

Agency culture: A dilemma for natural resource preservation

by Richard West Sellars

Editor's Note: In October 1997, Yale University Press published Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History, culminating extensive research and writing by NPS Historian Richard Sellars. The book's long-term influence on cultural change within the National Park Service is not yet known; however, it has already succeeded in stimulating dialogue about agency traditions rooted in tourism and the need to increase the role of science in park management today. The following is a summary of some of the book's main themes, concluding with the author's thoughts on how natural resource management could be improved.

One of the most challenging dilemmas that the National Park Service faces is the difficulty of living up to its rhetoric and its self-image that it is an agency whose primary mission is resource preservation. Although preservation constitutes essentially half of the Park Service's original mandate, natural resource preservation has consistently been underemphasized and conducted with insufficient scientific knowledge. By contrast, from the beginning visitor enjoyment has clearly been the primary management concern. This imbalance has deep historical roots and is closely tied to the dominant perceptions and values long held by national park leadership.

The dominant managerial assumptions of the Park Service are derived in large degree from the demands of recreational tourism and the desire for the public to enjoy the parks. Since the nineteenth century, park managers have had to deal not only with planning, development, construction, and maintenance of park facilities,

but also with increasingly demanding political, legal, and economic matters such as concession operations, law enforcement, visitor protection, and the demands of tourism interests. Especially since the 1960s, greater involvement in urban parks, greater drug and crime problems, more development on lands adjacent to parks, and the escalating political strength of concessioners and other commercial interests have added to the pressures on managers.

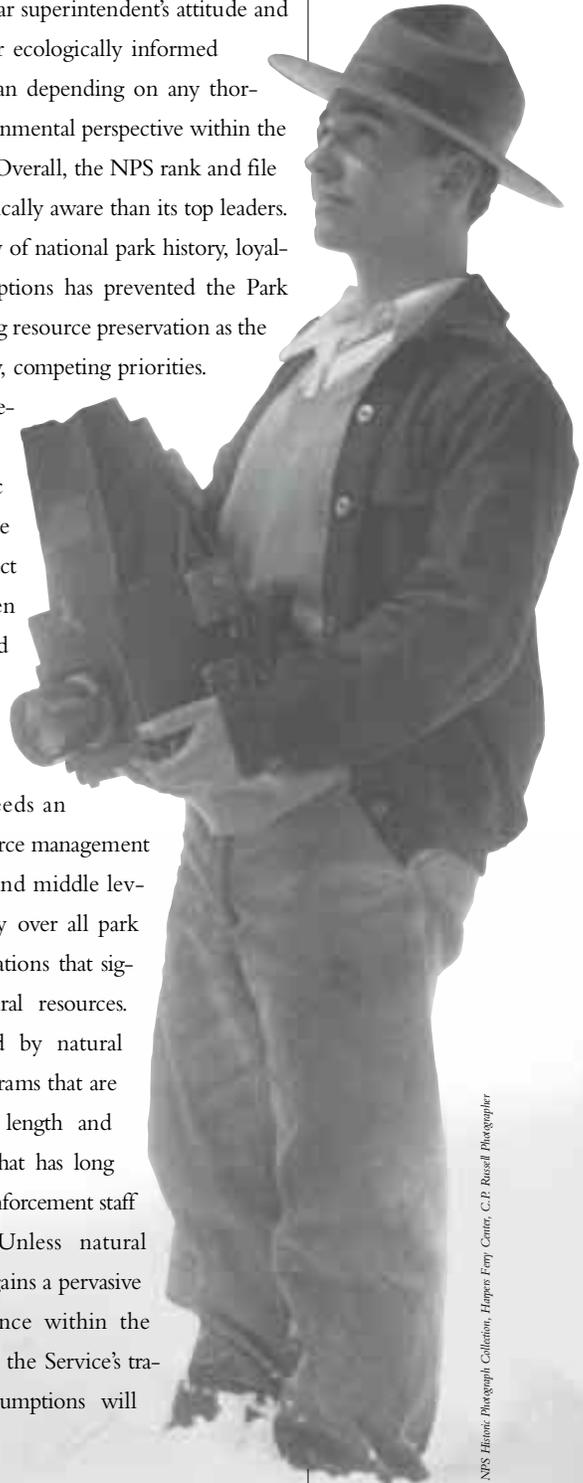
Out of these evolving circumstances, certain shared basic assumptions began to emerge even before the Park Service was created. A close consideration of eight decades of NPS history reveals that the following assumptions have long reflected the perceptions and attitudes of the NPS leadership culture: With the public's enjoyment of the parks being the overriding concern, park management could be conducted with little or no scientific information. Appearance of the parks mattered most. Even management of vast natural areas did not require biological science—the untrained eye could judge park conditions adequately. Moreover, scientific findings could restrict managerial discretion; and park managers needed independence of action. Each park was a superintendent's realm, to be subjected to minimal interference. Similarly, the Park Service was the right-thinking authority on park management—it could run the parks properly with little or no involvement from outside groups. In this regard, 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. Overall, then, the dominant NPS culture developed a strongly utilitarian and pragmatic managerial bent. It adopted a management style that emphasized expediency and quick solutions, resisted information gathering through long-term research, and disliked interference from groups inside or outside of the agency.

Primarily concerned with varied aspects of recreational tourism, NPS leadership has been very reluctant to abandon traditional assumptions, even when faced with repeated criticism. Much of the criticism has come from within, especially from biologists from the

1930s on, very often with support from naturalists and interpreters in the parks. Some superintendents have also been openly critical: the uniformed, “green blood” groups within the NPS family have not always been of one accord. Still, advances in furthering the application of science in management have largely depended on the chance of a particular superintendent's attitude and willingness to strive for ecologically informed management, rather than depending on any thoroughly pervasive environmental perspective within the National Park Service. Overall, the NPS rank and file have been more ecologically aware than its top leaders. But in the ebb and flow of national park history, loyalty to traditional assumptions has prevented the Park Service from establishing resource preservation as the highest of many worthy, competing priorities.

Scientific natural resource management does not at all preclude public use and enjoyment of the national parks. To correct the imbalance between tourism management and informed resource management that has existed for 80 years, the Park Service needs an infusion of natural resource management expertise at the upper and middle levels, with line authority over all park and central office operations that significantly impact natural resources. This should be backed by natural resource training programs that are at least equivalent in length and scope to the training that has long been required for law enforcement staff within the agency. Unless natural resource management gains a pervasive and authoritative presence within the National Park Service, the Service's traditional managerial assumptions will prevail, as in the past.

NPS biologist George Wright (shown in Yosemite in 1929 or 1930) briefly succeeded in bringing a biologist's viewpoint to park management. Using personal funds, Wright initiated the first professional wildlife research in the National Park Service. His accidental death in 1936 weakened NPS biology programs during an era of park development and construction.



NPS Historic Photograph Collection, Hapner Ferry Center, C.P. Russell Photographer