

Enhancing Natural Resource Management

— Recommendations —

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EDITOR'S NOTE: *Richard West Sellars, a historian with the Intermountain Support Office in Santa Fe, recently completed a history of natural resource management in the national parks, published in October 1997 by Yale University Press as "Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History." Prior to this project he was chief of the Southwest Cultural Resources Center in the former Southwest Regional Office.*

After extensive researching and writing covering more than a century of national park history, I felt it was appropriate to indicate to readers my thoughts on what would constitute meaningful improvements to natural resource management throughout the national park system. In a very brief way, the book's final paragraph addresses this concern.

When asked in November to make a presentation to the National Park System Advisory Board on improvement of natural resource management, I elaborated on the recommendations made in the book's concluding paragraph. In December, at the request of Director Stanton, I made a presentation to

the National Leadership Council that repeated the recommendations made to the Advisory Board. Those recommendations are discussed below.

BACKGROUND

In an age of ecological science, the extent to which the National Park Service manages parks in a scientifically informed way may be seen as a true measure of its commitment to ecological principles. It may also be a measure of its commitment to the ethical purposes that have always been implicit in the national park concept, but are more fully recognized today: that within these specially designated areas, all native species will be protected and preserved in their natural surroundings.

With careful forethought, ecological management in national parks can be compatible with visitor use and with the appropriate and necessary development to accommodate use. Certainly, facilitating use of the parks is a major managerial concern that must never be ignored. However, over time, the dominant attitudes and assumptions of the Park Service (associated with its continual focus

on visitor use and enjoyment) have impeded its full acceptance of ecological management principles.

Although the National Park Service has long declared that resource preservation is its primary mission, this has never been reflected in the organizational alignments within parks and central offices, or in budget, staffing, priority setting, and management operations — factors that themselves reflect true priorities. In order to bring the management of parks in line with the Service's declared primary mission, park and central office organizational alignments, operations, priority setting, and allocation of dollars and staff resources must reflect resource preservation as the highest of many worthy, competing priorities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations are based on eight years of in-depth research and analysis of natural resource management in the national parks since the establishment of Yellowstone National Park in 1872.

1. General

Rather than calling for yet another taskforce and report on scientific resource management, the National Park Service should proceed with the adjustments necessary to ensure that its primary mission of resource preservation is indeed its primary focus in national park management. From whatever source the Park Service acquires its scientific information (from the Biological Resources Division of the U.S. Geological Survey, other government researchers, Park Service staff, or universities), it should ensure that national park management is based on scientific knowledge and ecological awareness. This involves — but is not limited to — the procurement, oversight, interpretation, and application of research, inventorying, and monitoring for purposes of ecological preservation and restoration by Service professionals trained in the natural sciences and skilled in management. Such knowledge should be used to inform and guide all park activities that affect natural resources.

Natural resource management should be fully integrated into all levels of management, building on existing initiatives from inside and outside of the Park Service, including *The Vail Agenda*; *Science in the*



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National Parks; Science in the National Parks II: Adapting to Change; Resources Careers; the Natural Resource Professionalization Initiative; Natural Resource Management Assessment Program (NR-MAP); Government Performance and Results Act; the National Park Service's Strategic Plan; and recent reports by the Government Accounting Office entitled "Difficult Choices Need to be Made About the Future of the Parks" and "Park Service Needs Better Information to Preserve and Protect Resources."

2. Establish high-level, line-authority positions

All parks and central offices (including Washington) having substantial natural resource responsibilities or substantial potential to impact natural resources should have an upper-level management position (superintendent or other) filled by an individual professionally trained in natural resource science and management, and holding supervisory line authority over all park or central office operations, priority setting, and allocation of staffing and funding.

As the office having the most pervasive impact on natural resources throughout the National Park System, the Denver Service Center should come under such an arrangement. Also, below upper-level management, natural resource management professionals should have signature authority over all individual Service Center projects and operations that have the potential to substantially affect natural resources.

3. Establish direct access to leadership

As chief implementers of natural resource preservation and restoration programs, natural resource management units within parks and central offices should have immediate access to top leadership by reporting directly to the office of the superintendent, rather than to heads of other operational units.

4. Establish career paths to top management positions

In accord with the Resources Careers Initiative, natural resource managers should have well-defined career paths with clear potential for upper-level management positions, including superintendencies and heads of central offices. Those in natural resource

management who have aptitude for and interest in such leadership positions should be strongly encouraged by upper level management to train for and seek these positions.

5. Increase number of natural resource management positions

The number of natural resource managers in the Park Service should be substantially increased — in line with the NR-MAP and professionalization initiatives, and with the Director's "Stewardship Today for Parks Tomorrow" memorandum of September 6, 1994, which calls for doubling the number of natural resource management positions that existed in the mid-1990s. As spokespersons for natural resource preservation in the parks, newly hired natural resource managers should have a level of skills equivalent to a master's degree in the natural sciences. They should already be capable of performing at a fully professional level, and be knowledgeable and articulate about natural resource concerns.

6. Establish comprehensive training programs

All natural resource managers and those individuals in charge of parks and offices with major natural resource concerns hold immediate trusteeship for resources of national or world significance, and should therefore be required to take in-depth natural resource training that reflects and promotes awareness of such significance. Such training programs should be at least equivalent in length and scope to the training that has long been required for law-enforcement staff within the Park Service. Training should begin with extended courses, perhaps up to 12 weeks long, followed by annual one-week refresher courses. Brief courses covering special natural resource concerns, such as biodiversity, large mammals, ecosystem management, and aquatic ecosystems, should be established to keep managers current. Training should also include extended courses in executive leadership, stressing such matters as policy formulation and direction, resource preservation politics (such as building political and strategic alliances, and maintaining effective media relations), and supervision and management. Such training courses could be conducted by the Service, aided by academic and governmental

partnerships as appropriate.

This in-depth natural resource training should be augmented by back-to-school programs for natural resource managers, superintendents, and central office managers. Individuals in such positions should be encouraged—even expected—to take graduate seminars and other academic courses to further enhance their competency in addressing natural resource issues.

7. Ensure support for funding initiatives

As may be identified by the Associate Director, Natural Resources, Stewardship and Science, high-priority funding initiatives that strengthen park natural resource management should be vigorously pursued.

8. Adjust planning priorities

With resource preservation as the primary mission of the National Park Service, resource preservation — rather than park development — should guide park planning. The primary planning documents should be resource based, with preservation issues paramount, followed by visitor service and development needs.

9. Set timely implementation schedule

All bureaucratic recommendations have a limited life span. Changes in Park Service leadership, changes in higher-level governmental leadership, or procrastination can weaken or eliminate any resolve the Service might have to improve natural resource management. Thus, if the National Park Service decides upon a course of action based upon these recommendations, it should proceed to implementation in the shortest time possible. □



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