

Reassessing the National Park Service and the National Park System

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We are all agreed that park lands are more than physical resources; they are indeed the delicate strands of nature and culture that bind together the generations of men. They are moreover the bench marks by which we may chart a new course of human behavior.

— George B. Hartzog, Jr.,

Centennial Celebration of Yellowstone and the Second World Conference on National Parks

IN RECENT DECADES, THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE (NPS) AND ITS PARTNERS conducted a series of studies, reports, and conferences to assess the current state and future of the national park system. Each study to some extent reflected its political, social, cultural, and economic environment. A critical review of these studies can tell us much about the significant challenges the National Park Service and the parks have faced—and continue to face. Though varied in scope and form, the reports all struggled with questions about the importance of the national parks and what the drafters and participants believed were the enduring core values that the parks represented. Their major findings and recommendations were remarkably similar. Although the reports yielded some positive results, none resulted in fundamental, enduring change. As the NPS Centennial approaches and discussion focuses on the future of the NPS and the park system, there is much that can be learned from a look back at the strengths and weaknesses of these earlier studies and assessments.

State of the Parks—1980

There had been several landmark studies of park natural resources in the 1960s,¹ but the more contemporary reassessment of the NPS and the park system began in 1980 when Congress directed the NPS to con-

duct a major review of the condition of its parks. NPS officials used results from a questionnaire that had been sent to park superintendents. The final product, *State of the Parks—1980: A Report to Congress*, reflected the growing emphasis on an ecolog-

ical and scientific approach to park management that had occurred in the 1960s and 1970s. It highlighted the damage caused by both external and internal threats, such as that caused by management failures and visitor use. NPS efforts to document the damage and manage the resources, it concluded, were inadequate. Alarmed by the national press attention that the report received, senior NPS and Interior department officials began to have reservations and attempted to minimize its findings. The study made specific proposals for improving natural resource management but contained no firm commitment that the NPS would act on these proposals. In January 1981 the NPS submitted its formal response to Congress—a second *State of the Parks* report—in which the Park Service agreed to identify the most critical threats and give them priority for funding in the coming fiscal years. It also agreed to complete a resource management plan for each park and implement a greatly expanded training program, which would promote a more professional cadre of natural resource managers.

The same month that the Park Service submitted this mitigation report to Congress, President Ronald Reagan took office calling for government austerity and conservative retrenchment. His secretary of the interior, James G. Watt, shifted emphasis from wildlife and wilderness protection and preservation to recreational development. During the Reagan administration, leadership in shaping the national park system shifted from the executive branch to Congress. With little support from the administration, by 1982 Park Service leaders lost some of their resolve and abandoned the reporting procedures recommended in the first *State of the Parks* report. *State of the*

Parks did prompt the NPS to develop training courses in the 1980s to educate employees in ecological management principles and environmental laws, although this effort declined by the end of the decade. It also encouraged increases in funding and staffing for scientific research and natural resource management.

National Parks for a New Generation

Meanwhile, The Conservation Foundation undertook a comprehensive, three-year study focused primarily on land use issues. A multi-disciplinary team that included a land use and public land planner, an urban specialist, a social scientist, and attorneys visited more than sixty parks and interviewed hundreds of individuals. NPS staff assisted in the study, sharing information and insights. The final report, titled *National Parks for a New Generation: Visions, Realities, Prospects*, published in 1985, presented a critical portrait of the current state of the parks and made specific recommendations for the future. The Conservation Foundation acknowledged that the park system had grown in size and complexity, and the needs of the parks had changed. It outlined three major concerns that demanded attention if the national parks were to retain their “distinctive place in American life”: improved stewardship of park resources, a new assessment of the role of the private sector in the parks, and innovative strategies for creating the park system of the future.²

As with the *State of the Parks* report, *National Parks for a New Generation* was very much a product of the contemporary political, social, and economic climate. The report warned that pressures on parks were mounting, and the cumulative impact of

heavy visitor use, deferred maintenance, and outside threats would “seriously damage parks unless checked.” The 1980s, it explained, were “not a time of great expectations” for much-needed management innovations.³ Officials had placed more emphasis on reducing federal expenditures than on promoting park stewardship. The wide-ranging report recommended broad initiatives to preserve park resources and respond to rising public expectations: a ten-year, \$50 million comprehensive program called Preservation ’95 to protect park resources; special attention to historic and cultural resources; and a campaign to combat external pressures in the parks.

National Parks for a New Generation envisioned new and expanded roles for the private sector but with greater transparency and improved oversight. It advocated a “more expansive” vision of the future in which many unprotected sites worthy of preservation would become part of the national park system or protected in some other way. The report emphasized the need to address the backlog of private lands currently located within park boundaries and highlighted the need to improve and modernize NPS management. *National Parks for a New Generation* conceded that the increased visitation and other pressures on the park system made it increasingly difficult to preserve traditional park values. Yet it was confident that the system could accommodate these demands and still fulfill its preservation mission. It challenged NPS leaders to advance a “broad and dynamic” vision that reflected the size and diversity of the park system, but defined that vision in vague and narrow terms, emphasizing the individual visitor experience. “Preserving park resources more nearly unimpaired may

ultimately depend on more widespread respect, by an increasingly crowded and developed nation, for the visitor experiences that are less and less available outside the national parks,” the report concluded. “In communicating to a wider audience the experiences of awe, solitude, adventure, communion, repose, and reinvigoration to be found in national parks, the conservation community can aid the continuing evolution of the park ideal to help preserve the parks for this and future generations.”⁴

The problems identified in these and other studies persisted. As the decade of the 1980s closed, the NPS struggled with declining morale, the increasing complexity of the park system and programs, serious fiscal constraints, and inadequate personnel and organizational structures. The attempt to improve NPS scientific resource management through training, funding, and staffing as recommended in the various reports had had only partial success. Park Service leaders planned a major meeting of employees and their partners to address some of these growing challenges.

The Vail Agenda

In October 1991 the NPS convened a 75th Anniversary Symposium in Vail, Colorado, to analyze the problems facing the NPS and make recommendations that would help chart the agency’s course for the 21st century as an organization, as steward of the parks, as host to their visitors, and as an environmental leader—in effect to reassert its leadership role in shaping the national park system. Working groups focused on four areas of NPS policy and management: organizational renewal, park use and enjoyment, environmental leadership, and resource stewardship. Six strate-

gic objectives framed the work: resource stewardship and protection, access and enjoyment, education and interpretation, proactive leadership, science and research, and professionalism.

The findings and recommendations from the symposium were published in 1992 as *National Parks for the 21st Century: The Vail Agenda*. *The Vail Agenda* recognized that the Park Service's "portfolio of parks" had expanded to include a broad array of sites—from scenic rivers to historic battlefields. The park system had been constructed to serve many different constituencies and purposes, and these constituencies, whether backpackers, urbanites or others, measured the Park Service's performance based on that aspect of the park system that had direct value to them. Few understood or cared that the NPS mission was much broader. Yet, the report noted, "Appreciation of the multifaceted mandate of the Service is essential if one is to effectively define what it means to be a leader in this agency."⁵

Echoing earlier studies, *The Vail Agenda* found that the NPS budget had failed to keep pace with visitation and pointed to the immediate need for a massive investment in organization and parks. However, NPS historian Bill Brown noted that by failing to include cost figures for implementing its recommendations, the report remained "a wish list of 90 distinct recommendations." Also missing was a clear vision of how the national park system as an institution should fit into an evolving society. Nor was there a strong, direct appeal for public support. Brown encouraged the NPS draw upon its legislative mandate to state more emphatically "what the parks must be in our society, how they must

be nurtured with people and resources to accomplish the social purposes that we as a nation have agreed upon for them." What the Park Service needed, Brown concluded, was nothing less than "a national crusade."⁶

Though the report included important recommendations concerning park use and enjoyment, its analysis was sometimes confusing and its recommendations related to natural resources, such as the call for inventorying and monitoring park resources, echoed those of earlier studies. Other topics included external threats, improving cooperation with universities and managers of neighboring public or private lands, educating the public about environmental issues, increasing and professionalizing NPS staff, increasing funding for science and natural resource management, and securing a legislative mandate for scientific research in the parks. *The Vail Agenda* issued a challenge to the Park Service warning that "the only failure will be inaction," a challenge that continues to resonate.⁷ At the close of the Vail meeting, NPS Director James M. Ridenour voiced a similar concern: "It is clear to me that we will need an ongoing commitment and process to keep our collective feet to the fire to make sure that our efforts do not just generate another report to gather dust on a shelf."⁸ Yet for all the bold objectives, the problems outlined were all ones that the NPS had been reluctant to address. Although the report prompted some agency restructuring, Interior officials and agency leaders showed little enthusiasm for major change.

Preserving Nature in the National Parks

Problems with natural resource management received even greater scrutiny after the Vail symposium. For example, the

National Academy of Sciences came out with a critical report called *Science and the National Parks* in 1992. In 1997 NPS Historian Richard West Sellars published *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History*. This well-documented, carefully crafted history of NPS natural resource management revealed that the NPS had been negligent in the extreme when it came to pursuing a core function of its mission: preserving natural resources unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.⁹

Unlike previous studies, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks* inspired a substantial institutional response. In August 1999 Park Service leaders announced a major initiative, the Natural Resource Challenge, to substantially improve the way the NPS managed the natural resources under its care. The NPS appealed to Congress and within the first few years of the Challenge, had garnered an increase of approximately \$80 million in base funding for natural resource management and research in the parks. Since its inception, the Natural Resource Challenge has substantially increased the role of science in the Park Service's decision-making, revitalized and expanded its natural resource programs, strengthened its partnerships with the scientific community, and shared its knowledge with educational institutions. Although the Natural Resource Challenge has proven successful, there has been no similar initiative or effort on behalf of cultural resources.

Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century

As the Natural Resource Challenge gathered momentum, in late 1999 NPS Director Robert G. Stanton asked the National

Park System Advisory Board to address the complex, "multi-dimensional" mission of the NPS and make recommendations for the future and to prepare a report on the "purposes and prospects" for the NPS in the coming decades. More succinct and focused than previous studies, *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century: A Report of the National Park System Advisory Board*, which came out in 2001, reiterated the Park Service's founding mission: to ensure that these places would never be impaired and would be available to "inspire and inform future generations." It called on leaders "to re-examine the 'enjoyment equals support' equation" and to enhance the public's understanding of and appreciation for the importance of resource protection. The Advisory Board sought to take a "fresh look" at the NPS within the existing social, political, and economic context and to identify ways that the NPS could better serve the American public. It framed a more expansive social contract. Parks, it warned, could no longer be thought of "as islands with little or no connection, cultural or ecological, to their surroundings."¹⁰

The Advisory Board recommended that the NPS increase its commitment to education; encourage the study and public discussion of the American past and link park sites to the broader themes of American history; focus more attention on the conservation of natural systems and biodiversity; adopt and advance the principles of sustainability; actively explore and emphasize the connections between native cultures and the parks; encourage collaboration among park and recreation systems from the local to the federal level to promote a widely accessible outdoor recreation network; and develop a more diverse work-

force. The recommendations reflected the impact of the large number of cultural and historic sites that had come into the park system during the 1990s and the mounting pressure on park boundaries. It also reflected the agency's increased program responsibilities and greater emphasis on education and environmentalism. The study encouraged the NPS to reaffirm the meaning and value of parks, conservation, and recreation and to expand the education and research role of the parks. Expressing its vision for the NPS, the report concluded, "By caring for the parks and conveying the park ethic, we care for ourselves and act on behalf of the future. The larger purpose of this mission is to build a citizenry that is committed to conserving its heritage and its home on earth." The report sparked little response.¹¹

Discovery 2000

As the new century opened, the process of reassessment continued. In the fall of 2000, Director Stanton convened a major servicewide conference in St. Louis, Missouri, called "Discovery 2000." More inclusive than traditional superintendents' meetings, it included partners; representatives from various federal, state, and local agencies; Indian tribes; concessionaires; non-profit organizations; and foreign parks. There was greater representation of women and minorities than in the past. The stated goal of the conference was to develop a vision of the NPS role in the life of the nation in the 21st century; to inspire and invigorate the Park Service, its partners, and the public about this vision; and to develop new leadership to meet future challenges. The dialogue was to focus on the long-term future of the Park Service and the park system. The format was a mix of inspirational

plenary sessions, with such distinguished guest speakers as scientist E.O. Wilson and historian John Hope Franklin, and small group sessions and workshops where participants engaged in spirited discussions on a variety of pressing topics.

The conference came at a time of modest expansion, budget increases, and significant change. Yet, the problems the Park Service faced, the problems the NPS and its partners tackled at the conference, were remarkably similar to those a decade earlier: development around park borders, invasive non-native species, air pollution, and deteriorating roads and facilities. The conference was organized around four familiar themes: cultural resource stewardship, natural resource stewardship, education, and leadership. Participants discussed education, resource protection, the role of science, biodiversity, threats from outside park boundaries, demographic changes, leadership, environmentalism, and sustainability. But, as with many of the earlier efforts, participants left with no clearly articulated plan or agenda to guide real reform. Developing a clear agenda for the 21st century had never been the conference's purpose. As noted earlier, one of the major goals of the conference was to inspire, and by any measure it succeeded in this. However, inspiration alone would not be enough to prompt dramatic change, and the momentum generated at the conference soon waned.¹²

Since 1980 the various studies and conferences discussed above have repeatedly highlighted concerns related to education, leadership and management, threats from outside park boundaries, the role of science, environmentalism, and the need to

improve resource stewardship. The reports laid out a vision for the NPS and the park system that often fell short, just as the Park Service fell short in its response. Some of these reports recommended that the NPS develop a comprehensive program to inventory parks' natural resources and monitor their condition over time. The Park Service repeatedly expressed its intent to do this, but made little progress.

State of the Parks-1980, for example, highlighted the need for improvements in determining what cultural and natural resources existed in each park, their current condition, and the degree to which they were threatened. In its response, the NPS called for resource management plans to identify the condition of each park's resources and the problems managing them. Yet, between 1987 and 1996 the General Accounting Office (now the Government Accountability Office) reported three times that the Park Service had made only limited progress in fulfilling the requirements for information and monitoring identified in 1980.¹³

Another recurring theme from these reports and conferences was lack of adequate funding. However, with few exceptions the reports failed to detail the specific costs associated with their findings and recommendations. Except for *Preserving Nature in the National Parks*, none called for or sparked a major campaign to secure additional funds. None appealed directly to the American public for support. None actively enlisted the grassroots support within the Park Service that is so critical to success. None fully addressed the fundamental question of what the national parks should be and should mean in a rapidly changing society. None were able to effectively and powerfully assert the NPS pur-

pose. Though there were repeated references to "the park ideal" and "park values," most failed to articulate a clear vision and mission for the Park Service and the park system. To be fair, the NPS's mission and responsibilities had become so complex that the authors of these studies might have found producing a single mission statement or statement of park values simply too difficult.

Why did these studies and reports keep revisiting many of the same issues? Why were the problems and concerns identified in the reports not addressed more forcefully? The answer is not entirely clear. Certainly budget constraints and inadequate political support were factors. Some of the responsibility lay with the NPS and its own resistance to change. Park Service leaders seem to have absorbed the reports and made modest changes, but then retreated to their comfortable cultural behavioral patterns. In addition, most of the studies failed to include any requirement for accountability or milestones against which progress could be judged.

Yet, as we have seen, the reports also had some positive impacts. Most importantly, they focused attention on the critical issues affecting the Park Service and the parks. They articulated the pressing problems and challenges in clear and sometimes compelling ways. In some instances, they resulted in organizational change, budget increases, and improved training. Yet none prompted long-term, fundamental change. As the system grew larger and more complex, the challenge of addressing the issues noted above only became greater. *The Vail Agenda* set out to answer the question "Why would a nation want a system of national parks?" as a way of defining the purpose of the National Park Service. The

question remains as challenging, relevant, and urgent today as at any time in the Park Service's history.

The NPS mission has grown well beyond what founders Stephen Mather and Horace Albright envisioned; it has become much more complex than preserving and managing park sites. The Park Service now has responsibility for managing a broad range of programs, and its legislative mandate has grown to include clean air and water, protection of archeological resources, historic preservation, endangered species, wild and scenic rivers, 40 national heritage areas, large cooperative landscape projects, and environmental protection. The national park system has expanded from managing a collection of the great scenic parks to administering hundreds of diverse sites and programs and participating in civic and social pursuits. As the mission has grown in complexity, so too has the enormity of the issues the Park Service

must face. At the same time, change and growth have also created a new context of opportunity, one in which boldness, creativity, and a new set of skills will be required.

As the NPS reflects on its role and purpose in anticipation of its second century, what can we learn from these earlier assessment efforts and their outcomes? It becomes clear that significant fundamental change will require broad vision, bold leadership, outside-the-box thinking, a clear articulation of goals, careful planning, clear standards of accountability, a detailed budget that provides adequate funding, grassroots public support, a strong support base within NPS, and thoughtful, close collaboration with its partners. Any vision for the next century clearly must focus on more than preserving the individual visitor experience; it must be firmly linked to the common good. The NPS and its partners must continue to develop and embrace a broader view of what the national parks are for.

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Endnotes

1. For a detailed discussion of the (A. Starker) Leopold Report and the National Academy of Sciences Reports, both in 1963, see Richard West Sellars, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).
2. *National Parks for a New Generation: Visions, Realities, Prospects* (Washington, D.C.: The Conservation Foundation, 1985), xxxi.
3. *National Parks for a New Generation*, xviii.
4. *National Parks for a New Generation*, 310.
5. National Park Service, *National Parks for the 21st Century: The Vail Agenda* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 1992), 101–103.
6. William E. Brown, "Report and Reflections on Vail," November 22, 1991, NPS Park History Office Files.
7. National Park Service, *Vail Agenda*, 39.
8. "Talking Points for Vail Ridenour Concluding Speech," October 10, 1991, NPS Park History Office Files.

9. Sellars, *Preserving Nature*, 280–290.
10. National Park Service, *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century: The National Park System Advisory Board Report* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2001), 2–3.
11. *Rethinking the National Parks*, 13.
12. Janet A. McDonnell, “The National Park Service Looks Toward the 21st Century: The 1988 General Superintendents Conference and Discovery 2000,” NPS Park History Office Files.
13. U.S. General Accounting Office, Report to the Ranking Minority Member, Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Lands, House Committee on Resources, “National Park Service: Activities within Park Borders Have Caused Damage to Resources,” GAO/RCED-96-202, August 1996, 4.

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