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THE PROFESSION

AMERICA'S NATIONAL PARKS SYSTEM: SUNSET OR NEW DAWN?

Art Gómez | Oct 1, 2007

Note: See also the other essays in this series on the National Parks: "[Public Education and the National Park Service: Interpreting the Civil War](#)" and "[Remembering Repression: The GULAG as an NPS Exhibit](#)."

INTRODUCTION

Less than a decade after the U.S. victory in Europe and the Pacific, scholar-journalist Bernard DeVoto penned an essay in *Harper's Magazine* facetiously titled, "Let's Close the National Parks." For years, DeVoto had captured the imagination of the general reading public with his witty, thought-provoking column in

which he analyzed issues concerning the American West. Easterners, it seemed, were captivated by the West; Ogden-born DeVoto, an immigrant to Harvard University, regularly piqued their fascination with the mythic region.

DeVoto used his celebrated public forum in October 1953 to awaken readers to a looming national crisis. America's national parks system, which had languished during the war years for want of money, professional expertise, and near abandonment by tourists, experienced marginal improvement during the first postwar decade. Just months after the return of millions of America's soldiers and sailors, it became increasingly clear to state and local administrators that the United States would never revert to its prewar lifestyle. Postwar America witnessed an increase in leisure time for every working individual and greater access to neighboring states and regions via a system of interstate highways, enhanced by an affordable means of travel. America's love affair with the automobile, especially during the 1950s and the 1960s, enabled the country's citizens to experience their national parks in unprecedented numbers.

But the national parks system, DeVoto lamented in his poignant article, was suffering from "financial anemia." As the United States modernized its federal and state highways, national park byways remained, for the most part, dust-ridden trails. Park managers, moreover, found it nearly impossible to attract qualified employees to fill vacancies resulting from the war. Extreme isolation, long hours, and inadequate pay, made worse by pitiful housing conditions throughout the system, rendered the National Park Service (NPS) unappealing to most

returning service men and women. "Ever since it was organized," DeVoto wrote, "the Service has been able to do its difficult, complex and highly expert job with great distinction because it could count on this [employees'] ardor and devotion." He further asserted, "The most valuable asset the Service has ever had is the morale of its employees." He then cautioned that NPS morale was at an all-time low.

With the same staffing levels as those of the prewar years, the National Park Service was woefully unprepared for the postwar explosion that had resulted in a seven-fold increase in the number of visitors (from 5 million in 1932 to 35 million in 1952). Indeed, not only were NPS employees demoralized; the entire agency considered its parks a "national disgrace." DeVoto conservatively estimated that a congressional appropriation of \$250 million would be necessary to redress the appalling condition of America's national treasures. "No such sums will be appropriated," he somberly predicted. Boldly, the Harvard-educated columnist proposed a second, more viable but less palatable option: closing the national parks to visitation—in particular the high maintenance ones such as Yosemite, Yellowstone, Rocky Mountain, and Grand Canyon—and assigning the U.S. Army to patrol them. "They [NPS employees] are unable to do the job in full and so it had better not be attempted at all," DeVoto rationalized.¹

Once alerted to the prospect that their national parks would be forever closed, DeVoto's reading public rallied to their salvation. Deluged with letters, telegrams, and phone calls from irate constituents, Congress authorized the largest single appropriations increase ever awarded the National Park Service before or since. Poised to

celebrate a half-century since the Park Service's establishment in August 1916, Park Service officials proposed an energetic new program christened "Mission 66." In his presentation before the House, NPS Director Conrad Wirth promised to modernize the parks and to make them more accessible for the enjoyment of the nation's ever mobile population. Encouraged by the prospect of upgraded facilities, a highly trained staff, and a fresh management approach, Congress appropriated more than \$1 billion to be distributed over a 10-year period. In retrospect, DeVoto's seemingly tongue-in-cheek proposal in 1953 to close the parks had positive long-term results for the faltering federal agency.

NATIONAL PARKS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

More than a half-century since the appearance of DeVoto's public admonition, America's national parks are again threatened not only from outside the service but also from within. Last year marked the centennial commemoration of the Antiquities Act of 1906, the philosophical and legislative seed for the creation of the National Park Service a decade later. Yet, the event passed with hardly any acknowledgement from either the NPS or the American public—perhaps with good reason. Like DeVoto before him, veteran *National Geographic* correspondent and self-proclaimed national parks observer John G. Mitchell has taken up the charge to keep Americans informed about the perilous condition of the national parks system. In a cautionary article published in the magazine's October 2006 issue, Mitchell echoes the sentiment of British diplomat James Bryce, who in 1912 hailed U.S. national parks as "the best idea America ever had." Even in their current state of

deterioration, Mitchell assures us, the parks create an illusion of contentment. "For all the erosion of agency morale, the wear and tear, the backlog of uncompleted maintenance and repair projects, the widespread reductions of interpretive programs," he writes, "national parks can still deliver a memorable experience." Herein lies the crux of the problem. Few visitors, if any, suspect that the system is in serious dysfunction. For example, no one would imagine that in 1980 the NPS reported fielding one park ranger for every 50,000 visitors; today that ratio has widened to one ranger for every 80,000 people. Such a realization would no doubt cause visitors some measure of anxiety about personal safety, let alone the guarantee of a "memorable visitor experience."2

What factors have influenced such traumatic change in the NPS since its founding nearly a century ago? Mitchell's insightful essay informs us that scarcely 35 parks and monuments comprised the fledgling agency when President Woodrow Wilson endorsed its authorization. The system's total land accumulation comprised a mere six million acres in 49 states. More telling, park visitations numbered around 350,000 annually. Fueled by the postwar infusion of annual visitation that consistently registered all-time highs until September 11, 2001, the number of parks in the system nearly quadrupled. Today, approximately 390 national parks, national monuments, national battlefields, national memorials, national seashores, national historic trails, and national recreational areas encompass 84 million acres distributed within the United States, the Caribbean, and the South Pacific. Prior to 2000, these parks accommodated nearly 300 million national and international tourists annually.

Still, annual funding, staffing, and above all, maintenance and repair costs have not kept pace with mass visitation. One disturbing fact recently shared with the employees of the Intermountain Region of the NPS suggests that funding levels for the agency have not changed since its inception in 1916. At that time, the NPS budget represented 1 percent of the total federal budget. In 2007—more than 90 years later—the agency's apportionment still represents a paltry 1 percent. Although we are talking about substantially more money on a year-to-year basis, the ratio itself has not changed.³

Additionally, forces outside the NPS have contributed to the agency's acute vulnerability during the first decade of the new millennium. Especially threatening are the imperatives of a nation at war. The fiscal 2007 budget appropriation promised to be the most significant base increase since Mission 66. Despite his campaign promise in 2000 to spend \$5 billion to assist the nation's parks, President Bush excised \$100 million of the budget—presumably to support the Iraq War—before the money could be allocated. Less obvious but certainly no less egregious is the relentless assault of the outdoor recreation industry upon the national parks. An economic study underwritten and recently made public by the Outdoor Industry Foundation (OIF) openly challenges all public lands agencies to "recognize the economic importance" of the \$730 billion-a-year enterprise when making management policy decisions about the use of open space. In effect, what the study is advocating is making public lands even more accessible to recreational use. Implicit in the report, although not openly stated, is the notion that these considerations should take precedence over historical

preservation and environmental protection concerns. The unmistakable message of the report, according to Mitchell, is that "preservation is trumping recreation," and must cease.⁴

PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

Despite the gloomy scenario presented herein, hope looms on the horizon. The president's appointment of NPS veteran Mary Bomar to replace outgoing director Fran Mainella is a promising change. Bomar, an expatriate of Great Britain, has pledged to encourage "courtesy, communication and professionalism" within the Park Service. Her first official memorandum as director offered a personal insight absent from the communications of previous administrators. She reminisced about seeing the Statue of Liberty for the first time upon arriving in the United States, noting that she had never dreamed that this and other venerable symbols of America would one day be placed in her care. With less than a decade to go before the National Park Service marks its 100th year, Bomar has accepted President Bush's \$3 billion dollar "Centennial Challenge" to strengthen the national parks system for the coming century. Once again, congressional leaders have promised a healthy NPS budget increase in fiscal 2008 in support of that effort.

Still, one seemingly innocuous challenge evades resolution. NPS records indicate that visitations to the parks on the whole have dropped noticeably since 1999. Obviously, the 9/11 aftermath, unprecedented fuel and transportation costs, unseasonably hot summers, and a volatile national economy are contributing factors. Less conspicuous but nonetheless

contributory are the nation's shifting demographics. While international tourists have increased, more Americans complain that the national parks have become irrelevant. A recent *Washington Post* article revealed that "nearly half of the country's children under five are racial and ethnic minorities" with Latinos accounting for most of the national growth since 2004. Asians and African Americans, according to the report, do not lag far behind. Yet, interpretive programs and exhibits within the parks, most of which date to the Mission 66 era, do not reflect current national demographic trends. The predictable outcome is that ethnic and racial minorities are not frequent patrons of the national parks. The fault, in my view, lies with the National Park Service and its unwillingness or inability to be more receptive to change and more imaginative in addressing its educational mission.⁵

CONCLUSION

This essay represents the first in a series focused on the issue of interpretive programs within the NPS. In subsequent issues, experienced agency professionals will present their views on new and creative methods of interpretation designed to attract ethnic and racial minorities to the parks in greater numbers. If successful in meeting this challenge, the national parks system of the future will—by intent rather than default—become substantially more inclusive.

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NOTES

1. All quotations are from Bernard DeVoto, "Let's

Close the National Parks," *Harper's Magazine* (October 1953), in Edward K. Muller, ed., *DeVoto's West: History, Conservation, and the Public Good* (Athens, OH: Swallow Press 2005), 202–;210. This was one of a series of essays DeVoto wrote on national parks from 1949 to 1953.

2. John G. Mitchell's quotes are cited from "Threatened Sanctuaries: The State of U.S. Parks," *National Geographic* (October 2006), 88–;97; For statistics on ranger to visitor ratio, see Arthur R. Gómez, "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?: Tourism and the National Park System in the Twenty-First-Century West," in Richard W. Etulain and Ferenc M. Szasz, eds., *The American West in 2000: Essays in Honor of Gerald D. Nash* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003), 39.

3. Mitchell, "Threatened Sanctuaries," 92, 96; Intermountain Region Deputy Director statement to all employees, Santa Fe, New Mexico, January 17, 2007.

4. Mitchell, "Threatened Sanctuaries," 92, 96; Outdoor Industry Foundation, "The Active Outdoor Recreation Economy: A \$730 Billion Annual Contribution to the U.S. Economy," for a detailed discussion of the report, see Outdoor Industry Association Press Release, Salt Lake City, Utah, August 11, 2006.

5. Memorandum, National Park Service Director to all employees, October 31, 2006, 2; Memorandum, National Park Service Director to all employees, December 7, 2006, 1–;2; D'Vera Cohn and Tara Bahrapour, "Of U.S. Children under 5, Nearly Half Are Minorities: Hispanic Growth Fuels Rise, Census Says," *Washington Post*, May 10, 2006, A01.