

Getting to know you; getting to know all about you

By Richard West Sellars

Robin Winks had a solution: Every park should display the National Park Service's brochure, the National Park System Map and Guide, in the most heavily used areas, including in visitor centers and restrooms. But who was Winks, and what was (and still is) the problem?

Winks was a professor of history and the master of Berkeley College at Yale University for decades. He also was the author of many books and articles, a member and one-time chair of the National Park System Advisory Board, a diplomat to England, and one of the most prestigious lifelong fans and advocates the national parks have ever enjoyed.

He began early. As a teenager, he sought—and got—a meeting on national park policy issues with the Service's regional director in Santa Fe. At the time of his death in April 2003, he had visited all of the parks; and in his engaging, unpretentious way, sometimes spoke out on problems of concern to him.

This particular problem that Winks focused on is that the public is largely unaware of the great variety of natural and cultural treasures the NPS manages. And, he said, if the public were aware, then the Service itself would become much better known and understood—and more generously supported by the American public, making the NPS better able to undertake its stewardship mission.

I can testify to a longtime personal ignorance about the NPS, having been 27 years old by the time I learned that the Service even existed. Although not raised near a national park, I had already been coast to coast by car and visited many parks along the way. But I had never asked any uniformed employees what outfit

they worked for, much less was their park run by the same outfit that managed some other park. Finally, one spring day, I did ask.

Similarly, although former NPS chief historian Dwight Pitcaithley was born and raised near Carlsbad, which he visited along with Bandelier and other New Mexico parks, he recalls having no understanding (even while working with the Carlsbad maintenance crew) that these parks were part of a larger system.

I don't think his and my ignorance of the park system is at all unusual. A number of times during and after my 35-year career with the NPS, when I was asked where I worked, people would respond, "Oh, I just love the national forests." Clearly they were confused about the Park Service. Probably this happens more frequently to employees stationed in central offices, rather than in parks.

In fact, many individual parks, such as Gettysburg, Yellowstone, Statue of Liberty and Grand Canyon, have far greater name recognition than does the NPS itself. Moreover, the celebration of the National Park Service centennial in 2016 is coming at a time when the popularity of federal bureaucracies is at an all-time low.

Displaying the NPS map and guide in the parks, and handing them out with the park brochure would surely not break the bank. If Robin Winks was right, it could greatly increase public appreciation for what the NPS does. That would be a good thing as the centennial approaches—and long after. This is an elite organization with a high-minded mission. What is there to lose? Why not go for it? □

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