



Celebrating Mexico's Unique Heritage of National Parks

By Emily Wakild

As all Mexicans know, President Lázaro Cárdenas nationalized Mexico's petroleum industry. On March 18, 1938, he read the decree aloud on the radio and the date became synonymous with economic independence and revolutionary pride. But the following day, Cárdenas made a far less spectacular gesture that revealed another equally pivotal side of his presidency. He rose early, gathered his wife, children, and a few friends, and drove to Nevado de Toluca National Park. Cárdenas himself had ordered the park's creation two years earlier and his sojourn there reaffirmed the importance of natural resources that included, but extended far beyond, oil. After a day of picnicking with his family, swimming in the alpine lakes, and hiking in the woods, Cárdenas returned to the city invigorated and refocused to face the nation and the world. Both PEMEX and Nevado de Toluca National Park have had their status changed in the last few years which shows how quickly this history has slipped into the past.

Although few recognize it today, Mexico created forty national parks during the latter stages of the first social revolution of the twentieth century. Mostly within one or two hours of Mexico City, the parks largely protected pine, oak, and fir forests that overlapped with longstanding peasant communities in the highland volcanic plateau. By 1940, national parks encompassed more than 827,000 hectares in fourteen states and—this is the part that is surprising to most people—Mexico led the world in the number of national parks.

Mexico's first national parks were an outgrowth of revolutionary affinities for both rational science and social justice. For a brief span of time, roughly 1935-1940, the government tried to blend nature protection and environmental justice in a way that rarely happened afterwards or elsewhere. Formally trained foresters and experts established parks in places they deemed most critical to restoring the forests around the nation's capital, protecting watersheds for agriculture, and preserving nationally symbolic landforms. At the same time, rural people continued to inhabit these landscapes and use them for a range of activities from growing crops to producing charcoal. Because the revolution embraced the promise of "land to the man who works it," pushing these residents off the land or completely restricting their activities was politically untenable. Sympathy for rural people tempered the plans of scientific conservationists, but a concern for the rapidly degrading environment allowed the defenders of the natural world to enter forcefully into national policies. More than other Cardenista reforms, the park administration promoted a style that offered a common cultural patrimony of nature as a vision of how humans could live softly in their natural environment.



The unique circumstances that coalesced in Mexico during the mid-1930s helped redefine the meaning of national parks. The government borrowed from a foreign template that excluded local residents and reformulated it to fit their own society's intention to quicken the pace of inclusion. The inclusion of longstanding residents into park planning has been explained as a recent phenomenon brought about in tandem with U.S. environmentalism that spread awareness about rainforest depletion and biodiversity loss. Such a narrative credits environmental awareness to the rise of environmental movements in the U.S. in the 1970s and makes wealthy, white, urban actors the protagonists of "saving the planet." In fact, recognizing how Mexican revolutionaries insisted that their social programs had an environmental face alters these exclusively foreign interpretations. The Mexican version of environmentalism that ascended earlier should be seen as part of a domestic genesis of ideas promoting sustainable and careful management of natural resources. The willingness of government officials to make hard choices, such as to limit extractive uses in certain areas or to deny infrastructure projects, speaks to current dilemmas facing parks. The rapidity with which such commitments were abandoned also conveys critical warnings.

The institutional heritage and traditions of a country are vital to making conservation effective. National culture provides the key to sustainable conservation projects because private conservation can only be a catalyst as it remains subject also to governmental regulations and cultural shifts. If humanity is to protect what remains of the natural world it must rely upon the work of governments and the support of citizens. If Tata Lázaro were alive today he surely would be proud how many of his parks remain and concerned for those like Nevado de Toluca that are slipping away for their national place.

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