



Professional Report Series – Number 2

A National Park Service Centennial Commission

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Abstract

The Coalition of National Park Service Retirees calls for the establishment and convening of a non-partisan National Park Service Centennial Commission to lead the nation in a deep and thoughtful multi-year national dialog. This Commission would:

- Develop a report, or series of reports, on the status of the national park system, the issues that face the system, constraints that impact the system and challenges to be faced in the new century.
- Examine alternatives for addressing these issues and constraints that must be engaged, including fiscal and human resources required to accomplish the mission of the system for the long term.
- Examine in greater detail such issues as future challenges and constraints, organizational requirements for a new century, governance models, budget adequacy, long term strategic management considerations or any other topic the Commission chooses to study. These considerations will be synthesized into findings and recommendations that the Commission will report on.

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 Author

The paper was prepared for and with the concurrence of CNPSR by Rob Arnberger, a 34-year veteran of the National Park Service who retired in August 2003. He served at 10 different parks and in one regional office in a wide variety of positions. He ended his career as regional director for Alaska Region, where he supervised the superintendents of 16 national park units encompassing 54.7 million acres, or about two-thirds of the entire acreage of the national park system.

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Proud Traditions – A Context for Action

Establishing a national park area is an act of faith in the future - a contract with generations yet to come. The requirements to carry out this generational contract places an obligation upon the shoulders of the American people and their elected representatives for something more than short term benefit or gain. For over a century, through a rich tradition of law and public service, our national parks continue to contribute to a more perfect American Union. These places are landscapes and historic shrines in which we feel wonder, reverence, respect, taking pride in those things that demonstrate America at its best. We take patriotic pride that we live in a land where such places exist and that we are a people capable of reserving this natural and cultural patrimony for our generation and generations not yet born. As our society evolves, our national park areas mirror the interests and the evolving history of our American people. Our National Park System has achieved prominence in our way of life becoming one cornerstone in how citizens define their quality of life as Americans. Born from our citizens' deep love of their land and ideas, coupled with the intense political process necessary to set aside these places, parks are given the most special status of protection that our society offers to our American lands. Through this distinctly generational American process our national parks truly become our nation's best examples of the will of the people to protect their natural and cultural heritage.

On August 25, 1916, the Congress established the National Park Service and codified its purposes in public law “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.”

Again, in 1970 in Public Law 91-38, Congress eloquently described the National Park System that “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...”

These and other key acts have guided and defined each of our individual national parks, the collective system to which they belong, and the government service delegated to care for them. The purpose is not only to give a gift to present generations but to also assure these places are passed unimpaired to future generations.

Reaffirmation of the Promise

Over 100 years ago leaders of vision and high principles came together to conceive a very special idea unique to the world – the national park idea. The evolution of this vision led to the creation of a single national park system in 1916, led by the National Park Service to administer those lands with the special care for which they were set aside. The centennial of the National Park Service is but 8 years in the future. How we celebrate this anniversary is vitally important. If all we do is to celebrate the past through a series of “birthday party” ephemeral events and extravaganzas we do disservice to the national park idea. There can be no better celebration of the past successes of the National Park Service or the System than to reaffirm the promise of the future and to assure that the System and the capability of the National Park Service is enhanced as the second century begins.

To ensure a second century of vitality and purpose the fundamental principles of our national park system as “cumulative expressions of a single national heritage” must be nationally re-invigorated. It is time to restore the great idea to the prominence it has traditionally enjoyed in our national community, insulated from the divisiveness of partisan politics and destructive political ideology not practiced in the public interest. It is time to create a national dialog with the citizens and leaders of this nation to determine a new 21st century ideal for the national park system, to better understand its place and perspective in our national society and culture, its importance in the global context. It is time to explore governance and adequacy of federal investment for sustained support of our parks to assure they are passed unimpaired to future generations. The interests of citizens, park professionals, scholars and academics, advocacy and support organizations, politicians and political appointees, business and industry leaders must be ignited to join and engage a common endeavor to lead our parks into a successful second century.

The Coalition’s Call to Action

The Coalition of National Park Service Retirees believes it can contribute to a national dialog through collaborative efforts with other national stakeholders. The Coalition brings to the table thousands of year worth of knowledge, background and experience in national park leadership and a deep commitment to the national park idea. It is the belief of the Coalition that a second century of American national parks can only be assured by a deliberate and conscious national effort that seeks to reaffirm principles and commitments engaging the future through strategic decisions of the present. Our National Park System got to where it is today because of citizen activism, bi-partisan political action and a body of law establishing a management framework. It will take no less effort and deliberate dedication to assure a second century celebration.

The Coalition of National Park Service Retirees calls for the establishment and convening of a non-partisan National Park Service Centennial Commission to lead the nation in a deep and thoughtful multi-year national dialog. The Commission will explore the importance of parks in our society and national life and determine the long term governance strategies that will meet the future needs of our nation and assure long term sustainability of our nation’s system of parks. Enlightened national leadership must create the circumstances to begin this dialog on behalf of the broadest public interest. The Commission will develop a report, or series of reports, on the status of the national park system, the issues that face the system, constraints that impact the system and challenges to be faced in the new century. The Commission’s work would examine alternatives for addressing these issues and constraints that must be engaged, including fiscal and human resources required to accomplish the mission of the system for the long term.

The Commission will examine in greater detail such issues as future challenges and constraints, organizational requirements for a new century, governance models, budget adequacy, long term strategic management considerations or any other topic the Commission chooses to study. These considerations will be synthesized into findings and recommendations that the Commission will report on.

From public engagement and scholarly study must spring commitment to action. The outcomes of the Centennial Commission must be interpreted into a renewed national commitment to lead our National Park System into a second century of success. This must come by implementing the recommendations of the National Park Service Centennial Commission into a multi-year “Keeping the Promises Plan” that boldly celebrates the past with plans for the success of a second-century national park future.

Without effective linkage between Plan recommendations and long-term resolute political support to accomplish the recommendations , the Plan will fail and the future of our park system mortgaged to short term, ineffective actions that leaves the future of our parks in doubt, serious issues unresolved and our nation’s natural and cultural heritage in peril.

Centennial Commission Considerations

The following are essential considerations in the establishment and functioning of the Commission:

- The establishment of the Commission, its charter and goals could be carried out through Executive Order or its charter and goals might be legislatively authorized and necessary funds appropriated.
- The Commission also could be established and carried out by an independent, highly respected national advocacy organization or academic institution on behalf of the broader public interest. The Commission might fund its work and activities through a combination of philanthropic sources, public funds and organizational funds.
- Critical to the success of the Commission, no matter how it is established or by whom, is a non-partisan focus and level of independence from the parent organization's more narrow operational goals. If the Commission is politicized it will become polarized and ineffective.
- The Commission must have the stature and the resources to connect with the right groups and citizens in a variety of venues to ask the right questions and to bore deep into issues to assure recommendations are not superficial and are of consequence.
- Also critical to success is the ability of the Commission to effectively connect with the citizens of this nation to create the necessary "national dialog" on the future of our national parks; to re-invigorate the connection of citizens to their parks; and to assure their critical and continued involvement with parks. If the Commission fails in this important piece of its work there will be no national support group, no national citizen impetus to keep the pressure on achievement of recommendations. The success of the Commission's effort as a possible "blue-print for action" for a second century of national park success will be directly related to both the quantity and quality of connection the Commission makes with the broad spectrum of American people.
- Findings and recommendations must be submitted to the political interests of the nation and also to the broadest national spectrum of citizens of the United States for whom the parks are held in Trust. The recommendations can not be partisan or politically directed to find fault with any particular administration or congress, recognizing they must be carried out by successive political administrations and congresses.
- A political mechanism must be in place assuring the long term achievement of the Commission's recommendations over time. The recommendations must be translated into a deep and caring national political and moral will to accomplish commitments. Normally, commissions do their work and then dissolve. To provide the continuity to implement the recommendations over successive years and administrations it may be advantageous to continue this commission's work through the full period it takes to achieve the recommendations. It could complement the work of the present National Park System Advisory Board for that period of time.
- The Commission must be made up of a select diverse group of national stature leaders known for their objectivity, creativity and strong commitment to protect our national heritage. At their discretion, advisors and counselors from other park systems or globally protected areas may be selected to inform the work of the Commission.

- The work of the Commission must be seen as non-partisan “on behalf of all American citizens” carried out in the fullest sense of that charter. National hearings must be balanced and insightful, informed by scholarly examination of themes and issues, representing the broad public interest. While respectful of, and informed by more narrow political interests and special interest groups, the work of the Commission will be characterized in the broadest interest of the public good.
- The work of the Commission should project an immediacy of need and focused effort required to carry out its charter. Similarly, some similar mechanism must be in place for Congress to effectively deliberate on its recommendations and carry them out as appropriate.

The Role of the Coalition of National Park Service Retirees

Strategically the Coalition has focused its role as an important catalyst organization in the effort to establish a Commission. The Coalition has long identified the creation of a Centennial Commission as its most important long-term strategic goal. The Coalition will maintain and build the focus on establishing the Commission through strategic efforts with advocacy organizations, political leaders, citizens, and the press. An increasing number of individuals and advocacy organizations are convinced of the efficacy of the idea, especially as a planning tool for 2008 elections and the newly elected Administration.

There are two important concepts developed by the Coalition that are strategically linked to the Centennial Commission. First, the Coalition believes that a scholarly and informed series of “national park studies” of important contemporary national park issues and themes is a key component of planning for the future and ought to inform the Centennial Commission’s work. The Coalition has also called for the establishment of the Centennial Institute for National Park Studies to provide the focus and organization for the continued “self-examination” of our national park system long after the Commission has completed its work. The Institute will analyze and study the issues our national park system faces as it moves into a new century, providing constructive and thoughtful recommendations that will guide the National Park Service and those who politically oversee our park system in carrying out its mission in the most non-partisan and effective manner possible. The Institute might be an independent organization or may be affiliated with an established academic institution charged with unbiased and unencumbered examination of our national park system. Important to its success would be the effective linkage and collaboration with academic institutions across this nation also interested in pursuing the same goals. The Coalition is working towards this vision and has forged important connections to several organizations and committed bodies of citizens who are similarly interested in moving this idea forward. Secondly, a Coalition - based Collaborative Initiative will seek to develop a closer professional and supportive relationship with the National Park Service and to organizations who share the national mission of protecting our natural and cultural heritage. . The idea is to use the talents and professional skills held by the broad membership of the Coalition in a variety of ways in support of the national parks and with those local, regional and national partners who share the same goals.

Central to the work of the Coalition in the immediate future is the development of a series of “informed opinion professional papers” that articulate the knowledge and experience of Coalition members on key themes and issues. The first series of these professional papers represent the most serious “themes of the future” the Coalition believes need attention. These professional papers will not only articulate the advice and position of the Coalition on key contemporary park issues but will also, hopefully, lay the foundation to eventually transition this effort of “introspectively examining national park issues” to the Centennial Institute for National Park Studies. The Coalition believes these professional papers will be valuable in informing the Commission when it starts its work, and will also be important in the context of the present 2008 presidential campaign and the election results.

Once the Commission is established the Coalition will offer its service in any capacity that forwards their work. The Coalition can be an important and effective ally in developing findings and recommendations and in working towards the necessary connections with the media, national political leaders and the Congress.

Conclusion

The legacy of today's national park system was fashioned by leaders and citizens with vision, through hard work and dedication to bring it to where it presently is. It will take no less effort to allow this legacy to endure and to carry it successfully forward as our contract with future generations

How this centennial is celebrated is as important as what comes out of the celebration. In the words of one of our more celebrated members, historian Bill Brown, "I hate to see long lists of concocted glorifications abuilding, which will leave no substantive trace beyond mounds of bunting-draped garbage--to be removed by exhausted staffs, who will have worked unpaid hours of overtime to set up the fanfared moment that will fade as quickly as the trumpets' sound."

Connecting the work of a national commission to an effective and nationally supported "blue-print for the future" may be the most important and lasting gift that can be made to the future of our national park system. It is to that future the Coalition of National Park Service Retirees is committed.

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.