

NPCA and the NPS: A 70 Year Partnership

by

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As the National Parks and Conservation Association (NPCA) enters its 71st year, the partnership between the National Park Service (NPS) and NPCA continues to grow stronger. Throughout the history and growth of the national park system, NPCA and the Park Service have shared common goals and organizational ties in the defense of America's national park system.

On August 25, 1916, Congress passed that all too familiar "Organic Act," legislation giving birth to the National Park Service. The new bureau was charged: "to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the some in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."

In order to promote national parks and monuments and to encourage the expansion of the national park system, Stephen Mather, the first director of NPS, along with his good friend Robert Sterling Yard, organized a small group of men into the National Parks Educational Committee (NPEC). Included in NPEC were the presidents of major conservation organizations, civic associations, scientists and scholars including Theodore Roosevelt. In 1919, the National Parks Association (NPA) sprouted from NPEC. It was this organization founded "to defend the National Parks and Monuments fearlessly against assaults of private interests and aggressive commercialism" that evolved into the National Parks and Conservation Association.

Since the inception of the Association, public "education" has been a primary objective of NPCA. As early as 1919, Association literature described the national parks as "universities" with more than a 1/2 million students coming to class each year. Mather noted though that class was often being held without teachers. As a consequence, Mather envisioned that a National Park Association could assist in "informing and educating" those who visited the parks.

Robert Sterling Yard, a colleague of Mather on the New York Sun newspaper (and the individual Mather had selected to serve as the Park Service's first public information officer), resigned from federal service and became the first Executive Secretary of the new National Park Association. Mather told Yard, "with you working outside the government and with me working inside, together we ought to make the National Park System very useful to the country."

Mather believed the restrictions of a big governmental office limited him. He wanted groups on the outside to help him in his

work, particularly on matters upon which a public official could not take a positive stand. The Association, he stated "would be wholly non-partisan and independent." Mather believed the Association should have no official connection with government, but would work in harmony with the National Park Service. The Association became and today is just that--the only national, non-profit, membership organization that focuses exclusively on defending, promoting, and improving the country's National Park System, while educating the public about parks.

Throughout the 1920's, Yard called upon a variety of organizations to support the NPA. The National Federation of Business and Professional Women and the US Railroad Administration, to name but two, helped NPA to protect the integrity of the parks. The Association came to be known as the organizer of coalitions to fight in-appropriate park development schemes, a role NPCA continues to play today. For example, NPCA initiated the Everglades Coalition, a organization to defend and promote the preservation of the Everglades ecosystem.

During its first decade NPA's priorities primarily focused on fighting to maintain the integrity of individual park units. Later, NPA expanded its attention to establishing "a sound national policy for the perfection of the system." To this end, a joint NPA/NPS committee was appointed to study ways to preserve the primeval elements of the Park System while still making them accessible to visitors. The committee advanced criteria recommendations of what a national park ought to be. Included was a necessity for primitiveness, a "lofty degree of beauty," and national significance. Together the NPA and NPS began building a program to implement the committee's vision for the national parks.

About this time, "education" began to hold a greater importance as a park "use" than recreation. The "interpretive" profession was born as naturalists and later historians began educating the public about parks in parks. Although the Committee recommendations envisioned recreation as a legitimate secondary park use realizing that recreation could be used as a vehicle "to bring the spirit of the visitor into accord with the beauty and inspiration of nature," strict policies were suggested to prohibit the exploitation of the national parks. Park concessionaires began to come under closer public scrutiny. Railroad and airplane terminals would no longer be promoted in parks. And new roads and new buildings would be built only "when the educational and inspirational efficiency of the park shall definably be served by such extension..."

By 1936 a "system" of parks was beginning to take shape out of a patchwork of District of Columbia parks, memorial parkways, historic and military sites, and of course, the national parks and monuments. After World War II, as the park system expanded, the Association began to expand it's interests also into areas not always directly

associated with the National Park System. NPA's expanded scope included addressing such issues as the Army Corps of Engineers' proposal to build a series of dams on the Potomac River; damming of the Moose River in Adirondacks and the protection of wildlife throughout the nation.

Along with the increased concerns with "external" park protection issues, the NPA became increasingly concerned about internal park deterioration. With the dramatic increase in park visitation in the late 1940s and 50s, the idea of regional planning was raised by the Association. How could the needs of visitors to primitive areas be balanced with purely recreational needs of the visiting public without effective planning? The NPA also began advocating positions not wholly endorsed by the Park Service, for example advancing the position that motorboating, skiing, and pleasure driving should be, in some cases, diverted to lands other than national parks.

With the passage of the 1964 Wilderness Act (an undertaking NPCA took a leading role in), the Historic Preservation Act in 1966 and the National Environmental Policy Act in 1969, by the late 60's, the NPA's programs had continued to expand to a point where the Association was actively involved in protecting the parks from ever increasing air, noise and water pollution. The Association often took provocative positions advocating land use reforms, rural preservation and lobbied for increased protection of national parks from visitor overuse. Then in 1970, to reflect the Association's expanded programmatic interests, NPA, sister of NPS, changed its name to the National Parks and Conservation Association.

Today, NPCA stands committed to preserving parks, historic properties and unspoiled wilderness areas and seeks to insure that the National Park Service balances the System's preservation needs with the Service's legislative mandate to provide for visitor use. As the NPS's best ally (and occasionally its constructive critic), NPCA focuses its activities on maintaining the integrity of the entire Park System. The Association operates a land trust, conducts research on park issues, produces publications, operates a park education center and through citizen action, lobbies for legislation in order to better protect, improve and preserve the national parks. Efforts on Capitol Hill focus not only on promoting new areas to round out the system (for example, NPCA was a leader in the long battle to establish 47 million acres of Alaskan parklands), but also focuses on influencing the federal appropriations process to advance Park Service programs; NPCA works to see to it that parks receive an ever increasing share of the federal budget.

The National Park Trust To better assist NPCA in its on going effort to uphold and create national parks in 1983 the National Park Trust was created. The Trust enables NPCA to facilitate the transfer of land from private holdings in national parks to the federal government. Properties acquired by NPCA via the National Park Trust include lands at Big Cypress, Fort Laramie, Big Thicket and Appomattox Court House to name but a few.

Research One of NPCA's long term research projects is the Visitor Impact Management Study. Along with the aid of the NPS, NPCA and a team of scientists study carrying capacities and assess visitor impacts on the national parks. A two volume study relating to recreation carrying capacity in the national parks examines current theory and research on visitor impacts and prescribes a management framework for analyzing and mitigating visitor impacts.

In addition, in 1988 NPCA's mammoth four year research project culminated in the publication of the Association's nine volume study, Investing in Park Futures: The National Park System Plan, A Blueprint for Tomorrow, a document designed to guide the park system into the 21st century. A slim but important booklet, From Vignettes to a Global View, was also produced in 1989. It is the report of the joint NPCA/NPS Commission on Research and Resource Management Policy in the National Park System. The report builds on the work and ideas sparked by Dr. Starker Leopold's 1963 landmark report known as the "Leopold Report" and urged the Park Service to formally adopt the concept of ecosystem management in all our nations parks.

Education A primary goal for NPCA research activities is to inform the public of the importance of parks and influence Congress to fund necessary developments pertinent for public use and expand the system by adding new parks. As Stephen Mather well knew, a well informed public, when mobilized, can and does influence Congressional representatives to support the national parks. NPCA, seeks to build a well informed pro-park constituency. NPCA has taken a leading role in the effort to produce and distribute educational materials calling for the reintroduction of wolves to the Yellowstone ecosystem. In addition, NPCA recently joined with the National Park Service to publish a handbook for interpreters, "Interpreting Biological Diversity" as NPCA believes it is important to communicate global threats and concerns to national park visitors.

Park Education Center To provide the public with information on individual parks, NPCA recently established the Park Education Materials Center. The center publishes a mail order catalog of books, videos and other items related to the national park system including park-specific material often found only in park cooperating association outlets. Nearly a half million catalogs have been distributed and give national exposure to many small, less visited park service areas. Thirty-nine of the sixty-four national park cooperating associations are participating in the efforts of the Educational Materials Center. Visitors now can easily obtain, by contacting the center, information on a particular park, either before or after their visit.

Along with the Park Education Materials Center information, NPCA produces informational brochures. One called "Visiting the National Parks: How to Have a Quality Experience", provides suggestions on how visitors can make the most out their trip to a national park area. Another is in the works, "National Battlefields: How to Make the Most of Your Visit."

Citizen Action Created in 1979, NPCA's "Park Contact Program" provides an "action network" of NPCA members with information necessary to respond on short notice to park threats through letters and other means. Local park "watchdogs" or "park watchers" keep in close contact with park Superintendents and make contact with NPCA's headquarters in Washington DC to keep the central office staff informed about local park issues. In turn, NPCA publishes these issues of concern in the National Park Action Program's newsletter the "Exchange". These publications along with the National Parks magazine, a full color bi-monthly magazine, provides valuable information on our nation's parks for the Association's 100,000 plus members and the general public.

During the last decade, the mutual interest between NPCA and NPS has heightened public park awareness and has led to many other "park protection" achievements through the direct involvement of citizen activists. In Utah, NPCA was the leader in preventing Canyonland National Park from becoming the site of a nuclear waste dump. An education campaign using the motto, "Don't Waste Utah" resulted in scores of citizens coming to the defence of the park. In January 1985, NPCA participated in a nationwide mailing that emphasized the need to protect parks from impaired visibility and from the adverse effects of surface mines on air quality in the parks. These educational materials, focusing on specific park threats resulted in a booklet on acid rain in our nation's parks entitled Acid Rain Invades Our National Parks. Also included in NPCA's accomplishments is its involvement in mobilizing citizen support for limiting commercial flights over the Grand Canyon. NPCA too, was the first major conservation group in the fray to preserve the Manassas National Battlefield. NPCA was instrumental in formulating a National Heritage Coalition that swayed Congress to keep land out of the hands of developers who were going to build a shopping mall on General Lee's headquarters, historic lands adjacent to the Manassas National Battlefield. Finally, NPCA recently published a book Our Common Lands: Defending the National Parks which gives land managers, citizen activists, local officials and attorneys the facts they need to win park protection battles of the future.

Freeman Tilden Award Perhaps the most visible activity that most NPS interpreters associate NPCA with is the Association's sponsorship of the annual Freeman Tilden Outstanding National Park Service Interpreter of the Year Award. This award was created nearly a decade ago by NPCA's president Paul Pritchard and K.C. DenDooven publisher of the popular "Story Behind the Scenery" series. Pritchard and this citizen park enthusiast recognized that all too often the fine work of NPS interpreters went unrecognized. There was a demonstrated need to recognize outstanding work by National Park Service interpreters.

Together Pritchard and DenDooven approached National Park Service Director Russ Dickenson about their idea of establishing a special award for interpreters. For nearly ten years now, each Regional Office of the NPS has selected a regional winner and from that pool of candidates a national winner has been selected. Today

the Freeman Tilden Award recognizes creative excellence among NPS interpreters; the winner is selected on the basis of creative activities that make a positive impact on the quality of the interpretive program at the nominee's park area.

A Partnership into the Future The well-being and continued expansion of the national park idea resides in the efforts of citizen organizations such as NPCA. As partners in this endeavor the Association and the Park Service will continue to make the public aware of the history, mission and importance of parks. The quest to build a strong citizen organization supportive of our national parks is a never ending effort --- a partnership between National Parks and Conservation Association and the National Park Service.