless allegations of bison-bullying outside park boundaries, but changed few minds about the rights and wrongs of it.

As for snowmobilers and their right to roar along Yellowstone trails when winter descends, millions of dollars have been spent on lawsuits in Wyoming and Washington, DC since the late 1990s, backed by studies of engine-noise, exhaust-pollution and wild-life behaviour. Some wrangling continues.

All this puzzled Mr Farrell, a sociologist at Yale’s school of forestry and environmental studies, whose book is due out this summer, under the full title “The Battle for Yellowstone: Morality and the Sacred Roots of Environmental Conflict”. He spent two

years asking folk in and around Yellowstone why they are so cross. Beneath debates about science and economics he found arguments about morality and the proper relations between humans and nature—though those involved often do not, or will not acknowledge this. In short, all sides purport to be weighing what is true and false, while really arguing about right and wrong.

Pro-wolf biologists and officials call themselves dispassionate custodians of a unique place. But they give themselves away with quasi-spiritual talk of wolves restoring “wholeness” to a landscape damaged by man. Indeed, when the first Yellowstone wolves were released in 1995, the then-interior secretary, Bruce Babbitt, called it “a day of redemption”. While living with pro-bison activists, a startled Mr Farrell heard them telling various furry specimens “We love you,” or “We are here to protect you, you big sacred boy,” and spouting bowdlerised Native-American teachings about the animals’ ancient souls (while simultaneously insisting, in many cases, that they distrusted religion and its works).

As for anti-wolf types, when offered financial compensation for wolf-attacks on their livestock, some turn it down—suggesting that more than economics is at stake. Dig a bit, and a culture war is raging between the “old West” of rugged ranchers and hunters, who once earned respect and status by taming nature, but who now find themselves called environmental menaces by “new West” incomers with big-city ideas about animal rights and natural ecosystems. Behind that local clash—pitting folk with gun racks on their trucks against those with bike racks, as Mr Farrell puts it—there lurks a still larger suspicion of the federal government. Many “old West” types see a plot to drive ranchers from the land. They talk of “federal wolves” undermining their property rights, and challenging the God-ordained duty of humans to protect their own families, and exercise dominion over Creation.

Crying wolf

Yellowstone’s hidden moral disputes offer wider lessons to America, a country that is increasingly divided and unusually keen on tackling complex ethical questions in judicial and quasi-judicial settings. Lots of other countries debate such issues as the death penalty, abortion, gun control or global warming in parliament, allowing partisans to admit when they are advancing emotional or religious arguments. From its earliest days American law courts and congressional hearings have rung to the noise of impassioned partisans, hurling facts (and, all too often, confected para-facts) at one another in a bid to prove the other side wrong.

Mr Farrell is not the only scholar testing the thesis that this approach has its limits. Earlier this winter the Faith Angle Forum—a twice-yearly conference bringing together theologians, scientists and political journalists—heard from academics working to bridge divides between science and Americans of deep religious faith. Many partisans subscribe to the post-Enlightenment idea that giving people lots of facts ought to be enough to convince them, noted Jeff Hardin of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, a zoologist and devout Christian. But “most of us hold our beliefs in a tangled ball of yarn”, especially in a religious, polarised place such as America. Tug at one thread, and people fear that their very identity is under attack.

This is not a call to abandon rationality or to scorn facts. It is a call for more empathy in American political debate, and more honesty about the tangled agendas that lurk in every breast. That would not end every conflict: just look at Yellowstone and its unending rows. But even agreeing to disagree would be a start. ■