

**NOTES ON SEEING THE NATIONAL PARKS AS A VISITOR**

**or**

**IN DEFENSE OF THE FRONT COUNTRY**

**by**

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### IN DEFENSE OF THE FRONT COUNTRY

As employees of the National Park Service, we seldom set down impressions of the parks as seen by visitors. Frequently, this is because we are not visitors ourselves when in parks or because we are so familiar with operating details that we tend to forget or ignore the interaction between park and public. For two weeks in August my family and I visited Teton, Yellowstone, Bighorn, and Fort Laramie. The trip was motivated by national parks (the kids had never seen Yellowstone or Teton) and a high percentage of our time was spent within the boundaries of national parks.

As a family of four traveling in the family car our experience was probably typical. If so, perhaps these observations will be of value.

#### 1. Economics

Like Thoreau, let's start with this dismal subject. On an impressionistic level, it is obvious that the parks we visited are powerful economic generators. Once we left Interstate 80, most of the people we encountered were enroute to or from Teton or Yellowstone. At the Buffalo Bill Museum in Cody, Wyoming, it was obvious that most of the visitation there was on the way to Yellowstone. A sign in a restaurant in Buffalo, Wyoming, extolled the virtues of Route 16 (passing through Buffalo) as access to Yellowstone over those of Route 14 (passing through Cody). It pointed out that construction would be encountered on Route 14 – we didn't see any.

Virtually all the money one spends on a trip to these parks goes to private enterprise. Out of \$1,000 spent, only \$20 went directly to the government (a Golden Eagle Passport and a Wyoming nonresident fishing license). \$980 went to private enterprise. (I am including the sale of publications in parks in this category.)

The multiplier effect of a visit to a park is considerable. Here is a simpleminded analysis. In 1980 the total cost of administering the National Park System was \$535 million. In that year, 294 million visits were recorded for a per-visitor cost of \$1.82. On our trip we were counted 13 times. The multiplier used at these parks is 3.2, so we became 42 visits. Forty-two visits times a \$1.82 per visit is approximately \$76. However, we paid \$10 for access to the parks and that revenue is not included in the \$535 million cited above, so the multiplier effect would appear to be \$1,000 divided by \$66 or around 15 times the cost of administering the system. Not bad.

Some other economic facts of note. The cheapest accommodations were in Yellowstone. Rooms without a bath at Old Faithful Inn and the Lake Hotel were \$31.20. This compared with an average outside the park of \$40.60 for all the motels we stayed in. The range of accommodations in a park like Yellowstone is greater than available in the surrounding towns. For instance, we had a room without a bath. Cost would have been comparable had we selected a room with a bath. Given the ambience of the park environment, one could consider the lodging prices at Yellowstone a bargain. But more on ambience later.

Gasoline is not a significant part of the cost on such a trip. Our car got 23 miles to the gallon. Our total gasoline costs were \$102, or just at 10 percent of our total expenses. Food was the biggest single expense, amounting to 42 percent of our expenditures. Lodging was 27 percent. The food and lodging breakdown was affected by the fact that we stayed with friends on five of twelve nights on the road. If we had rented lodging for each night, percentages would change somewhat but food would still be the predominant cost. No other cost was particularly significant but it is perhaps worth noting that we spent \$37 on film and \$26 on books and publications.

## 2. Some Aspects of Design

We stayed in both the Old Faithful Inn and the Lake Hotel during our visit. The character of that visit was sufficiently impressive to deserve some comment. Both experiences relate more to late Nineteenth Century social theorems than to Twentieth Century wilderness ideals. These structures, and presumably other buildings similar to them in other national parks, are more similar in character and concept to the mansions and lodges of the Maine coast or the Jersey shore than to the austere concept of wilderness. This is not to say that the concepts are not valuable even in the late Twentieth Century. The fact that these structures have existed inside national parks for up to a hundred years makes them unique and it makes the character of the experience unique. The Old Faithful Inn, resplendent in new shingles, was the object of several overheard compliments from other visitors who immediately recognized its uniqueness. The ability to stroll through the geyser basins at sunset or along the shores of Lake Yellowstone in a nonstrenuous way was a pleasure enjoyed by many people. For those who wanted solitude, it was available within a mile and a half. One morning I hiked to a geyser basin overlook a mile and a half away from and 400 feet above the basin. During that hike I saw five people on the trail.

The concept of the interior spaces is a contrast to most modern structures built for overnight lodging. The rooms, while spacious, are spartan in their appointments. The lobbies in both buildings are grand and obviously designed as places where people were meant to spend time. Both offer spaces for contemplation, writing, or just sitting around and looking at people. The rationale would seem to be that the room is a place to sleep; lobby and verandas, balconies, etc., are places for spending waking hours. Since all those spaces were well used by visitors, it would seem that the concept works.

A couple of highly personal observations; the lighting in the rooms at both Old Faithful and Lake, consistent with the philosophy noted above, is dismal for reading. Since the principal things the visitor takes away from the national parks are pictures, paper, and ideas; and since the national park is the purveyor of vast amounts of written information, it would seem we would want to promote an environment that makes it conducive to read. I found the lack of a good reading light annoying. Similarly, "Muzak" adds nothing as I view Yellowstone Lake. Listening to the strains of "Rum and Coca Cola" gurgling mindlessly out of an overhead speaker in the lobby of the Lake Hotel actually detracts from the experience. I have always wondered about canned music anyhow. Who asks for it? Does anybody miss it if it isn't there?

These large, central lodges with adjacent cabins take their toll in a heavy demand for infrastructure. Large parking lots, support features such as power plants, and other commercial structures place a considerable amount of development in a sensitive area like Old Faithful. My view, however, is that these experiences work, are rapidly becoming unique, and hence, are valuable. We should be very careful in modifying them to preserve their character and ambience. The Nineteenth Century visitor experience in national parks is worth preserving too.

We stopped at six visitor centers on the trip – Moose, Coulter Bay, Old Faithful, Lake, Bighorn Canyon, and Fort Laramie. Five of the six are Mission '66 or after. Fort Laramie is largely park design and is set in an historic building. Our primary purpose in stopping at these visitor centers was to pick up information on destinations and alternatives. In observing other visitors, their primary purpose seemed to be information. Thus, at Moose, for instance, more people were clustered around the information desk and the publication sales rack than were in the adjacent museum. The information was dispensed in a businesslike manner and was entirely adequate in our experience. Further, the centers served as focal points for finding out what activities were available in the parks. The newspaper style formats available in both Teton and Yellowstone were particularly effective in outlining options.

With regard to the museums, people seemed to pass through them rather quickly, gaining an impressionistic view of the subject matter rather than studying them. My theory would be that people on vacation have a somewhat built-in impatience to get out and "see the park." I sensed that myself as I viewed exhibits. By far the most elegant piece of interior design was Coulter Bay. It has the flavor of an art gallery rather than a museum. It works well.

These buildings viewed at the peak of the summer season did not seem overdesigned. In fact, one of them, the Moose Visitor Center at Grant Teton, was downright crowded. That structure, though, seemed particularly well placed. Out of the central resource but right across the visitor's path to it, a high percentage of entry visitors did seem to stop there.

As exterior design, only the Lovell Visitor Center is memorable. The rest are clean, functional, and relatively unobtrusive.

Both at Yellowstone and Teton there is still extensive use of routed wood signs. As informational devices, they look nice but simply cannot be read from a car moving between 30 and 40 miles an hour. Apparently, to accommodate this fact, Yellowstone frequently uses two signs "Point of Interest Ahead" or something like that. Question: Do two routed wood signs, looking as good as they do, equal the impact of one standard sign readable at highway speed?

### 3. The Visitor

Family groups continue to dominate the population of national park visitors. Two other subdivisions were apparent during our trip, however. Foreign visitors were much more in evidence than in similar trips we had made in previous years. We were in no assembly of over 50 people where French, German, and Japanese could not be heard. In one instance we saw a car (presumably rental) which carried a sign saying "We are French. Help us discover America." This influx of foreign visitors, if it continues, will require a reaction from the National Park Service. Generally speaking, the facilities available to visitors are in English only. Both publications and recruitment practices will be affected.

A second group observed in accommodations and lodges were groups of elderly people. I assume the reason these people were more readily observed at major assembly points is that they were coming by tour bus. Certain facilities are best suited for these visitors and others excluded them. The geyser basins at Old Faithful, for instance, are fully accessible to visitors of all ages. But with the continued "graying of America" park design and facilities need to consciously address the needs of this increasing segment of the population.

The impact of changing transportation patterns was everywhere apparent. The trend towards smaller cars has created a boomlet in the car-top carrier and trailer industry, I would say. Similarly, recreation vehicles were common. My presumption is that many of these are rentals. Or are they borrowed from a friend? Are we moving towards a vehicle for vacation? Is this trend accentuated by the use of a smaller vehicle for primary transportation purposes? Such a trend would contradict the conventional wisdom of four or five years ago which predicted the demise of the recreation vehicle. If such an end is at hand, it was not readily apparent this summer in the parks we visited.

It is intriguing to speculate on the economics of such a vacation. Is it cheaper to fly to some regional center (say, Salt Lake City), rent a recreation vehicle, stay in it every night, than to drive from your home, stay in motels, hotels, lodges, etc.? I suspect that the economics are competitive. One further note, the absence of reservations in campgrounds in midsummer makes the life of a tent camper difficult. In Teton and Yellowstone, some campgrounds were filled as early as 7:30 in the morning, most before noontime. Tent camping under these circumstances means breaking camp at anywhere from 4:00 to 7:00 a.m. to move on to the next campsite. Obviously, one would spend most of a vacation working on logistics. Not a very pleasant way to spend one's time. Contrast this with the recreation vehicle. The kids can still be asleep in the back of the vehicle when mom or dad pulls out of the campsite and heads for the next destination, queuing up on a first-come, first-served basis to get a site. As a camper (tent) my preference has always been for reservation campgrounds. That way the logistics can be accomplished at home before the trip starts. I believe both management and the visitor would be best served by the adoption of reservation campgrounds on a wider scale in the National Park System.

#### 4. Interpretation and Information

As a general observation we used interpretive services more for information than for interpretation. In all the parks that we visited there were more options presented in the form of walks, talks, programs, and activities than we had time for. There are lots of things to do in national parks.

Interpretation has a remote control character. We relied on publications, exhibits, and museums more than direct contact with an interpreter. I believe that this probably is the experience of most visitors. The advantage of the exhibit over the guided walk is that it adjusts to the visitors' schedules. Such interpretive activities as we participated in were the result of arriving at an area at a time convenient to the beginning of a walk, talk, or program. The logistics of our trip dictated the information and interpretation we received. I suppose with a longer time in one location, the programs available might be a motivating factor. Out of all this comes the observation that the National Park Service has pretty low visibility to a park visitor. That is not to say the uniform is invisible, it is to say that for the majority of the time a visitor spends in a park, it is on the periphery. This is not a criticism, in fact, it probably suits the visitors just fine. They're on vacation and probably seek unstructured experiences as a contrast to the structured experiences of their work-a-day world.

I have always thought a reasonable test of a personal interpretive program is one developed by Bill Eddy in the postscript to the original edition of *Man and Nature in the National Parks* (Conservation Foundation, Washington, D.C., 1969). Eddy says "The first step is to use the interpretive program to build a bridge between the world of the park and the world of the visitor — to demonstrate at a variety of levels that the forces that shape and control natural communities are precisely those forces that man

has unleashed and accelerated in shaping his own communities. From such a conceptual bridge the visitor can view the park, his home and himself with perspective he has never had before." Dwight Hamilton expressed something of the same thought more prosaically but with equal effectiveness in pointing out that interpretation ought to get the visitor to say "Hey, that's just like home."

Using this rather stern test, the walks and talks we attended failed. They contained facts, sometimes fascinating, sometimes overwhelming, but with little to tie them together. They were didactic. The interpreter talked. The visitor listened.

This lack of focus did not exist in the publications and handbooks we purchased and read. Whatever happened to thematic interpretation? Is it too tough and elusive a concept?

## 5. Summary

National park areas are marvelous places to vacation. Relatively speaking, they are cheap, well designed, and perhaps most important of all, thought provoking and profound. To the thoughtful visitor, these areas raise questions about the culture we spring from and the world we live in. They invite the visitor to ponder his "place among the infinities." It is this conjunction of visitor, park, and idea that is perhaps the most lasting contribution of national parks to the nation, to the planet, and to the species.