Book Review

For What and For Whom is Camping in America?:
A Review of Camping Grounds


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In our efforts to recruit participants for fully funded expeditionary education courses from the diverse student body of a large public research university, we are consistently met with two major barriers. One is the implicit—or at times quite explicit—perception that outdoor recreation and education are primarily the domains of middle-class white people. The second is a lack of clarity among students of all backgrounds about why they might be motivated to prioritize this opportunity amidst an array of programs competing for their attention. In order to be effective in my work, I’ve found that I need to be able to answer with some depth why so many people have made the decision to go camping in the past—and also why so many haven’t.

Phoebe S. K. Young’s Camping Grounds: Public Nature in American Life from the Civil War to the Occupy Movement goes a long way in helping someone in my position develop such perspective. The book tells of the varied, at times conflicting reasons that a range of Americans have pitched tents and what their practices reflect about their evolving relationships to the natural world, their society, and their government. Young introduces her book with a dramatic scene from a 2012 hearing in which members of Congress interrogated the director of the National Park Service on the definition of camping in the context of the government’s efforts to respond to Occupy protestors. Were the activists able to be kicked out for practicing an activity explicitly prohibited on the land they were occupying, or were they exercising a protected First Amendment right in their tented demonstration? More generally, who has the right to camp, where, and for what purposes? From this opening anecdote, Young’s work goes on to demonstrate why answers to these questions are less straightforward than readers might have assumed. She offers a consideration of the economic, cultural, and political forces that have given rise to some of the major reasons that diverse groups of Americans camped over the past nearly two centuries.

Young divides the book into three parts, each with two chapters that cover some piece of that history, along with an introduction and an epilogue. “Part One: Outdoor Strategies, 1850s-1890s” offers an account of the rise and meaning of mass public camping among veterans of the civil war and a biography of John Muir’s evolution as one of America’s most famous campers. In “Comrades and Campfires,” Young explains how the Grand Army of the Republic first began
to use large campouts after the war to develop a sense of public veteran identity and to organize Union veterans to advocate for federal benefits. From this early phase likely less familiar to many in the fields of outdoor recreation and education, camping had a definitively political dimension and a great deal to do with the formation and performance of campers' identities.

The telling of John Muir's life in “The Roads Home” introduces a more critical engagement than exists in most popular representations of his life and work. Young describes how Muir developed his “signature embrace of nature and promotion of wilderness recreation in part through observing and rejecting the functional and political modes of camping he witnessed on the road” (p. 57). She details his encounters with indigenous communities, whose reciprocal relationship with the land Muir saw as disruptive of pristine nature, and with African Americans for whom traveling and making camp “had become both method and symbol of freedom” (p. 67). As Muir's writing and philosophy have been foundational to modern environmental and recreational movements, this explication of his biases against groups with more functional relationships to the land would be useful to anyone seeking to understand and attempt to rectify the enduring exclusions of those movements today.

“Part Two: Outdoor Promises, 1880s-1940s” offers chapters on “Tramps and Tramp Style” and “Establishing the Campers' Republic.” The rise in industrialization and urbanization led to a growing population of itinerant workers who traveled and camped by necessity as they followed work. This social phenomenon coincided paradoxically with a parallel rise in camping as a widespread leisure pursuit, not only for the elite but increasingly also for the middle class. These recreational campers sought to distance themselves from functional campers (at times through new forms of expensive gear that could be seen as the origin of the modern outdoor gear industry) while also demonstrating an infatuation with a tramp aesthetic which endures today. Young explains that a “literary fascination for tramping hinted at an incipient dissatisfaction with regimes of modern middle-class urban life. From some angles, tramps appeared to retain a sense of independence that was eroding in the shift to industrial systems of work and time” (p. 107).

The fourth chapter on the origins of the “Camper's Republic” explains how this growing demand for recreation was met through the changing missions of the National Park Service and the U.S. Forest Service as well as the creation of the now ubiquitous Meinecke Loop design to maximize access to public land for car campers. While prioritizing one class's interest in recreation, however, the government failed to support the basic needs of whole segments of the population living in economic distress, at times also sleeping outdoors.

“Part Three: Outdoor Challenges, 1950s-2010s” presents a history of the rise in backpacking and outdoor education with a focus on the National Outdoor Leadership School and Leave No Trace along with an account of the role that tent occupation has played in activism. The fifth chapter, titled “The Back-to-Nature Crowd” provides a story likely more familiar to many readers of this journal, yet with fresh insights. For instance, Young tells how the short documentary Thirty Days to Survival (1970) largely introduced backpacking to American popular culture and highlights how this film was produced by some of the same people and in the same year as the better-known Woodstock (1970). Through drawing attention to these commonalities, she challenges readers to consider the relationship between these concurrent narratives and countercultural visions. The final chapter, “Occupying Public Ground,” explores more explicit forms of camping-as-protest from the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963 through the Occupy Movement of the 2010s. The racial, class, and political identities of the activists played a significant role throughout in how this form of camping was received by the public and thereby also the evolution of the laws that regulate it.

The epilogue, subtitled “We MUST Camp” after an REI advertisement, unpacks the implications of these histories to a more current moment—with an outdoor gear industry shaping our environmental values from a consumerist lens, through the surge in outdoor interest during the COVID-19 pandemic, and in the context of global ecological crises. Young refutes the
prominent biological argument for camping as a response to “nature deficit disorder” for the way it “displaces the significant cultural history of outdoor recreation” (p. 300) in its attempt to universalize needs that actually reflect particular, historically exclusive outdoor traditions. In contrast, Native-led movements against the Dakota Access Pipeline and Thirty Meter Telescope have adopted encampment as an innovative, place-based strategy for environmental protection. This political mode of camping is a response to a less individual and perhaps more urgent and universal need as we collectively face mass extinctions and ecological collapse.

Throughout, Young makes a compelling case that the various motivations and intersecting identities of campers matter a great deal to how their practices are perceived by the public, the government, and other campers. While there is some critical engagement with social identity and the political implications of our practices within the outdoor recreation and education literature, there are deep gaps and underappreciated historical threads that this book helps to illuminate. Camping Grounds does not offer a full and robust discussion of all of them, but it does help to identify the key tensions we should be holding. Importantly, Young brings histories of protest and activism into conversation with more recreation-based forms of outdoor activity. In this, she invites practitioners and researchers alike to consider more deeply the inescapably historical and political implications of what we do. In a context of expanding environmental crises and restrictions, the questions of exactly what we are going outdoors to do, with whom, and why will only become more important. Engagement with the histories presented in this book will yield more conscious, responsive, and responsible practice.

References