

A HOUSE DIVIDED: THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE AND ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERSHIP

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IN 1991, A CONFERENCE ON NATIONAL PARKS held in Vail, Colorado, focused on what it termed “environmental leadership”—asking by what means should the National Park Service establish itself as a leader in sound ecological land management. On the surface, it seems strange to raise such a question about a bureau that for three-quarters of a century had managed special public lands under the mandate to leave them “unimpaired.” Yet the park service had always emphasized a kind of tourism and scenery management. And its response to demands to become more ecologically informed—especially outspoken since the early 1960s—had been, as a Vail conference document noted, “sporadic and inconsistent, characterized by alternating cycles of commitment and decline.” The question then arises: What historical factors limited the National Park Service’s success in this regard?

With the Northern Pacific Railroad Company as its chief lobbyist, the 1872 Yellowstone Park Act made a commitment to nature preservation—but it also, in effect, heralded the emergence of tourism as an important part of the economy of the American West. In the parks, economic benefits derived from public lands would be based on a low-impact utilitarian use—tourism—rather than on the more customary extraction of natural resources. Products of their times, the early national parks were not intended to be inaccessible nature preserves. The public was encouraged to visit the parks and to stay for a while—an obvious factor, but one which had enormous implications for the future of the national parks.

By the early twentieth century, for example, more than 400 miles of roads had been built in Yellowstone, along with hotels, horse corrals, and trails. Yosemite, Sequoia, and other early parks were similarly developed for tourism. Such development came also to include maintenance facilities, electrical plants, employee housing, campgrounds, garbage dumps, and extensive water supply and sewage systems.

The treatment of natural resources also reflected the desire to ensure that the public enjoyed the parks. To protect popular species of wildlife, predators such as mountain lions, wolves, and coyotes were killed. Naturally occurring forest fires were suppressed to protect beautiful green landscapes. And to please anglers, millions of fish—native and non-native species—were planted in lakes and streams, many of which had previously been fishless.

Reflecting the utilitarian nature of national park affairs, the principal proponents of the 1916 National Park Service Act were a former borax mining executive (Stephen T. Mather), a landscape architect (Frederic Law Olmsted, Jr.), a horticulturalist

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(J. Horace McFarland), and a young lawyer (Horace Albright). Like the other founders, Olmsted, who drafted the act's principal statement of purpose—that the national parks be left “unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations”—gave no indication in his correspondence that “unimpaired” required an exacting biological preservation within the parks. Rather, as one whose profession involved the aesthetic enhancement of landscapes for public enjoyment, Olmsted was concerned about keeping national park *scenery* unimpaired—maintaining the beauty, dignity, and nobility of the parks' majestic landscapes.

The 1916 act thus mandated no changes whatsoever for previously established policies dealing with predators, forests, fish, and other natural resources. Instead, the act consolidated a dispersed park management by creating an assertive new bureau within the Department of the Interior—one that was backed by advocates of outdoor recreation, tourism, and landscape preservation, and one that could promote the national park idea with Congress and the public.

Guided by the 1916 act, development to accommodate tourism in the national parks continued with few interruptions. Several periods of construction and development stand out: the Mather years (1916–1929); the New Deal era, when President Franklin Roosevelt's emergency work-relief funds meant flush times for the park service; the billion-dollar Mission 66 development program (1956–1966); and the Bicentennial era.

Through most of the 1950s, it could be argued (and was assumed by National Park Service leadership) that with decades of scenery protection and tourism management in the parks the park service was meeting its original mandate. Mission 66 alone, totaling a billion dollars of appropriated funds over a decade, provided substantial evidence that ensuring accessibility and public enjoyment of the parks was exactly what Congress and the people wanted. Meanwhile, more than half-way through Mission 66, the budget for biological research in the parks amounted to less than \$30,000 per year—a factor of no concern to Congress or the public at large.

Concerns about the national parks were expressed, however, and during the Mission 66 era these concerns underwent important changes. They were first focused on deteriorated postwar conditions of park facilities (this was blamed mostly on Congress). Criticism then shifted toward the park service for the appearance and the extent of its modernistic, intrusive Mission 66 development. Finally, by the early 1960s, critics targeted the park service's refusal to consider the ecological impacts of park development or to use science in park management. Like many of today's critics, they began to define the most crucial park needs in terms of ecological preservation and science.

Significantly, however, the drive to develop the parks for tourism had propelled developmental professions into commanding roles within the park service. Landscape architecture, because it formed the crucial link between park development and the protection of scenery, became the single most influential profession in the park service (a position that, arguably, it maintains today). Early on, the landscape architects had joined with engineers, foresters, and park superintendents and rangers in establishing a loosely allied but enduring park service leadership, whose values and perceptions formed the dominant culture within the park service. These leaders were deeply committed to public enjoyment of the parks, valued park scenery much more

than ecology, and evidenced little interest in acquiring a scientific understanding of the parks. With minimal internal opposition, the leadership imposed its values and principles on a receptive park service rank and file, and established managerial traditions that, in part because of their success with the public, became taken for granted as right and proper for the parks.

THROUGHOUT NATIONAL PARK HISTORY, biological science has been the only important program to have been initiated with private funding. Indeed, during Stephen Mather's directorship the park service established a firm policy of borrowing scientific expertise from such bureaus as the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Plant Industry, and the U.S. Biological Survey. In 1929, however—thirteen years after the park service was created—George Wright, an independently wealthy biologist stationed in Yosemite, used his own funds to launch a survey of wildlife in the national parks and to establish a park service office of wildlife biology. Later funded through the park service's own appropriations, this office grew by the mid-1930s to a maximum of about twenty-seven biologists who conducted research and reviewed park development projects for possible impacts on natural resources.

In the context of prevailing park service values, the wildlife biologists' vision was truly revolutionary, penetrating beyond the parks' scenic facades to comprehend the significance of the complex natural world and challenge the managerial status quo. The biologists, for example, opposed the killing of predators and voiced concern about the ecological impacts of park development. With no true botanists in the park service's resource management programs (the foresters were mainly "timber men"), the wildlife biologists sought to maintain natural conditions in national park forests, adamantly opposing the policy of total fire suppression, arguing that in a national park a blackened forest is just as valuable as a green forest. And they charged that chemical spraying to kill native insects in the forests violated the very purpose of the national parks.

Without George Wright's leadership, the park service may have waited decades to create a science program—there is no evidence to indicate otherwise. Indeed, when Wright's leadership was ended by his untimely death in 1936, the program declined, reduced to about nine biologists by 1939. By comparison, in the late 1930s the park service had an estimated 400 employees classified as landscape architects—part of an overall total of about 2,400 landscape architects, engineers, foresters, and other technicians, and a clear indication of fundamental park service values. Without a vocal public constituency that could overcome prevailing park service indifference, the wildlife biology program languished for more than two decades.

Unlike in the 1930s, increasing public environmental awareness in the 1960s and 1970s brought outside pressure for scientific resource management in the parks. This was manifested especially in two 1963 studies, the "Leopold Report" (principally authored by biologist A. Starker Leopold) and a subsequent report by the National Academy of Sciences. Both argued for creating strong, scientifically based natural resource management programs. In effect, they challenged the park service to reinterpret in scientific and ecological terms its long-standing mandate to leave the parks unimpaired. But a full and committed response would require park

service leaders to share their control of policies, programs, staffing, and funding with science, which had long been marginalized. Moreover, the reports' insistence on scientifically informed decision making (grounded in research) threatened traditional park management with a more costly, difficult, and time-consuming process. The reports thus precipitated a struggle within the park service between the ecologically oriented factions and the far more powerful leadership establishment.

Since the Leopold and National Academy reports, there have been about two dozen similarly critical studies of national park science and resource management, each with comparable recommendations. While science and natural resource management programs have certainly grown well beyond what they were at the time of the Leopold Report, the very fact that so many critical reports have appeared since 1963 suggests that the park service's response has indeed been, as the Vail document stated, "sporadic and inconsistent, characterized by alternating cycles of commitment and decline."

THE PARK SERVICE'S ORIGINAL LEGISLATIVE MANDATE had fostered the emphasis on use and enjoyment of the parks—yet it certainly did not exclude close scientific management of the parks when that became a recognized option. Still, the park service has never had, as the Vail conference report acknowledged, "any specific statutory language directing it to engage in science as part of its assigned mission." Thus, without a scientific mandate, the park service has refused to seize the initiative to build sufficient science programs on its own. And a 1993 park service document entitled "Science and the National Parks II: Adapting to Change," stated that, despite "repeated authoritative urging," there is "no assurance that [the park service will build such programs] now, on a long-term sustained basis, without statutory direction."

A 1992 National Academy report stated that such resistance was "rooted" in park service culture, but it did not identify cultural traits. The Vail conference report, however, stated that the culture was exemplified by employees who are "creative and embrace responsibility, [do] not avoid accountability and [do not] play it safe" and who are imaginative, committed, and have initiative—altogether a definition so conventional that it provided no clues as to the dominant values and perceptions of the organization.

In truth, the dominant culture of the park service has in large degree evolved in response to the demands of tourism. Since the nineteenth century, park managers have had to deal not only with the planning, construction, and maintenance of park facilities and roads and trails, but also with such increasingly difficult concerns as concession operations, visitor services, law enforcement (including, in more recent times, drug and crowd control), and the political pressure from tourism and other interests outside the parks.

Out of this evolving set of circumstances, certain shared basic assumptions began to emerge before the park service was created; they gained strength under Mather and his successors, and endured—some of them into the present. These dominant assumptions have included: With public enjoyment of the parks and the protection of scenery being the overriding concerns, management even of vast natural parks required little scientific information and therefore few, if any, highly trained

biologists—the unscientifically trained eye could judge park conditions adequately. Moreover, park managers should have independence of action, and scientific findings could restrict managerial discretion. Each park was a superintendent's realm, to be subjected to minimal interference. Similarly, the park service was the right-thinking authority on national parks—it could manage the parks properly with little or no involvement from outside groups. Thus, environmental activism was often unwelcome; and legislation such as the Wilderness Act or the National Environmental Policy Act should not interfere unduly with traditional management and operations of the park service.

Overall, the park service developed a highly pragmatic management style that emphasized expediency, resisted information-gathering through long-term research, and disliked interference from groups inside or outside the park service. And when ecological concerns inspired a different perception of the national parks, many individuals who had risen to power embracing the dominant cultural assumptions of the park service adhered to tradition and resisted changing the perceptions and policies they had long taken for granted and upon which their careers and their influence and authority within the organization had been built.

ON THE OTHER HAND, although it admits to a deficiency in scientific management, the park service—as host to millions of tourists who come to the parks to enjoy nature and majestic scenery—has earnestly sought to inspire a greater public appreciation and understanding of the complexities of natural history. In so doing, the park service has encouraged the development of an environmental ethic nationwide, fostering greater knowledge and concern about ecological issues—a truly major contribution to our national life. This influence has been evolving especially since campfire talks, nature walks, and museum displays spread throughout the park system in the 1920s and 1930s. The effort expanded over the years to include a huge and varied array of museum and visitor center exhibits, interpretive talks, guided hikes, and trails exhibits, augmented by brochures, films, book sales, and other means of enlightening the public. Begun in the 1960s, Director George Hartzog's environmental education programs reached out to thousands of schoolchildren, many of them underprivileged and without access to parks outside of urban areas. Also, through its involvement with state and local parks and the more recent partnership programs, the park service has advanced nature appreciation and understanding. Thus, despite limitations in scientifically based ecological management, the national parks, the National Park Service, and the uniformed ranger have become symbols of a conservation and environmental ethic.

Surely, given the protection they receive, the national parks will always be beautiful places to visit. Park service leaders such as Mather, Horace Albright, and Conrad Wirth successfully championed development of the parks for public enjoyment of park scenery. Moreover, they were builders of the system. They worked with conservation groups, politicians, and private citizens to help create a large and impressive array of national parks—a legacy of inestimable value. Without their determined efforts, many of the very areas which are the focus of contentious debates over management strategies may not even exist today in a protected condition.

Yet, although highly effective leaders, such directors showed little concern for ecological matters. In a classic example of disregard for science, Director Wirth wrote to Horace Albright in November 1956, expressing the need to “slant a practical eye” toward the issue of elk grazing in Yellowstone. In a telling comment, Wirth added that: “Sometimes I find, Horace, and I am sure you will agree with this, that you can get too scientific on these things and cause a lot of harm.” Clearly reflecting the views of park service leadership, these remarks came at a time when there was almost no park service research underway in Yellowstone. The director’s remarks fell on receptive ears, given Albright’s record of opposition to the biologists on numerous wildlife management issues. Albright displayed attitudes similar to Wirth’s when he later told a gathering of the National Parks Advisory Board that in the parks “there should not be too much emphasis laid on biology.” After all, he added, the people were “the ones who are going to enjoy the parks.” The former director asserted that “ninety-nine percent” of the people who visit the parks are “not interested in biological research.”

But the wildlife biologists had long held broader, more comprehensive views of the purpose of the national parks. They had written in their 1933 landmark report, *Fauna of the National Parks of the United States* (known as Fauna No. 1), that America’s heritage is greater than just scenery, that it is “nature itself, with all its complexity and its abundance of life, which, when combined with great scenic beauty as it is in the national parks, becomes of unlimited value.” “This,” they concluded, “is what we would attain in the national parks.” It should be noted also that the biologists’ recommendation for perpetuating and even restoring natural conditions was, in 1934, accepted by the park service as official, systemwide policy—a policy that was unprecedented in the history of national parks and, likely, in the history of American public land management.

At the same time, the wildlife biologists also recognized the ecological changes that had occurred in the national parks and the impossibility of regaining truly primeval conditions. But they believed, as George Wright stated in 1934, that there were “reasonable aspects to [such a goal] and reasonable objectives that [the park service] can strive for.” And they knew that ecological preservation—far more complex than scenery management—requires in-depth scientific knowledge.

But for decades the park service’s dominant cultural traditions and assumptions have formed the chief impediment to a full acceptance of science. Nevertheless, the park service has persistently claimed that preservation is its primary goal. If this assertion were valid—and if it had long been reflected in policies and organizational structure, and in such matters as staffing, funding, and programming priorities to establish an overall record of excellence in scientific natural resource management—there would have been no need for the 1991 Vail conference to ponder how the National Park Service could attain “environmental leadership.” By example of its own resource management, the park service would already have achieved such status had it faithfully adhered to the recommendations of George Wright and his fellow wildlife biologists made official policy more than six decades ago.

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