



Professional Report Series – Number 1

America's Crown Jewels: The National Park System

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Abstract

This paper is a review of National Park Service law, policy and history and an examination of chronic problems and disturbing trends affecting the future of our parks. It summarizes the historical research that clearly establishes the protection of resources as the primary mission of the National Park Service under its Organic Act and its amendments. It describes some of the serious threats to the National Park System, describes the challenges we face in coming years, and calls for action to protect the integrity of the system.

The Coalition

The Coalition of National Park Service Retirees (CNPSR) is an organization comprised of nearly 700 former National Park Service employees who, collectively, have served almost 20,000 years within the agency in every capacity and at all grades, including a substantial number of former Directors and Deputy Directors, former regional Directors or Deputy Regional Directors, former Associate or Assistant Directors at the national or regional office level, former Division Chiefs at the national or regional office level, and former Superintendents or Assistant Superintendents.

In our personal lives, we come from the broad spectrum of political affiliations. As park managers, rangers and employees in the National Park Service's many disciplines, however, we devoted our professional lives to a common goal – maintaining and protecting our national parks for the benefit of all Americans, both living and those yet to be born. We remain committed to that goal.

This paper is one of a series on critical issues facing the National Park Service as it enters its second century. A complete listing of all current or planned papers appears at the end of this report.

The Authors

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America's Crown Jewels: The National Park System

Preamble

America's invention of national parks was termed by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Wallace Stegner as "the best idea America ever had." Over 390 units comprise a living record of the areas that successive generations of Americans have considered worthy of protection in perpetuity. More than 60 percent of these areas preserve and protect sites important to us for their historical or cultural associations.

In the National Park System, we can hear the drums and cannons of the Revolutionary War at Minute Man or Colonial. We can sense the excitement of nation building at Independence Hall in Philadelphia. We can trace the bloody trail of General Grant as he clashed with General Lee at places such as the Wilderness, Spotsylvania Courthouse, Petersburg, and Richmond, ending, finally and mercifully, in the stillness at Appomattox. We can trace the contributions of individuals or groups of people at these sites. The contributions of Black Americans are celebrated at places such as Booker T, Washington, Frederick Douglas Home, or Martin Luther King, Jr. Sites with Hispanic associations are Castillo de San Marcos, De Soto, Coronado, El Morro, Chamizal, San Antonio Missions, and Cabrillo. We can think about the contributions of American artists and writers at NPS sites such as Carl Sandburg, Eugene O'Neil, Longfellow, Poe, and St. Gaudens. American women are commemorated at Clara Barton, Susan B. Anthony, and Women's Rights National Historic Site in New York, the scene of one early suffragette meeting. We can contemplate the genius of our American Indian ancestors at Mesa Verde or Chaco, or sense their pain at Little Big Horn or Canyon de Chelly. We commemorate presidents, some great such as Lincoln and Washington and some perhaps not so great like Hoover and Taft. We celebrate scientists such as Edison and inventors like the Wright brothers.

But that's not the end of the system's diversity. In 1936, the Congress ordered the NPS to study the impoundment behind Hoover Dam, Lake Mead, for its recreational potential. It was our first recreation area. In the public works days of the 1930's, several parkway projects were authorized and begun. The NPS now manages such places as the Blue Ridge, Natchez Trace, and George Washington Memorial Parkway in D.C. In 1937, Congress authorized the first national seashore, Cape Hatteras. In 1972, the first urban recreation areas were created and the NPS assumed management responsibilities at Gateway National Recreation Area in New York City and Golden Gate in San Francisco.

We have also protected our wild places. These wild lands have scientific value. Wilderness parks are reservoirs where natural processes still continue. Outside the parks, we have modified these processes, adapting them to the needs of civilization. Only in wild places do the forces of evolution still go on in a more or less unmodified way. Science has not yet found a way to duplicate or replicate these processes. Interrupt them and we interrupt the evolutionary processes responsible for all life, including our own.

Wild parks are like genetic warehouses. Aldo Leopold once observed that the first rule of successful tinkering is to save all the parts. That's what we are doing in places like Denali, saving all the parts. If we want to be really practical about it, we could argue that natural parks might contain the next cure for cancer or for HIV. Who knows? On a more philosophical level, the scientific value of wilderness parks can be framed by considering them as control areas. More than 100 years ago, the American landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmstead, commented on this reason for preserving wild parks. He said that it is not that civilization is moving too rapidly. It's just that if there were not places like national parks, we would have nothing against which to measure the speed and nature of the advance.

Our large natural parks are the last refuges in which modern people do not operate on a fixed schedule. A visit to one of these parks is one of the last things we do at our own pace. We discover things and perceive relationships based on our own rate of understanding. No one attempts to fill up our schedule and sell us a book of tickets that have to be used by 5:00 PM that afternoon. Natural parks, then, are very different. We live in a world of rigorous schedules, urgent meetings, and important meetings. In our wilderness parks, we can take off our watches, turn off the boom boxes and cell phones, and live life attuned to biological rhythms, not to the pace of human enterprise.

Natural parks are outdoor living laboratories for environmental education. One thing is crystal clear: the future of the planet depends upon the creation of an environmental ethic among its inhabitants. What better place to teach the lessons of the importance of biological diversity, stability, continuity and sustainability than in our natural parks?

For many visitors, wild parks have spiritual value. It is not uncommon to hear people talk about a park like Denali National Park in Alaska as a temple, a place where they find the clearest proof of the existence of a Creator. Aboriginal people long thought of such places as sacred. Even today, the Navajos speak of the four sacred mountains that sit on the edges of land they claim as their homeland.

Closely tied to the concept of wilderness with a spiritual value, is the argument that wilderness parks have an aesthetic value. People find beauty in raw, untamed landscapes, places that have not been modified by the works of humankind. This was one of the most compelling arguments for the establishment of the wilderness parks contained within the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA.) When one reads the reports of the Congressional debate about ANILCA, one finds repeated references to Alaska as “the nation’s last great wilderness.” Proponents of ANILCA called it “the last chance to save the best of the wilderness that our country still contained.” They talked about “the sublime beauty of the land.”

Finally, the last reason for preserving natural parks has really nothing to do with humans as a species. It has, instead, something to do with the deep ecologist’s point of view that wild ecosystems themselves have a right to exist. Our country’s Endangered Species Act is an example of this kind of thinking. We are extending the concepts contained within the Bill of Rights to nature. Even if a snail darter or a furbish lousewort has no recognized benefit to humans and even if certain desirable projects have to be put on hold, these species have a right to exist.

Wilderness parks, in this context, then, are examples of our willingness to restrain or limit ourselves. Dr. Roderick Nash, the environmental historian, has called the creation of these parks “a gesture of planetary modesty,” a recognition that we are not the only passengers on the spaceship earth, that we share it with hundreds of millions of other species for whom we must find space on the ship.

Thus, national park areas are established because they are one of the most honest reflections of our culture. We have preserved outstanding examples of our landscape heritage. We have set aside areas where our people can recreate and re-create. We preserved the sites where great events of the nation’s history have occurred—the battlefields, the landing sites, the theaters. We have also kept the houses where great figures were born or raised, the homes and libraries where they did their greatest work, and, finally, as commemorative sites, the places where they were buried. These areas all help us understand who we are as a people and what past events bind us together.

Our national park system is also an excellent representation of what each generation of Americans has considered important. As sites are added to the system, as chaotic and unpredictable as the process may seem, they are reflections of the people’s will, an indication of what the majority considers significant at that moment of the park’s establishment. This system is, therefore, a priceless legacy that we will pass onto future generations; one that they, too, will enrich by adding to it.

National Park Service Law, Policy and History

The Threat to Our Heritage

One of the most eloquent observations on the critical need to defend our national parks came from Newton B. Drury, who served as director from 1940 to 1951:

“(The) great areas of the national park system inspire in the people a pride of country and serve in a direct way to crystallize a love of its institutions,” said Drury. “In short, our national shrines rank among the first of the irreplaceable values that we must defend, for they are America just as are the people who live around them. Someone has said, in speaking of national parks and historic sites, that men will die gladly for their country; and there devolves upon us a singular obligation to preserve a country worth dying for.”

Today, the founders of the national park system must be turning over in their graves at what is happening to their beloved National Park Service and to the incredible diversity of parks created over a century of enlightened and consistent progress, regardless of which political party was in control of the White House or the Congress.

Over the last few years, newspaper headlines across the country have repeatedly highlighted the declining state of the parks. Reporters, members of Congress and citizens ask the same questions, get the same non-responsive answers, and write or read the same stories. These headlines scream out about threats to the ecological integrity of parks, historic resources in disrepair, encroaching obeisance to private interests, declining budgets, low staffing levels, deteriorating facilities, destructive political ideologies, contentious public policy issues, and worsening visitor experiences.

The major lesson to be learned from this repetitive recitation of headlines year after year is that our national parks are in peril. At no time in the past has the fate of the National Park Service and our system of national parks been so threatened. One thing seems certain: Unless we find a way to make the management of America’s natural and cultural heritage areas less subject to political whim and short-term thinking and decisions, our future generations—those for whom we are charged with conserving unimpaired these precious resources—will not have them to enjoy. Moreover, we will have reneged on our debt to previous generations of Americans who have built our heritage system – not because we couldn’t pay that debt but because we consciously and deliberately chose not to honor it.

Proud Traditions – A Unique Legal and Policy Context

The 2001 edition of National Park Service Management Policies, the sourcebook and policy guide for park managers, simply and lucidly states the purpose of the system and the guiding principle for its management:

“Beginning with Yellowstone, the idea of a national park was an American invention of historic consequences. The areas that now comprise the national park system, and those that will be added in years to come, are cumulative expressions of a single national heritage. The National Park Service must manage park resources and values in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.”

The American national park system is unique among the world’s systems of government preserves, most of which used the American model in creating their own national preserves. Because of their uniqueness, reference to legislative or management practices elsewhere in the world is of little help in truly understanding American national parks. Certainly, comparing the American system to others can be instructive and informative but one is left with the reality that those comparisons only underscore the uniqueness of the American national park system.

The national park system of the United States is the world's largest, both in number of units (390 as of April 2007) and in total land area (just over 84 million acres). The system is the most complex, the most carefully described and the most specific system in the world, with at least twenty-one designations of units administered by the National Park Service. Although these units may vary in their designations according to the specific legislation that established each, all are governed by the National Park Service Organic Act.

Professor Robin W. Winks, noted author and historian of the American national park movement, addresses its uniqueness in his studies of the parks.

Writing in *The National Park Service Act of 1916: "A Contradictory Mandate"?* (Denver University Law Review, Vol. 74, 1997, No. 3), Winks opines that "the national park system of the United States is genuinely national, for there are units in all but one state and in all dependencies." Further, Winks notes that the system enjoys "the warm support of the American people, who clearly cherish the system even when they do not fully understand it," and "there can be no doubt that by the 1970's the system was embedded with a vigorous, growing, wide-spread public sentiment for conservation and protection of the environment. This sentiment has not abated, and the public brooks little compromise with what it understands to be the System's mission. The same may be said of national park systems in few if any other countries."

On August 25, 1916, the Congress established the National Park Service and its purposes were codified in Title 16, the United States Code. The key management-related provision of the Organic Act, found at 16 USC 1, states:

"[The National Park Service] shall promote and regulate the use of the Federal areas known as national parks, monuments and reservations hereinafter specified...by such means and measures as conform to the fundamental purpose of the said parks, monuments, and reservations, which purpose is to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."

As the national park units increased in number and diversity, Congress clarified the overall mission by amending the Organic Act in 1970 through P.L. 91-38, with language that tied all the variety of units back to the purposes stated in the Organic Act. Thus, while each unit is to be administered according to its specific enabling legislation, each is also to be managed following the directives of the Organic Act. This amendment known as the General Authorities Act of 1970 (16 USC 1a) states:

"The national park system shall include any area of land and water now or hereafter administered by the Secretary of the Interior through the National Park Service for park, monument, historic, parkway, recreational, or other purposes. That, Congress declares that the national park system, which began with the establishment of Yellowstone National Park in 1872, has since grown to include superlative national, historic, and recreation areas in every major region of the United States, its territories and island possessions; that these areas, though distinct in character, are united through the inter-related purposes and resources into one national park system as cumulative expressions of a single national heritage; that, individually and collectively, these areas derive increased national dignity and recognition of their superb environmental quality through their inclusion jointly with each other in one national park system preserved and managed for the benefit and inspiration of all the people of the United States; and that is the purpose of this Act to include all such areas in the System and to clarify the authorities applicable to the system."

Responding to a widely perceived need to provide better legislative direction strengthening the National Park Service's protective function, Congress passed another amendment to the Organic Act and the General Authorities Act in 1978.

Known as the “Redwood Expansion Amendment,” contained in the Act expanding Redwood National Park, it added two key sentences (16 USC 79a-q):

“Congress further reaffirms, declares, and directs that the promotion and regulation of the various areas of the national park system, as defined in section 1c of this title, shall be consistent with and founded in the purpose established by section 1 of this title [the Organic Act amendment in the General Authorities Act], to the common benefit of all the people of the United States. The authorization of activities shall be construed and the protection, management, and administration of these areas shall be conducted in light of the high public value and integrity of the national park system and shall not be exercised in derogation of the values and purposes for which these various areas have been established, except as may have been or shall be directly and specifically provided by Congress.”

Professor Winks, in the paper noted above, states that “clearly here Congress was holding National Parks to an ‘increased’ or higher standard of protection, this higher standard was based on the maintenance or achieving of superb ‘environmental quality,’ and each park benefited by being included in a system that benefited all: that is, a threat to one was a threat to all. Further, Congress now called for preservation and management that would benefit and inspire ‘all the people,’ thus by implication ruling out management decisions that would redound to the benefit of only ‘some of the people’: interest groups, local parties, one might argue even historically vested bodies that lacked clear national significance... [With the 1978 amendment] Congress appears to have instructed the National Park Service to manage parks in relation to public sentiment and, in effect, sociological jurisprudence. By this standard in 1978 Congress gave a powerful mandate to the Park Service, a mandate which would prohibit actions that could have the effect of ‘derogation’ of park values.”

Examination of these important pieces of legislation provides an imperative context in which the people of the United States have expressed, through their Congressional representatives, a clear intent and set of criteria as to how the parks will be managed. They further elaborate the “uniqueness” that sets our park system aside from our other American public lands. Congress has clearly intended the National Parks to be special – places of the highest public interest as “cumulative expressions of a single national heritage.” While they certainly are part of the important context of American public lands, they are also something more. They were intended to be something more, enjoying higher levels of protection than other public lands.

To assure total clarity, the Senate even went further in elaborating that “specialness” in Senate Report 95-528, stating the reasons for these amendments is “to refocus and insure that the basis for decision-making concerning the national park system continues to be the criteria provided in 16 U.S.C. 1.”

For added clarity, the duty of the Secretary of the Interior was elaborated in this same report, setting a clear standard of decision-making: “The Secretary is to afford the highest standard of protection and care to the natural resources of Redwood National Park and the national park system. No decision shall compromise these resource values except as Congress may have specifically provided.”

Chronic Problems and Disturbing Trends Threaten Park’s Long-term Sustainability

The cumulative impacts of gradual diminution of park assets and sustainability are a trend that has worried the National Park Service and its friends for decades. Director Drury spoke of it during his tenure in the 1940s: “If we are going to succeed in preserving the greatness of the national parks, they must be held inviolate. They represent the last stands of primitive America. If we are going to whittle away at them we should recognize, at the very beginning, that all such whittlings are cumulative and that the end result of such whittlings are cumulative and that the end result will be mediocrity.”

It seems that the “organic” evolution of park protection law over the history of the National Park Service is increasingly forgotten or discarded by those who would seek to tear down this legacy of the thoughtful and democratic expression of the American people. Until now, National Park Service directors, and most Department of the Interior leaders, have honored and perpetuated this legacy, incorporating it effectively into the matrix of internal management policies that govern the actions of the Service in carrying out its mission. But now, there are those who would seek “homogenization” of the mission of the National Park Service with other public lands agencies.

There are those who faithfully interpret law according to their ideological political viewpoint rather than the affirmative manner that the law requires to protect parks. There are those who try to find ways to tear down the “uniqueness” of parks rather than recognize and celebrate it. There are those who refuse to recognize that their affirmative responsibilities to ensure that the enjoyment, by future generations, of national parks can be accomplished only if the superb quality of park resources and values is left unimpaired. Even when faced with law and a strong record of court judgments, there are those who continue to deny that when there is conflict between conserving resources and values and providing for enjoyment of them, conservation is to be predominant.

Our nation’s courts have consistently interpreted the Organic Act, in decisions, restated in *Management Policies (2001)*, that variously describe it as making “resource protection the primary goal,” or “resource protection the overarching concern,” or as establishing a “primary mission of resource conservation,” a “conservation mandate,” an “overriding preservation mandate,” “an overarching goal of resource protection,” or “but a single purpose, namely conservation.” What parts of these legislated mandates and legal interpretations do they not understand?

Frequent attempts to effectively rewrite law through policy and administrative procedure require continuing vigilance and an excellent grounding in the mission of the National Park Service and its legal foundations. Lynn Scarlett, a past Assistant Secretary of the Interior, now Deputy Secretary of the Interior (2007), has consistently insisted that “you have a national park statute that requires that parks are managed to both protect the resources of the park and, **on an equal plane with that, provide recreational opportunities** and visitor enjoyment of the parks. [emphasis added]” This requires a strong response. In fact, there is no “equal plane” between resources protection and providing recreational opportunities. Yet, there seem to be broad and deep efforts to practice revisionist history in trying to explain the imaginary contradictions in the Organic Act. There is no contradiction in the Organic Act; the intent of Congress across the history of related acts is clear. Professor Winks, after exhaustive historical research into the derivation of the Act, firmly declares in his above-noted paper that:

“The National Park Service was enjoined by that act, and the mission placed upon the Service was reinforced by subsequent acts, to conserve the scenic, natural and historic resources, and the wild life found in conjunction with those resources, in the units of the national park system in such a way as to leave them unimpaired; this mission had and has precedence over providing means of access, if those means impair the resources, however much access may add to the enjoyment of future generations.”

The most recent judicial support for Professor Winks’ assertion was articulated by U.S. District Court Judge Emmet G. Sullivan, U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, Civil Action No. 02-2367, plaintiffs v. Gale Norton, et al, on December 16, 2003, where the Interior Department decided to scrap the phase-out plan for snowmobiles in Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks. As reported in the *Winston-Salem Journal*, Sullivan issued an overdue reminder: “The NPS is bound by a conservation mandate, and that mandate trumps all other considerations.”

A major contributing factor to the malaise the parks now find themselves in is the failure by those whose responsibilities include overseeing the national park system to consistently reaffirm the fundamental principles upon which parks are created: that they are part of a national system of parks and that they enjoy a unique mission created by a robust body of law.

Disregarding these fundamental principles has created a principled leadership void in how we care for our heritage resources and provides ample opportunity for chronic mischief whenever the opportunity presents itself. So, progress is rarely made and certainly not enough of it to retire repetitive negative headlines. It is a “herky-jerky” process that tugs and pulls at the National Park Service and the collective interest of our nation’s citizens. It creates much activity but little true progress, and has caused stagnation in the management of our nation’s most cherished heritage resources. Citizens don’t understand...wondering what to believe from the headlines, the politicians, and Service professionals.

More particularly, they wonder why this is happening to a national park system that, as Winks has written, “...has the warm support of the American people, who clearly cherish the system even when they do not understand it.” Increasingly, the National Park Service is unable to assert principled leadership that clearly articulates what the national parks stand for and what the rule of law requires in managing them. More frequent than not, the National Park Service does not take clear unambiguous positions on serious issues, seemingly preferring a position to be imposed upon it by partisan political interests who increasingly really call the shots.

Teddy Roosevelt once said, while standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon, “Keep it for your children and your children’s children, and for all who come after you.” As we look forward to this new century, having inherited this national park system from our forefathers, there are grave warning signs that we will not be able to carry out the admonishment that Roosevelt laid before us.

Speaking in Los Angeles in 2003, David Rockefeller, Jr., who continues to carry on the conservation traditions of his renowned family, asked “what greater gift could we be given than to work on behalf of our great-grandchildren? And to do so recognizing that every human impulse (institutional impulse, too) is working against us.” He went on to say:

“...we are little concerned about a year from now, or ten, or a hundred. That’s just human nature. And our corporate and political systems also create strong biases toward short-term thinking: the next quarter, the next fiscal year, the next election. This is also very natural, when the operative incentive systems (bonuses, shareholder satisfaction, and victory at the polls) primarily reward success in the short-term. But, those of us in the business of protecting public lands, places that ‘restore our soul,’ must do so with the long view in mind.”

Our system of governance is increasingly based upon offering short-term solutions to long-term problems. Long-term thinking and sustained long-term investment based upon a solid foundation of fundamental principles is the key element now missing from effectively taking care of our park system.

Long-term strategic thinking is nearly impossible when the National Park Service is regularly whipsawed every election cycle by competing political ideologies. Management systems based on well-considered priorities are ineffective and failing. Federal budget cycles respond only to short-term considerations, and out-year planning is a constantly-shifting political target for all levels of our governance system. “Park-barrel” decisions in Congress often lead to funding allocations that do not come even close to reflecting the highest priorities of the NPS, often leaving the real needs deferred or unfunded. Strategic plans become political statements for whatever party is in office rather than effective tools for agency governance of our precious heritage resources. Non-partisan politics that consistently characterized the early traditions upon which our national park system was founded are being replaced by divisive political ideologies that inject shameful political partisanship down to the lowest level of staffing and the most routine park management issues, destroying agency discretion and marginalizing the nation’s best career park professionals. Routine park management decisions, once the discretion of seasoned career professionals, are now managed upward to political appointees who make political decisions rather than reasoned or science-based resource decisions that are in the public interest.

Federico Cheever, Assistant Professor of Law at the University of Denver, College of Law, in a thoughtful essay about the evolution of agency discretion in managing our public lands (*The United States Forest Service and National Park Service: Paradoxical Mandates, Powerful Founders, and the Rise and Fall of Agency Discretion*, Denver University Law Review, Vol. 74, 1997, No.3), writes on this subject:

“To take management discretion away from an agency like the Forest Service or the Park Service also has a negative effect on agency culture. The effectiveness of law, any law, on the public lands depends completely on a healthy agency culture. Neither industry representatives nor environmental activists will ever manage the public lands, staff the regional offices, collect the data, inspect the range, control the run-off, welcome and manage the visitors. Legislation which furthers ideological goals at the cost of destroying the agencies which might effectuate them is a victory for no one.”

Going one step further than just “legislation,” the incremental and cumulative effects of the whittling-away done by government, in the act of being governmental, can accomplish the same kind of agency destruction. It is alarmist to contend the parks are being torn apart by inadequate legislative mandates that need revision for further clarification of the mission of the National Park Service. These are nothing more than “code words” to disguise hurtful intentions to align an agency mission with a specific political ideology. Quite to the contrary, the record is abundant that the broader public interest is well served by existing legislation and resulting judicial decisions. What is required is a national reaffirmation of these progressive principles and the return of agency discretion to manage these nationally significant resources.

Well-intentioned efforts by Congress and different Administrations to hold agencies accountable have created a plethora of documents and frenetic agency activity to document performance, success or failures. More frequently than not, these documents are bound together and stacked in corners of offices, where they gather dust because they are too confusing, lengthy and irrelevant—or the next change makes them irrelevant before they can be effectively used. Well-considered national park business plans that link with performance documentation and budget needs are frequently received by political appointees with suspicion and sometimes even outright hostility because they do not mirror a particular administration’s political agenda. They are considered as “sniveling documents” from overly protective park professionals who are not sufficiently “sensitive” to Administration political ideologies. The positive attributes of politics—“how we do business in America”—are being diminished, trivialized and polarized, disenfranchising the public from exercising their affirmative rights as citizens to determine the future of their national park system.

It is time—before it becomes too late—that the park political debate includes the opportunity for the public to once again claim some of the responsibility for determining whose job it is to conserve America’s heritage values rather than continue the negative and cynical political manipulation that characterizes the decisions of today.

National environmentalism, in response to a barrage of threatening ideological conservation values, has become increasingly shrill, partitioning and polarizing communities, governmental officials and citizens who yearn to see the debate focus on quality of life approaches that encourage reasoned public negotiation and consensus. The “lightning rod” issue of viewing parks as essentially “cash cows” for local and regional economies increasingly skews interpretation of law suggesting or insisting that recreation and visitor use are as important as, if not more important than the protection of the resource. The increasingly overwhelming attention that is placed on a park’s revenue-generating capabilities creates a dilemma that often threatens long-term ecological health. It diffuses “large scale” core resource protection duties into smaller incremental reactions subjected to a continual barrage of park development plans and threatening visitor use scenarios that seem to prevail more often than not. In other words the national park system is being killed by a thousand small cuts rather than one massive slash.

Rob Arnberger, then superintendent of Grand Canyon National Park, comments on the pertinent issue in “Valuing the Priceless” in *Forum For Applied Research and Public Policy* (University of Tennessee, Vol. 12, No. 1, Spring 1997):

“The dilemma is this: When our national parks are viewed solely as a source of revenue, shallow financial considerations and short-term solutions begin to shape park policies. Moreover, the parks’ most convincing supporters become those who believe that the parks’ principal purpose is to help businesses, communities, and people make a buck. As a result of these trends, the role of environmental stewardship in many of our national parks is in danger of being overrun by a desire to maximize revenues over the short-term.”

The ability of park managers and their staffs to carry out core resource protection missions is systematically being diminished across the country as agency decisions, with increasing frequency, defer instead to gateway communities and special interest groups.

The ultimate goal should be to regard the priceless attributes of our national parks as valuable unto themselves and not as adjuncts to the parks’ ability to generate revenues or to be self-supporting through devolution of inherent federal responsibility with non-federal entities. Simply put, the priceless qualities of our national system of parks are beyond value. It is the job of our nation to keep these qualities from becoming nothing more than memories sold on an auction block forged from short-term economic gratification.

Of course, the national park system, as a microcosm of our nation’s present state of affairs, does not suffer alone in trying to carry out the grand democratic ideals of our nation’s way of life under increasingly difficult circumstances. Just balancing the federal budget is daunting, much less coping with the myriad other problems of leading and managing our democracy. But, it would seem that affirmatively responding to the problems and issues—tackling them head on with the fervor and dedication our forefathers consistently demonstrated in times of difficulty—is far more likely to maintain the values and integrity of the national park system than the present course.

The Challenge We Face

This paper intentionally focuses on just one segment of our great society—our national park system. It is the responsibility of our generation to now respond to the challenge previous generations passed to us. The national park system Advisory Board, in July 2001, presented a thoughtful report to the Secretary of the Interior (*Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century*, July, 2001) that eloquently captured our generation’s challenge:

“The Creation of a National Park is an expression of faith in the future. It is a pact between generations, a promise from the past to the future. In 1916, Congress established the National Park Service ‘to conserve the parks unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.’ This act and the many others that have created the national park system and related programs echo the promise of the Constitution ‘to secure the Blessings of Liberty for ourselves and our Posterity.’ We are that future, and we too must act on behalf of our successors. We must envision and ensure a system of parks and programs that benefits a new generation of citizens in a changing world.”

Sadly, the challenge articulated by the Advisory Board was not responded to and the report was relegated to a dusty shelf of “has-beens.”

The founders of this great legacy created the world’s first national park at Yellowstone in 1872, preserving the watershed of the Yellowstone River “for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.” The place was to be administered by the federal government for the broader national public interest.

Put under the exclusive control of the Secretary of the Interior, the land within Yellowstone was “reserved and withdrawn from settlement, occupancy, or sale under the laws of the United States, and dedicated and set apart as a public park or pleasuring-ground...[that would] ... provide for the preservation, from injury or spoliation, of all timber, mineral deposits, natural curiosities, or wonders within said park, and their retention in their natural condition... [and] ...provide against the wanton destruction of the fish and game found within said park, and against their capture or destruction for the purposes of merchandise or profit.”

Before there ever was a National Park Service, other great places and archeological treasures were set aside in those early years because of the unique vision of protecting and passing on our country’s legacy to future generations.

The prescience of our founders must not be squandered. Through generations of citizen leaders, Congressional activists and Presidential action our system of national parks stands today as an essential component of how our culture defines itself. It took courage and vision to respond to the real danger that our lands and history could be lost by taking special care of them – indeed, placing them on a special pedestal in our society. The challenge is no less daunting today than it was then. Key components of ecosystems are being lost. Sustained vision is being replaced by short-term convenience. The threats to our special places are as real today as they were a hundred years ago.

In a speech in Flagstaff, AZ in 1996, now-retired National Park Service Director Roger G. Kennedy eloquently repeated the challenge before us and the call we must respond to:

“It is time to join in a concerted, non-partisan endeavor to restore the health of the national park system and to encourage the people of the National Park Service to continue to share in a national reaffirmation of our national community—in real places. The National Parks are important in themselves. Beyond themselves, they provide a Call to Conscience, a call to preserve America at its best, where we can be our best selves. Thus they can be—and we can be—a ‘saving remnant.’”

This Series Of Papers

The imminent arrival of the centennial of the National Park Service's birth, which will occur in 2016, has led to reflection on its past, evaluation of its successes and failures, and discussion of its future goals and priorities – both within the agency and among its many friends and supporters.

As an organization containing more professional experience and knowledge than any comparable entity anywhere in the country, we believe that we are uniquely placed to offer our professional perspectives on the array of issues that are and will be discussed over coming months and years.

This series of papers offers our professional evaluation of the key issues that the agency is now facing or will be dealing with in coming years. Current papers in the series, either completed or in development, include the following. Others may be added:

- Report 1 *America's Crown Jewels: The National Park System* – A paper on the philosophic and legislative foundation of the NPS and an evaluation of the need for more effective national engagement in protecting parks.
- Report 2 *The National Parks Centennial Commission* – An evaluation of the commission and recommendations on how it should work, what its goals should be, and what issues it should focus on.
- Report 3 *The National Park Centennial Institute* – A paper that explores the need and concept for a formalized academic institute to study a wide variety of park-related issues in order to inform and educate agency staff and political leaders and better manage our parks in a new century.
- Report 4 *Competitive Sourcing, Privatization, and Philanthropy in our National Parks* – A paper on these key issues and the bearing they have on the agency and its efforts to attain its goals.
- Report 5 *The Future of Entrance Fees and Their Connection to Visitation* – An examination of the problem of over reliance on entrance and user fees and the potential fees have to “price publics out of their parks.”
- Report 6 *Reasserting International Environmental and Park Leadership* – This paper looks at the reasons why the NPS has lost its standing as an international leader in parks and what needs to be done to become a more effective member of the international parks community.
- Report 7 *A Renaissance of Park Interpretation and Education Reaffirms the Mission of the National Park Service* – A paper that looks at the present dire straits of the NPS interpretive and education program and calls for a “renaissance” and a renewal of excellence in our on-site and off-site educational programs.
- Report 8 *Toward A Second Century Of Excellence For The National Park System* – This paper presents a ten-point vision of the attributes that the National Park Service needs to have by the time its centennial arrives on August 25, 2016. It also outlines qualities that must be sought and fostered in its leaders for it to retain its integrity, serve the public and meet its goals, and identifies core values that underlie “principled leadership.”

- Report 9 *It Is Not A Matter Of Money – It Is A Matter of Priorities* – This paper exposes the budgetary quagmire the National Park Service finds itself in and discusses ways out of the situation. It also presents a 15 year review and analysis of NPS budgets and compares the Clinton and Bush administration’s budgets.
- Report 10 *The Renewal of the Park Ranger Profession* – A review of the present state of the park ranger profession, which is increasingly called upon to specialize in the narrow niche of law enforcement, and how it might be reformed to better serve the agency in the future.
- Report 11 *Global Climate Change Creates New Park Environments and New Organizational Challenges for Park Science Programs* – This paper looks at the coming changes to our national and global ecosystems and impacts upon society and where our national parks can serve as effective barometers of global change.
- Report 12 *Reassessing the Development Footprint in our Parks* – This paper looks at the planning, development and construction process in the parks, examining the lessons learned from the first century of park development and how they need to be reconsidered for the second century.