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Air Space in Our National Parks and the Value of Solitude

During our backpacking trip the Olympic National Park our class, a group of twelve people, climbed Sentinel Peak. We had walked from Deer Park deep into the national park, nearly twenty miles from the nearest road. It had been days since we had seen a person who was not a part of our group and so while there was many of us, there was still an intimate sense between us and the wilderness. On top of the peak, the vast landscape opened up. We could see Mt Olympus across the valley from us and the river beds of both Elwha and Silt Rivers. While people chattered eagerly as we reached the summit, behind the chattering there was a sort of blustery silence that one could only find atop a mountain peak far from what many people would consider ‘civilization.’

Then, out of the wilderness came a loud buzzing. A helicopter had flown over a nearby mountain pass. The sound of the spinning blades reverberated off the nearby mountains amplifying the noise so it could heard across the valley. The red and white helicopter flew over Sentinel Peak, quite close to where we stood. It flew across the mountain pass, in and out of the mountain valleys before landing on a glacier on a mountain opposite of us. It stayed there for a bit before flying off again, in and out of mountain peaks and valleys. Once over another mountain pass, many minutes later, the blustery silence returned.

This experience got me thinking about air space over our national parks. I wondered about the restrictions on air use over the National Park and if those air usages are worth violating the solitude found in the wilderness. This essay will look at first why limitations to air use are important in the national parks and explore if the reasons for air use over a National Park truly necessitate the violation of solitude.

First, let's look at what regulations there is regarding air travel over national parks. The Federal Aviation Administration and National Park Service have worked together to create regulations that limit air travel over the national parks. According to the Federal Aviation Administration "all aircraft are requested to maintain a minimum altitude of 2,000 feet above the surface of lands and waters administered by the NPS, FWS, or USFS Wilderness areas.” In other words, all planes and helicopters in the area are meant to keep a high enough to minimize noise impacts on wildlife and travelers through the parks. Also, permission is needed from the superintendent of the park before a helicopter can land ("Flight Advisories")- a direct violation of the actions we saw during our trip.

These regulations are necessary because they help provide a space for solitude. On the first day of our trip we had a discussion with a park ranger. She said that one of the main goals of the National Park Service was to maintain a space for solitude. Solitude is important because as our world becomes more closely connected and as our daily decisions are increasingly dictated by the buzzing of our phones, solitude has become a rare luxury. The chance to be in the moment without feeling the need the Snapchat or Tweet about an experience is a rare and as the space for this form of solitude disappears with ever increasing cell service and faster data speeds, it becomes more important to intentionally set aside space for solitude. I found that without my phone constantly by my side, that there was this empty space. At first this empty space was a bit strange. However, I soon began to fill this space with other things such as reflection and conversation. As time went on, it became easier to identify the importance of reflection and conversation in our daily lives and how our phones prevent us from pursuing them. The national parks provide just that space. With the limited cell coverage and a timeless landscape, the national parks serve as a type of refuge from rushed daily activities. However, when a helicopter flies over the center of the park, it is a violation of this solitude.

For instance, I was surprised at the reaction I had towards the helicopter on Sentinel Peak. Helicopters are not uncommon where I live and they have never particularly interested me before, but the helicopter in the park bothered me. It was after some brief reflection that I realized that the helicopter had briefly intruded on our wilderness experience. Instead of us and the wilderness, it was us, the wilderness and the big buzzing machine in the sky. One of my favorite parts about the wilderness experience is the freedom I find in not being tied to society and the peace found in the parks. However, the helicopter impeded on that experience and broke the solitude.

That being said, air travel over the parks still occurs. In my research, I found that the air space over United States national parks is being used for four main activities- commercial flights, air tours, environmental studies, and military training. This paper will examine these activities and explore whether or not their presence in the national parks justifies their violation of solitude.

The most common type of airfare in the United States is commercial air travel and commercial airfare naturally conflicts with the interests of the national parks. According to Larry Nickey, a parks fire and aviation officer, commercial air travel over the national parks is a matter addressed by both the Federal Aviation Administration and National Park Service. (Nickey) He writes that ”the issue for Olympic is that unfortunately, SEATAC airport, along with Boeing Field and McChord Air Fork Base, are surrounded for all practical purposes by three national parks, several United States Forest Service Wilderness areas and the only non-wilderness airspace to direct the traffic over is the corridor over the San Juan Islands that leads right into Canada.” (Nickey) He writes that since crossing international borders is difficult, the Federal Aviation Administration tries to direct air traffic over the edges of the park when necessary but that inevitably some traffic does go over the center of the park. (Nickey) While that is an unfortunate reality, during the nine days we were in the park, I did not see any planes- commercial or otherwise fly over the park. However, in quiet moments it was possible to hear the occasional commercial jet in the distance. Nickey also writes that while all air space in the United States is controlled by the Federal Aviation Administration, the FAA also works with the National Park Service to limit air use over the national parks and the impact of the these commercial flights. There has been limited success in changing air space regulations over the United States given the complicated factors involved in air usel. (Nickey) However, I did not find commercial air crafts to be an intrusive part of our trip and do not think it significantly impedes on the solitude found in the wilderness.

The second use of national park airspace is air tours. Air tours are rides in a small aircraft, usually over landscapes like the ones in our national parks. For instance, Vashon Island Air company does air tours over the Olympic National Park. ("Olympic National Park.") Their website says that they offer a three hour tour in a tailwheel airplane. ("Olympic National Park.") The tour includes flying over the Hood Canal and the Olympic Mountains. ("Olympic National Park.") The Federal Aviation Administration manages these tours and worked with the National Park Service to develop the National Parks Air Tour Management Act. ("Program Information.") This act requires air tour companies to apply for the ability to conduct tours in national parks and to report their air tours to the Federal Aviation Administration and the National Park Service. ("Program Information.") According to reports by Federal Aviation Administration, the Olympic National Park ranked thirty-first in 2015 for the most air tours in a national park service area with nineteen air tours conducted throughout the year. ("Reporting Information") However, other parks, such as Lake Mead National Recreation Area and Hawaii Volcanoes National Park saw upwards of ten thousand air tours during the year. ("Reporting Information") Air tours are a particularly prevalent form of air use above our national parks.

However, air tours do not justify the violation of solitude that they inflict on the wilderness. One could argue that air tours give people the opportunity to see landscape in new ways or that air tours are making the wilderness accessible to the general public instead solely those who are interested in backpacking. Air tour companies would likely argue that they are justified in using the air space above national parks because the wilderness is meant to be enjoyed and these tours enhance the general public's ability to enjoy the parks. But I would argue that air tours decrease the enjoyment of the park for more people than it increases the enjoyment of the park. Therefore, air tour companies are not truly increasing enjoyment of the park. Helicopters can be heard for miles because the sound of the propellers reverberates off the valley walls, reaching many more people in the park than the few people that are in the helicopter. While the helicopter likely increases the enjoyment of people in the helicopter, the sound from the aircraft violates the sense of solitude of people on the ground and likely reduces their enjoyment of the park.

If the purpose of the parks is to enjoy them, then air tours should result in a positive net increase of enjoyment of the parks. However, since the air tours likely decrease the enjoyment of the park for more people than it increases, then the net result of the air tours is negative. But air tours continue to exist because the companies value of the enjoyment of their paying customers over the enjoyment non-customers. In other words, if you pay them, then your enjoyment of the park is worth more than those who do not pay. While the purpose of air tour companies is to increase the enjoyment of the parks and actually do increase enjoyment of the park for a select paying few, they do not succeed increasing the net enjoyment of the park. Therefore, air tours are not worth violating the solitude of those people in the park.

Another reason for air travel in national parks in environmental studies. Environmental studies occasionally utilize helicopters in their research and sometimes these environmental studies take place in national parks. For instance, the United States Geological Survey and the United States National Park Service conduct a helicopter survey of the mountain goats in the Olympic National Park. The survey uses a helicopter to travel around mountain peaks to count goats. (Jenkins) During our time in the Olympic National Park we saw the goat survey helicopter on two different occasions. As a result of this survey from past years, it is now known that while the mountain goat population in the Olympic Mountains was relatively stable in past decades, the mountain goat population increased between 2004 and 2011. (Jenkins) The researchers also determined that if current trends continue, the mountain goat population in the Olympic National Park will double in fifteen years. (Jenkins) Hence, air use over national parks has practical research applications.

These environmental studies are justified in their violation of solitude because their intent matches the impact of their studies and these studies help improve spaces for solitude. While these environmental studies face a similar decrease in enjoyment as air tours because these studies also use noisy helicopters, these studies are different than the air tours because of their intent. The studies do not want to increase the enjoyment of the parks for a select paying few. Rather, they are focused on the preservation of the environment. While the helicopters directly impede on the solitude found in the wilderness, these surveys aim to improve the wilderness by learning more about it and the impacts that different factors have on the parks. By preserving the wilderness, the studies are also improving the spaces for solitude. Hence, because these studies eventually improve spaces for solitude and actually succeed in their intentions, these studies are worth violating people's solitude.

Air space above national parks is also used for military training. For instance, in the Olympic National Park, the air space is used for navy warfare training. In October 2004, the Navy submitted a proposal to be able to use the Olympic National Park as a place for warfare training. The Outdoor Society wrote in an article that stated that the United States Navy “is hoping to fly 36 of its EA-18G ‘Growler’ supersonic warplanes 1,200 feet above the ground in order to conduct war games with mobile towers placed at 15 locations on the western slopes of the Olympic Mountains.“ This proposal predictably created a bit of a backlash but clearly based on our experience in the park, the Navy is in the park.

It is a bit tricky to determine whether or not the training exercises performed in the national parks are worth invading other people's solitude. The intent is to improve skills for defending national security but the benefits and impacts of these trainings are hard to see. However, one could argue that it is not worth invading other people's solitude if there are other viable places to perform the same training exercises. But, it is a bit tricky to determine what the Navy looks for in a training location so it is difficult to determine if there are other viable training locations. Additionally, it is important to note that while the Navy performs important duties but none of those duties directly impact the national parks. In other words, the Navy is taking more from the National Parks than they are directly giving back to the park. Therefore, whether or not the Navy should be allowed to invade the privacy of those in the park is a toss up.

In summary, regulating air use above our national parks is tricky. When I first approached the subject, I was somewhat against any air usage above our national parks. However, I found that the issue was not that simple. Some types of air travel over national parks, like air tours, are not worth the violation of solitude because they neither improve the space for solitude nor give back to the park as a whole. Other reasons for air use, however, like environmental studies, serve to preserve the wilderness experience for everyone, in which case the solitude of the park can be sacrificed for the improvement of the space. Other cases, such as military training, are a gray area. The benefits of the air use are not directly seen so it is difficult to determine their worth.

In the end, the circumstances surrounding the helicopter we saw on Sentinel Peak were a little more complicated than I initially thought. I disliked that the helicopter impeded on our solitude because solitude is an invaluable experience in a society where we are increasingly connected. While landing on the glacier was excessive, there is a possibility that the general presence of the helicopter could have justified the violation of solitude. All in all, while I may not have enjoyed the helicopter in the park, the training exercises it was performing could have justified its presence in the park.

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