Private Paths to Public Parks in the American South

Chris Eklund
Auburn University

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Abstract

This paper explores the connections between private individuals, government entities, and non-governmental organizations in the creation of parklands throughout the American South. While current historiography primarily credits the federal government with the creation of parks and protection of natural wonders, an investigation of parklands in the Southern United States reveals a recurring connection between private initiative and park creation. Secondary literature occasionally reflects the importance of local and non-government sources for the preservation of land, yet these works still emphasize the importance of a national bureaucracy setting the tone for the parks movement. Some works, including Jacoby’s Crimes Against Nature examine local actors, but focus on opposition to the imposition of new rules governing land incorporated into national parks. Other works chronicle local efforts to preserve land in the face of some outside threat. In spite of scholarly recognition of non-government agencies and local initiative, the importance of local individuals in the creation of parklands remains an understudied aspect of American environmental history. Several examples in the American South raise concerns about the traditional narrative pitting governmental hegemony against local resistance. This paper argues for widespread, sustained interest in both nature preservation and in creating spaces for public recreation at the local level, and finds that the “private path to public parks” merits further investigation.