History, Architecture & Landscapes

What Makes a Vista Scenic?

By Kevin McCardle

Many visitors experience Yosemite through scenic drives and taking photographs of the park's iconic images. In visitor surveys, sightseeing and scenic driving are consistently mentioned as the most popular visitor activities. Many of Yosemite's scenic vistas are historic and occur along the major roads of the park. Maintaining these scenic vistas for visitors to enjoy is a perpetual endeavor — requiring a mix of science, art, manual labor, and most of all vigilance. For without continual management, vegetation can grow up and obscure the view as evidenced by the series of photographs below.

When set aside in 1864, Yosemite Valley and Mariposa Grove were the first scenic natural areas in the United States protected for public benefit and appreciation of the scenic landscape. One of the purposes in creating the National Park Service ...is to conserve the scenery... Principles and standards for building roads in the National Parks that reveal the dramatic scenery began with an agreement of understanding between the National Park Service and the Bureau of Public Roads in 1925. Tunnel View, at the east end of the Wawona Tunnel, was constructed in 1932 and is one of the most visited examples of these standards. The site was rehabilitated in 2009 to address several issues, including visitor safety, but also reopened the dramatic view originally intended.

The openness of the vegetation found in the park by early visitors and inhabitants created many vistas, particularly in the highly scenic Yosemite Val-

ley. Indian inhabitants and early visitors often described the ability to see the valley floor from one side to the other, an experience not possible today. In the past, the vegetation in the park had been managed by American Indians through many cultural practices that included fire. The suppression of these practices, suppression of lightning-ignited fire, and the alteration of the valley's hydrology are major reasons that many vistas in Yosemite Valley, and the park, are obscured today. In 2009, park staff inventoried 181 scenic vistas in Yosemite and found that encroaching vegetation partially obscured over half the vistas and completely obscured about one-third of the vistas.

Recognizing the importance of preserving these majestic views, the park recently completed a *Scenic Vista Management Plan*. This plan establishes a systematic program to document, protect and reestablish Yosemite's important viewing areas and vistas with actions in concert with the natural processes that created them.

Re-establishing vistas under the *Scenic Vista Management Plan* is a two-step process: the first step is deciding which vistas; the second step is determining what management actions are appropriate. Determining which vistas in a scenic park such as Yosemite is a daunting issue. Hundreds of locations may be considered vista points to a variety of visitors. Identifying which vista points are most important to the park and the visitor's experience is most



View of El Capitan in 1868 Selected to represent Yosemite in the postage stamp series.



Postage stamp series view in 1940. Before selective thinning to restore view.



Same view taken in 1940 after selective thinning.



Same View in 1990. Obscured by vegetation

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critical. A vista may be important because of its unique beauty, another because of historic events, and still others because of the numbers of likely visitors seeing the park at a given location. These points have widely varying degrees of historic documentation.

A key challenge in developing the *Scenic Vista* Management Plan was striking the right balance between preserving historic views and allowing natural processes to prevail. Re-establishing vistas because of their cultural importance must be balanced with the need to manage natural resources. Objectively assessing the cultural importance can be done in many ways with varying degrees of formality and standardization. To complete this task, a team of park staff developed an approach for comparing various sites. The system developed for Yosemite is an adaptation of the Blue Ridge Parkway system used to rate the cultural importance of vistas to visitors. This tool is referred to as a Visual Resource Assessment (VRA) and provides a structure in determining the value of scenic vistas. The team at Blue Ridge Parkway spent several years developing this program, working with academic researchers, and using public input.

By assigning a numerical value to features of a site that range from the level of infrastructure present to the depth and variety of scenery, vista points can be compared and assigned a band of high, medium, or low cultural value. Different people performing VRA analysis at the same point may obtain different scores, but the structure of the VRA ensures that the scores would at least be close. This provides a mechanism to regulate the process and provide a reasonably predictable program over a wide range of sites.

In addition to the VRA, the *Scenic Vista Management Plan* prescribes the management intensity of vegetation clearing at each vista based upon the vegetation communities present at each vista site. The Yosemite landscape encompasses a remarkable range of vegetation communities, as it rises from 2,000 feet to over 13,000 feet. The diverse vegetation in the park includes foothill chaparral, giant sequoia, California black oak, and lodgepole pine. Some vistas encompass more than one vegetation community. The vegetation types described in the *Yosemite National Park Fire Management Plan* form a basis for specific clearing prescriptions, and supplemented by site-specific ecological information.



Tunnel View in 1933, after completion of the Wawona Tunnel.



Tunnel view before restoration, April 2007. Iconic views of Half Dome and Bridalveil Fall are obscured by conifer trees.



Dramatic view of Yosemite Valley is restored in March 2008.

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