

THE POLITICS OF INTERPRETATION

by

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Ninety-seven years ago, Charles Dickens wrote that "it was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness; it was the season of darkness; it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair; we had everything before us, we had nothing before us; we were all going to heaven, we were all going direct the other way."

While this is a description of the French Revolution in 1875, it is not difficult in our context of parks and recreation and political reality to paraphrase into today's jargon--it is the time of wilderness recognition, it is the time of urban parks; it is the decade of ecology or environmental awareness, it is the decade of colossal environmental degradation; it is the paradox of the dwindling quality of life through poverty, it is also the age of dwindling quality of life through affluence; it is great political clout from conservationists, but also casual acceptance of delay in clean-up, of periods of grace, of sin as usual while resources crumble; it is the era of increasing central power of government, yet it is the age of revenue sharing--in other words, and briefly, things are pretty much normal!

But this kind of normality somewhat reminds us of the preacher who defined the Status Quo simply as the mess we are in! Our status quo may not quite be the same political swampland we surveyed a year ago, but the hazards, the challenges, the dimensions of the problems, are of the same urgency and magnitude.

As I try to sort out the big--or immediately urgent things to do as compared to little or less compelling ones, I think I must begin with the new kind of management dimension we might call "involving the public in decision making." This is an interpretive and communications frontier of direct public confrontation about parks and recreation. We shall speak of this in a number of its dimensions but we can start with public meetings where community groups, often with paid advocates, get together to look at our planning proposals--like highways--and to present alternatives. These advocate planners often use forensic skills instead of evidence and at least this grabs the daily headlines, and the meeting gets in the paper if you don't care what it says about your project. It gives the loudest shouters every day a semblance of support or acclaim. But it usually does not settle much--our principle reason for participating in them is to state honestly that everyone has had a chance to be heard.

Most of today's news stories have no trace of conscience or judgements or memory. I have lost many policy battles on the front pages of the Billings Gazette--but when subsequent issues report factually that the action sought had been accomplished--like zoning on Yellowstone Lake--there is never a word of reminder that yesterday it looked like Garrison was on his way down the tube! This is political reality--

It is also a procedure most agencies are required to follow for public airing of environmental impact statements--of which more later--or master plan proposals unveiled before adoption, or standards for water quality and the like. These require something special in the way of communicative skills, a combination of forensics and thorough knowledge.

For many years our public meetings consisted of glowing reports to a local Chamber of Commerce banquet about all the good things our wise, diligent resource management accomplished for the benefits of the local citizens. We bragged of travel increases, rising economic indicators, more roads, more hotels, more fish, more logs if we were listening to the Forest Service, more of everything that was semantically good in the field of economics. Nobody could be against travel, dollars, roads, hotels, forest harvest programs, camping--or could they?

Today we use a different basic approach--political as all get out! We do not vaunt "our" programs which "we" have developed from "our" greater wisdom and knowledge for "your" benefit. Rather, we are questing for public input on problem solving.

Whether we are a public agency (Federal) or public (state) or public (city or urban) or private sector (Disneyworld) we diligently pursue a concept of communication with our customers/users. We even help to create Advisory Councils or committees, or seek out alternative advocate planners if they do not already exist on a legislative or ad hoc basis. I am a political activist and this is political reality.

One specific experience may be helpful and illustrative. We were meeting with an ad hoc committee on a comprehensive plan for the Connecticut River and our evening was in Holyoke, Massachusetts. A plan to create a public park on Mount Holyoke was under special review. Several hundred people were in the audience.

I thought our planners had done well on the limited space of about 900 acres already tightly surrounded by housing and streets, cut up by roads, a stone quarry, etc. We had a well reasoned plan for circulation, some hiking, some urban types of activity. But this was not what the citizens wanted at all. By some legerdemain the planners were at once to have a mini-wilderness, a bird sanctuary, a campground for kids, a network of hiking trails, a picnic ground, a scenic drive. Obviously we got shot out of the saddle and the headlines still blazon across my memory quoting Senator Kennedy and others that we had just taken a master plan from some wide open space Montana area and pasted it on to Mount Holyoke.

Subsequent hearings were planned quite differently--we would just display a big map showing only a proposed boundary and the physiography. Then with a handful of flannel symbols for all kinds of facilities let the audience tell us where to paste them on. I'm sorry we didn't get to try it--I'm certain it would soon have been more cluttered than our map! But I pass along the example of how directly responsive some of these things can be and a technique that I believe could alleviate much of the pain!

One of our immediate hang-ups is that this rising public social conscience and a consensus for environmental preservation and reform has brought many good and bad projects alike to a screeching halt while we re-examine our positions. Winston Churchill's sage observation that nothing can equal the force of an idea whose time has come is demonstrated almost daily as aroused Ladies Clubs, Conservation Friendlies and others organize, sue, challenge, delay and even stop highways or bridges. This is political reality.

We are still talking about public affairs as the heart of political reality and will continue to do so for a while. All of us can remember when the primary mission of management was to keep from making waves. This is obsolete as a \$2 bill. We have to be activists, to mix in it and get with it. Thus we may meet again with the same Chamber of Commerce we were pleasantly wooing a few years ago, only this time we are butting heads as we present pleas for restraint (we don't want to build it), support controversial alternatives (we want to change the boundaries and entrance location), programs with built-in conflict (limitations on recreational vehicles). In this role of interpreter in the political field lies the real squeezer on management in decision making. Our political interface is as broad as the whole spectrum of parks and recreation. We are caught between a rock and two hard spots: our own agency policies on the one hand and conflicting pressure from both developers and conservationists on the other.

Even the private sector gets into it because Disneyland or Sturbridge Village or Busch Gardens must be concerned about zoning, set-backs, environmental impact statements (both their own and their neighbors), policy of local or state government, law enforcement, city budget, tax rates, utility corridors, streets and highways, safety, standards, etc. This is more political reality.

But, we are like the Swede who complained that by the time he learned to say Yam they changed it to Yelly because after we get acquainted with the jam of the political and procedural jungle, we bang into the sticky jelly on the wall on the resources side of the picture with a societal consensus for environmental preservation and reform in the form of a document called an Environmental Impact Statement. This may be a stirring ecological discourse by an articulate scientist; it may even represent a political thrust to justify political goals of public spending or levels of spending although these goals are ancillary rather than environmentally primary. But honestly done, an E.I.S. should evaluate alternative levels of action from zero (do nothing) to do-it-all!

These decisions are in the political arena since you - the manager - must decide and then go before the public to explain why you did it. The odds are you won't completely please any of your publics! Here is interpretation in the true guts of political reality!

My own rationale and reasoned judgment is that I would sooner explain to my power structure and to my users at this point in time, why I apparently lost my marbles on this one, than try to do it later after bulldozers may have embalmed my things into an eternal public monument. But--how do you do this and survive?

Fortunately, a major element in this kind of political face-up is that the political people don't really want to make public recommendations that will get them criticized any more than you do. A Congressman may have different reaction criteria but he can be and often is sensitive to ecology and the national social awareness consensus if his constituency will support him! Give him a chance! Bears can't vote but he knows how many of their friends can and do in his district if the trigger mechanism is pushed! So in this way an Environmental Impact Statement becomes a support document for the manager and the politician both.

Another grindstone your nose must accommodate is communication with your own staff--let them know your knowledge, reasoning, alternatives, goals, the message to communicate. Did they help you work it out? You can look real good sometimes if your staff has the gleam along with you!

Consider the very real dilemma of a young park interpreter conducting an evening Star Walk but just upwind is the Four Corners Power Plant with smoke stack problems. The facts are inescapable--the smoke is there--they all can see it even if they can't see the stars! What can the interpreter say in response to audience inquiries that will be environmentally honest, informative, helpful, constructive, lead to public awareness of energy dilemmas, even lead to community action?

The young interpreter needs positive leadership, counsel, guidance, information and he needs it from you in advance. How do you supply it? How do you support him after he follows through? Should you have counseled him that a Star Walk could be a disaster? So is the power plant as it pollutes the air but there is more to it than this and you know it even if the young interpreter does not. Training--communication--these are the bind--

But, as the manager, you doubtless have the same communications problems, only yours begin farther upstream. You recognize that many environmental problems surface too late or only in part. The Superintendent of Saratoga National Historic Park learned of a planned 350' atomic cooling tower in the middle of the historic view at Saratoga only after the land was purchased and plans finally surfaced for community review, but this was kind of a forced review since so many political power wheels suddenly got into it. I consider these evasions on the part of industry as dishonest but that is my moral judgement. However, they are a fact of life.

Pressure got the Saratoga plant moved somewhere else but that is another political dilemma too. Don't put it here--put it over there is a common scream yet the people over there don't want it either! Sports Illustrated had a dandy comment on this last April--"hindsight may be better than foresight but anything is better than looking at a nuclear plant in your front yard!"

We struggle vigorously about dilemmas of heat dissipation warming the Hudson River or Lake Michigan but this is just a power company smoke screen. The reality is that instead of worrying about the problems of one plant we should be looking at the impact of seven or eight of them.

And, while the Four Corners plant may be an ecological monstrosity, later we learn that it is simply the first in a string of such plants; all needed for energy production, all coal fired, all needing environmental palliatives far beyond the present capacity of our boastful technology. The real bind is that phrase--"these plants are all needed"--just to meet projected requirements over the next couple of decades. I'm glad there are a few young people in this audience--for it is your problem! At my age all I can do is hope you are ready for it!

In his hard hitting book, "Island of Hope," Bill Brown addresses himself to this topic as he talks of the southwest energy study, the antecedent actions, lack of communication, single purpose planning and decisions, attempts at palliatives. He bangs right into our role--"people who talk straight don't always get ostracized; many get respect and get things done. Sitting tight is unrewarding these days. In other words, the switch to honest--sometimes blunt and unpleasant--environmental activism is on. It is time to separate the men from the boys, wheat from chaff, fishing from cutting bait and getting ready to fish! NOW is the time!"

This reinforces my own long held convictions about innovations and creativity--if we can never do anything better or in different ways than we have always done it--we are like the operative deepsea diver who got the message--"come up at once--the ship is sinking!"

The main element is change--it is the new dimension and we must learn to live within it. New rules and the broad guidelines are only beginning to emerge. Interpretation then is a bigger issue than the birds and the bees; it becomes life systems, food chains, energy flow, all the life blood of resource program success. We must Communicate it.

Many successful recreation resource managers are already doing this. It is a form of political eco-system too with many interlocking parts--industry, communities, conservation groups, resources, the public, all parts of society in motion together. Our goal remains largely one of the intangibles of the quality of life for the people of America. With this shining goal we need not flinch from responsibility for interpreting our resources to citizens and to the political sector. It all ties together--the challenge and the hope for success.

Lewis Mumford tells it well--"man's autonomous decisions are the only factor capable of transforming the future. Otherwise the future rolls on and we roll with it or we roll under it as the case may be."

Historically I want to refer to an example of our long pattern of recognition of the political role and response to it. Any Federal agency is a creature of the administration. Its direction must reflect not only the detailed policies and guidelines of the immediate leadership--Director--Chief Forester--but also the goals of the Secretary of the Department and his desires for recognition or immortality. Both of these must then go to the Administrative program of the President and the funding restraints set by OMB in line with national priorities. The Congress also is involved and this great body also must have input and contributions; however, in the day to day operations, the administration sets the pattern and it is wishful thinking to act otherwise.

In this pattern let's look at a series of policy directives for one of our great Federal agencies--the National Park Service.

The enabling act passed on August 25, 1916, but it was not until May 12, 1918 that Secretary Franklin K. Lane issued the now famous Lane Policy Letter, just like the news Commentators of today, in which he established his interpretation of what this act meant with the language of "in such manner and by such means"--"benefit and enjoyment of future generations"--"National interest"--Secretary Lane spelled it all out--this is what you do!

We will not read it, but in three typewritten pages it sets out the guidelines with remarkable perception as to the future pressure points. I have long suspected that Horace Albright must have written it but to this he always responds simply that it has Secretary Lane's name on it.

Strangely, it was 38 years before any other such document surfaced and this was the set of 14 Precepts or assumptions guiding the MISSION 66 program. It is a pasttime today among those who fail to read the background of like it was or even to read the report on the very real conservation thrusts of MISSION 66, to criticize it without ever understanding it. But this guiding document came along in 1955--these standards and goals were the name of the game until July 10, 1964, when Secretary Udall came up with PARKSCAPE USA. This was a fairly simple body of statement, but very solid in import, articulating clearly such things as the three categories of parks, regional planning, and working with youth. We began to move outside the park--under this approach, the National Park Service first moved into the field of Environmental Education.

However, with the next change in administration, Secretary Hickle soon came up with an eleven point program. The point to make is that with a change of administration--Democrats to Republicans--you simply cannot expect the new Secretary to look at the program of his predecessor and say "Me too!" He has a right to a program with his own identity--the fact that the programs are quite similar just reflects the ability of the National Park Service staff to convince the new man and his Palace Guard that the concepts are valid, although they must be couched in new language. Almost the same thing happened when Secretary Morton came out with his 17 point program in the Second Century of National Parks. This is a most imaginative program indeed with a good title and solid content. It is no surprise to me that it contains the concepts that began with Land and Mather, lasted through MISSION 66, Parkscape, the Eleven Point Program--but it has a lot of new and good things too.

I use this simply as an example of political reality--you can't fight it--why should you? In our form of government it is the way it's 'sposed to be!