

Cultural Resource Management at Shenandoah

It Didn't Come Naturally

For most of its history, Shenandoah National Park has been considered a “natural” park. Management’s objective was to restore, as quickly as possible, the forest and other natural resources of this 196,000-acre preserve. If the NPS had any cultural resource management philosophy here at all, it was to deny the presence, or at least the significance, of park cultural resources. Signs of prior human use were seen as interfering with nature’s reclamation of these “damaged” lands.

Harsh as the above paragraph may sound, my purpose is not to criticize my predecessors. Rather, I would like to introduce this issue of *CRM* with a brief recap of how this “natural” area has come to be recognized as a significant “cultural” area and suggest that, despite the circuitous path to the present, the distinctions between natural and cultural resources are artificial and counter-productive to good stewardship.

The 1916 Organic Act, which established the National Park Service with its oft-quoted directive to “conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein ... unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations,”¹ embodied a vision of static nature.² The scenic wonders of America were to be preserved, just as they were found by the first European explorers. The early parks were mostly large, spectacular, and *western* scenery. Each site was clearly “nationally significant.”

Shenandoah’s origins arose in the desire for an eastern park, to provide a recreational outlet for the people of the nation’s capital; but perhaps more importantly, to build a constituency for the *national park system* from those politically sophisticated residents of the east who might never venture west to visit another park.

The 1926 Shenandoah establishing legislation³ and the 1937 act mandating federal police control within the new park suggested a management strategy that focused on protection of natural resources. The 1937 Act described the park’s purpose as:

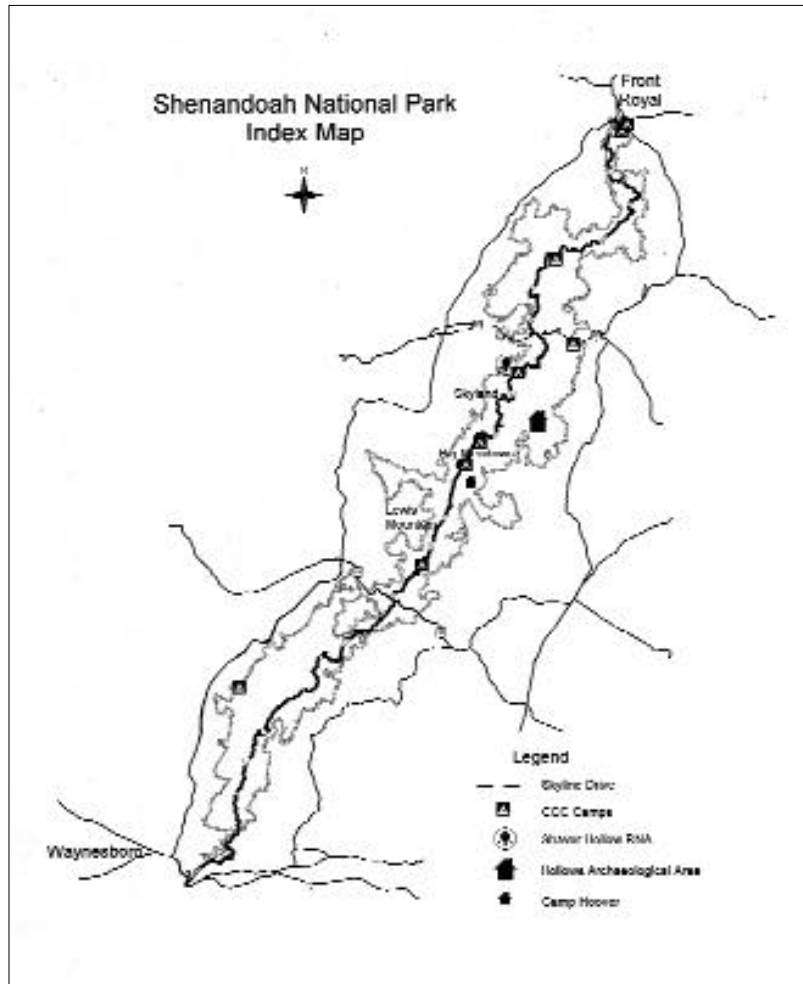
... the protection of the property therein, especially for the protection from injury or

spoilation of all timber, mineral deposits, natural curiosities, or wonderful objects within said park, and for the protection of the animals and birds in the park from capture or destruction, and to prevent their being frightened or driven from the said park ...⁴

While the lands that made up the park were not as ravished and eroded as has been commonly told, they were heavily used lands—much either cut over or in early stages of old field succession following abandonment by families forced to leave when the economically-significant chestnut trees died⁵ and/or when government took possession. It would have been hard to argue, then or now, that the park was “nationally significant” at the time—except, perhaps, for its potential.

Shenandoah has often been called a “created” park. The forests have grown back vigorously, though the species mix has changed. Wildlife has come back in abundance: deer and bear are at unprecedented numbers; and there are also turkeys, bobcats, endangered peregrine falcons, and probably cougars. The park has one of the longest periods of protection of any land in eastern North America; and in those 60-plus years, we have studied its natural values, catalogued its species, and discovered its vulnerabilities. In 1976, 40% of its lands were designated wilderness by the U.S. Congress.⁶ The park has been protected, studied, and visited by so many⁷ seeking “recreation and re-creation” (President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s words from the 1936 park dedication ceremony at Big Meadows) that today it clearly merits the “nationally significant” label despite its humble origins.

Ironically, the reverence for Shenandoah as an icon for so many is, in itself, a *cultural* phenomenon. Wilderness and national parks are, in University of Washington environmental historian Richard White’s words,⁸ “social constructs” fabricated by people seeking organization and names for the world around them. These areas increase in value to society in proportion to how well they are known and loved, perhaps more than for the uniqueness or significance of the resources inside their boundaries.



The traditional view of National Park Service management, rooted in the Organic Act, was to protect the scenery. If we put out the fires and put a fence around the park, nature will take care of itself. Cultural resources, except in places like Mesa Verde and other prehistoric sites, were not generally recognized—and certainly not managed—in most parks prior to the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act in 1966.⁹

Shenandoah, interestingly, lacks a fence. We have one of the most irregular boundaries of any national park in the system. It's taken too long, but we've finally learned that our artificial park boundaries are highly permeable: by people, by wildlife, by fire, by weather, and by air masses bringing pollution that today may be the most serious threat to ecosystem preservation. A few generations after the people left these hardscrabble lands, others now want to snuggle against our boundaries.

Our view has evolved, as well. Originally, park managers focused on the scenery and objects; then it was key wildlife species, watersheds, and—in recent years—ecosystems. Today, the ecological focus is on a landscape scale, i.e., the broad patterns of species, communities, and ecological interactions on a large scale. Ironically, this connects us

back in many ways to scenery. Perhaps we have come full circle, with more understanding of how the pieces fit together this time around.

Mark Sagoff, Director of the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy at the University of Maryland, asks whether the NPS is protecting *resources* or *places*.¹⁰ Places may have ecological, scientific, historic, or economic components (the *objects* of the Organic Act?); but their significance is in what they represent intellectually and emotionally. The value of wild places is largely cultural.

The concept of *landscape* is what joins human and natural history together, and it has become one of the integrating themes of Shenandoah's resource management program. As society gets more complex, everything becomes more homogeneous. Uniqueness is lost. We need *places* more because they (like antiques or works of art) anchor us and give us a sense

of who we are.¹¹ We've seen that of late at Shenandoah, with the tremendous interest staff and the community have shown in our archival collection. It's not the archives themselves that are significant, but what they tell us about ourselves and our connection with the landscape. Notably, the archives (recently upgraded from attic and basement storage to a state-of-the-art facility) are now located in the same building as our natural resources inventory and monitoring offices and labs, further demonstrating our commitment to managing cultural and natural resources in an integrated fashion.

There's an inherent dilemma, however, in the desire to preserve—to prevent change—and the modern recognition that natural change is inevitable.¹² NPS management policies, in fact, instruct us to "... not seek to preserve natural systems ... as though frozen in a given point in time."¹³ That dilemma is often described as a conflict. Advocates for nature, long the dominant voices at Shenandoah, argued that old buildings and foundations should be left to molder and that it's inappropriate to cut any trees along the Skyline Drive to improve the views. Some advocates for historic preservation seem to suggest that every-

thing that is old is significant and that *all* evidence of prior human use must be preserved. Management policies, however, recognize that “achievement of other park purposes may sometimes conflict with and outweigh the value of cultural resource preservation.”¹⁴

That conflict only exists when we fail to see that a true understanding of the significance of Shenandoah National Park requires us *both* to preserve and embrace change. We must appreciate that human use and settlement of *this* place was shaped by, and a result of, the natural characteristics of the landscape—mountainous terrain, poor soils, abundant and clean water, forests for tan bark, good hunting and fishing, etc. Similarly, Shenandoah’s ecosystem is anything but pristine and undisturbed: people have altered and manipulated the landscape for hundreds of years; and the resulting mix of plants, animals, soils, and chemistry is an artifact of human activities.

The challenge is to incorporate the human into our ecosystem view and to recognize the need to make deliberate, and often difficult, choices. There are times and places we should manage principally for natural resources—and times and places where cultural resources should take precedence. Our job is not to balance, but to do both. Not everything historic can be preserved; not everything natural can be protected or restored. Once we understand that, the greatest impediment to success is lack of knowledge. Shenandoah’s long history of scientific inquiry has provided us with an understanding of fundamental ecological processes and components that has allowed us to take controversial, but appropriate and well-documented, stands against human-caused air pollution that is degrading park soils and aquatic systems. But our lack of knowledge of cultural resources is an obstacle; the greatest need is a comprehensive archeological survey to locate and identify the artifacts of those who have lived and used this land before us so we can make intelligent choices, rather than blind ones, especially in the backcountry and designated wilderness areas of the park. We may elect to protect or to allow to molder, but we’ll do it cognizant of what we stand to lose or gain by either course.

In this issue of *CRM*, we attempt to describe the challenge of managing *cultural* resources in the context of what has long been considered a *natural* park. This issue is the product of the fortuitous confluence of three events: first, the park’s hiring in 1994 of Reed Engle as its first cultural resource management specialist. Reed has been singularly responsible for the awakening of latent enthusiasm for cultural resources and has been remarkably successful at translating that into financial support. Second, the unusual agreement the park consum-

mated in 1996 with *CRM* editor Ron Greenberg to station Production Manager Kari Koester at Shenandoah headquarters three days a week, which led to the shared and wonderful idea of doing the special issue. And lastly, the spectacularly successful Shenandoah National Park Symposium of May 1997, where talented practitioners in natural and cultural resources came together with the interested public to discuss the themes echoed in this issue. Many of the articles are outgrowths of talks given at the symposium, and I can only hope they ignite in the readers some of the ardor and sense of shared purpose that were felt by the Symposium participants.

Notes

- ¹ Act of August 25, 1916; 39 Stat. 535. (16 U.S.C. § 1).
- ² For a lengthy and interesting discussion on the intent of the Organic Act, see chapter 2 in Richard West Sellars, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).
- ³ Establishing Act of May 22, 1926; 44 Stat. 616.
- ⁴ Act of August 19, 1937; 50 Stat. 700.
- ⁵ The non-native Chestnut blight (*Cryphonecthia parasitica*) swept through this portion of the Blue Ridge Mountains during the period 1920-1930, devastating the forests and the lives of many who depended upon them.
- ⁶ Act of October 20, 1976; PL 94-567; 90 Stat. 2692.
- ⁷ Almost two million people visit Shenandoah each year.
- ⁸ In a plenary address March 17, 1997 at the George Wright Society Biennial Conference: “Making Protection Work,” Albuquerque, NM.
- ⁹ P.L. 89-665 (16 U.S.C. §470). For support of the idea that the NPS did not recognize a mandate for cultural resource protection in “natural” parks, I am grateful to NPS historian Richard West Sellars (personal communication).
- ¹⁰ I have drawn many of these ideas from Sagoff’s May 12, 1995, address at the NPS Mid-Atlantic Region Resource Management conference, held in Annapolis, MD.
- ¹¹ Sagoff, *op. cit.*
- ¹² White, *op. cit.*
- ¹³ Chapter 4:2 in US Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *Management Policies* (Washington, DC: 1988).
- ¹⁴ *Management Policies*, *op. cit.*, chapter 5:5.

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