

Rich in Resources, Short on Cash: How Philanthropy Helps Yellowstone and Other National Parks

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Introduction

The purpose of the Yellowstone Lake Conference was to encourage awareness and application of wide-ranging, high-caliber scientific work on Yellowstone Lake. The lake basin is one of Yellowstone's greatest resources and is increasingly being recognized by the scientific and conservation world for its significance. Because the full implications of the changing geology and ecology of the lake area are still unknown, the opportunities for research and discovery are many. Unfortunately, federal funding for science-related projects in national parks is insufficient to meet the growing needs of research. If studies on the relationships between the regional landscape and its resident species are delayed in Yellowstone and other national parks until federal funding is available, irreplaceable resources and information could be lost forever.

Due to a lack of human development, as well as limits on recreation, protected lands such as national parks are great laboratories for research. With the ceaseless growth of urban areas, these protected lands are becoming more important to our civilization. Yet high-quality research is often expensive and, though important, is usually not as high a priority for federal funding as are the reconstruction of roads, the reroofing of leaky buildings, or the repair of hazardous structures. Furthermore, an important part of research is the use of the results. Even if a research project is federally funded, there is often limited or no funding available to disseminate the valuable information that is discovered.

Increasingly, philanthropy is being used to help the National Park Service (NPS) protect ecosystems, improve education, fund research projects, and inform the public about the results of the significant scientific work that is happening in Yellowstone and other national parks.

The History and Current Role of Philanthropy in Protecting National Parks

The national park idea was started in the United States and has since spread throughout the world to help protect in perpetuity some of our earth's most precious lands. The donating of private money to public causes is also primarily an American phenomenon. Philanthropy played an important role in helping to establish and protect national parks and in creating the NPS. Before the NPS was established in 1916 and Congress appropriated funds each year to run parks—and later, when land acquisition needs to expand the national park system exceeded available federal appropriations—private donations were responsible for substantial additions and funding to parks.

Barry Mackintosh, a former NPS historian, lists a number of examples of the earliest philanthropic efforts in national parks in his paper “Philanthropy and the National Parks” (Mackintosh 1998). The following paragraph highlights some examples from his paper, which is an excellent summary of the role of philanthropy in national parks.

Among the earliest large donations were a 1907 land donation from Mr. and Mrs. William Kent, which allowed for the creation of Muir Woods National Monument. Another land donation came in 1916 from a group of private donors for what is now Acadia National Park. Before Stephen T. Mather became the first director of the NPS, he too gave a substantial amount of his own money for the protection and administration of national parks, including funds to buy more land for Yosemite National Park and money to publish the *National Parks Portfolio*. This portfolio was distributed to 250,000 people and was helpful in drumming up support to convince Congress to create the NPS on 25 August 1916. In the early 1900s, the Rockefellers donated a significant amount of money and land for national parks, including millions of dollars to buy land for Acadia, Grand Teton, Great Smoky Mountains, Virgin Islands, and Yosemite National Parks, among others. Since the 1940s, the Mellon family has given millions of dollars to acquire lands for the public, including for Gettysburg National Military Park and Shenandoah National Park, as well as to preserve existing parklands at Redwood and Rocky Mountain National Parks. More recently, in the 1980s individuals, foundations, and other non-profit entities donated \$350 million to refurbish the Statue of Liberty and restore Ellis Island’s Great Hall. The latest substantial act of philanthropy in the United States was from the Haas family, who donated \$16 million to transform Crissy Field in Golden Gate National Recreation Area from a dirt wasteland into a beautiful waterfront park.

Mackintosh’s paper ends with a discussion of how Congress recognized the importance of philanthropy in the protection of parks and established the National Park Foundation in 1967, which was launched, appropriately, with a \$1 million donation from Laurance Rockefeller. The National Park Foundation raised more than \$35 million in 2000 for the benefit of all national parks. Since the creation of the National Park Foundation, more than 20 other non-profit groups that raise money for national parks, called “friends groups,” have been established to help individual parks. Yellowstone’s friends group is called the Yellowstone Park Foundation.

The Current Role of Philanthropy in Protecting Yellowstone

The Yellowstone Park Foundation and other friends groups do not replace congressional funding for national parks, but enhance it. The purpose of friends groups is to help the NPS achieve a margin of excellence by funding programs that do not directly affect visitor and staff safety, but that enhance the experiences of visitors in parks and the protection of natural and cultural resources in ways that are beyond the financial capacity of the NPS.

In 2001, Yellowstone received \$25,122,000 in direct federal appropriations, \$5,656,000 in user entrance and special use fees, and \$714,000 in concession

fees—a total of \$31,492,000 to run the park. This equates to approximately \$10 spent on each visitor to Yellowstone to fund interpretive talks, ensure visitor safety, provide adequate staffing to meet visitor needs, clean campgrounds, and create educational exhibits—just part of the unseen work that is done for the benefit of each visitor.

Assuming an annual visitation to Yellowstone of about 3,000,000, the above-mentioned work is done by a full-time staff of approximately 556 people—which means that each full-time employee is responsible for approximately 6,000 visitors per year. The level of federal funding has prevented the park from filling 15% of its permanent positions and has led to a number of operations being reduced or cut, including exotic species control, monitoring park resources, ranger patrols, and interpretive programs. Yet, all of these cut programs are essential to the long-term protection of Yellowstone's resources and to visitor fulfillment.

Though Yellowstone was not the recipient of many of these large, early donations mentioned earlier as part of Mackintosh's paper, philanthropy is now playing an increasingly important role in the conservation of and research on the world's first national park.

Much of the philanthropy that has taken place in Yellowstone has been done quietly. Therefore few people know if a research, interpretive, or wildlife restoration project has been funded with private money. But millions of private dollars have been designated for Yellowstone's benefit in recent years.

Recent philanthropic contributions to Yellowstone include close to \$1,000,000 contributed by American Gramophone and its owner, Chip Davis, to help restore the park after the 1988 wildfires. This large gift was used for trail rehabilitation projects and educating the public about the role of fire in Yellowstone's ecosystem through funding a supplement to the park newspaper. Later, American Gramophone funded the "top ten issues" supplement to the park newspaper. The Yellowstone Association has contributed more than \$6.5 million since 1933 to provide educational programs, exhibits, and publications for park visitors. The Association also runs the Yellowstone Institute, which offers a variety of courses that teach people about the ecological processes of Yellowstone. Moose Charities has long been a supporter of Yellowstone by funding the park's Youth Conservation Corps program each year for 12 years. Their donations have totaled more than \$1,500,000 since 1989.

In 1996, Conoco donated \$200,000 in seed money to start the Yellowstone Park Foundation. Since then the company has donated more than \$2.2 million, including \$2 million for a new visitor education center at Old Faithful for which the Foundation, in cooperation with NPS, is currently raising money. This new visitor education center will have a large theater and classrooms and will be an important hub for education and research on Yellowstone's geyser basins. Unilever launched the Old Faithful Visitor Education Center campaign by donating \$1.25 million for the cause. They also have donated a considerable amount of recycled material for boardwalks throughout Yellowstone, including for the boardwalk that circles Old Faithful.

Defenders of Wildlife has made a considerable difference in the protection of Yellowstone's wolves and grizzly bears by providing money to ranchers for livestock lost to these predators. National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) advocates for the protection of Yellowstone and other national parks and has recently worked with park staff to create a business plan that NPCA plans to use to encourage more financial support of national parks from Congress.

Canon, USA, and the Turner Foundation have both contributed large donations for research and education in Yellowstone. For example, starting in 1997 Canon donated a total of \$300,000 over three years to fund conservation research on grizzly bears and amphibians, and for native plant and native fish restoration. The Turner Foundation has been a long-time supporter of Yellowstone, including supporting wolf restoration and research on the army cutworm moths that are one of the favorite and most important fall food sources for grizzly bears.

Why National Parks Should Not Simply Make Do with the Federal Funds that Congress Appropriates

Though the world has changed profoundly since Yellowstone was created in 1872, the role of national parks has evolved with the needs of our country and now provides benefits of fundamental importance to virtually every community in America. The future would be bleak without national parks. The programs they provide include everything from campfire talks in Yellowstone about wildlife, to discussions of the history of early civilizations at Aztec Ruins National Monument in New Mexico, to learning about civil rights at Frederick Douglass National Historic Site in Washington, D.C.—yet all of these NPS units are struggling for viability.

In December 1999, the director of the NPS asked the National Park System Advisory Board to “develop a report that should focus broadly on the purposes and prospects for the National Park System for the next 25 years.” An excerpt from the resulting 2001 report, titled *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century*, states the following:

Private citizen involvement with national parks has a long history. In recent years the number of volunteer ‘friends’ groups supporting individual parks has grown significantly. These groups provide tens of millions of dollars each year to support individual park operations and enrich the quality of public service offerings. The work of the friends groups is extremely valuable to the Park Service...National parks will always be dependent on federal appropriations for their primary support. However, the opportunity to provide additional private resources for the parks should be encouraged. The added value expressed through private funding is a measure of the importance placed on this revered American institution (National Park System Advisory Board 2001: 29, 30).

Conclusion

Barry Mackintosh writes:

Philanthropy is more than a source of land and money for the parks. It is a means of building and strengthening bonds between parks and their advocates.

While all taxpayers contribute to the parks, those who make additional voluntary contributions will have a special interest in the park's welfare. The parks and the National Park Service benefit from their devotion as well as their dollars.

As our daily environment is filling with strip malls, as we watch our farmlands being replaced by parking lots, and as our world becomes more technologically and politically complicated, national parks are an increasingly important source of connecting with our roots and of peace and refuge. Their role as a laboratory and an infinite source of learning and wonder is only strengthened. Yet as parks become more essential to our world's balance, the economic and physical demands on them become greater. Without what Mackintosh mentions as the private sector's devotion to enhancing federal funding, access to national parks may have to be restricted and education programs cut even further. We may lose vital elements of the very places of solitude and wonder that we seek.

References

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