

## The Great Basin Study

*Ronald W. Johnson*

The evaluation of candidate areas for possible inclusion in the National Park System is a basic mandate contained in the agency's management policies. Since the inception of the National Park Service (NPS) in 1916, various methods have been employed to test the worthiness of new areas for addition to the System. Between June, 1978 and February, 1981 a special unit stationed at the Denver Service Center (DSC), the agency's principal planning, design and construction office, conducted approximately 50 new areas, rivers and trails studies. This unit comprised of 35 planners, outdoor recreation, natural and cultural resource specialists and support staff labored to rationalize what previously had been a somewhat elastic system of evaluating and recommending new areas to the Secretary of the Interior and transmittal to Congress for its consideration.

To comprehend that innovative system to assess such resources as a historic canal in Illinois, a wetland in Alabama, a tract of open space in southern California and a Revolutionary War site in South Carolina, it is germane to review one of the more complex new area projects—the Great Basin study. The study determined feasible management strategies to preserve significant cultural and natural resource values represented in the Great Basin physiographic region. Briefly stated, the Great Basin province lies roughly between the western slope of the Rockies and the eastern fringe of the Sierra Nevada in the states of California, Utah, Oregon, Idaho and Nevada, and features a closed drainage system, numerous ranges and basins.

The study complied with the new areas (Section 8) process that stemmed directly from Public Law 94-458 which amended the 1970 General Authorities Act. The 1976 amendment called for the Secretary of the Interior to transmit to Congress on an annual basis "12 areas which appear to be of national significance and which may have potential for inclusion to the National Park System." A sophisticated three-phase study process evolved to insure that the best professional thinking from NPS planners, other agencies and private interests ultimately went up through the chain of command to Congress. This process involved an initial reconnaissance survey to evaluate the resource base, then if a recommendation warranted, a study of alternatives to define all feasible management and use strategies for the resources and finally action in Washington to implement the professional analysis contained in the two previous steps. Timely and cost effective products resulted from this study process.

Initially a four member DSC team undertook the evaluation of four extensive areas in Nevada and California that had been identified in a 1975 NPS national natural landmarks study of the Great Basin physiographic region. The university consultants rated natural resources throughout the Great Basin and narrowed this region

into four recommendations that could individually or collectively represent the physiographic region in the National Park System.

Starting in January, 1979, the NPS team contacted the United States Forest Service (USFS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), two agencies that managed much of the four study areas; briefed the Nevada congressional delegation, various state agencies, local government and private citizens; conducted basic research and traveled to the field. Utilizing the 1975 landmarks study as a starting point, the team analyzed the White Mountains/Fish Lake Valley, Monitor Valley, Railroad Valley and the Snake Range/Spring Valley. Responding to additional recommendations, the team added the Toiyabe Range/Great Smoky Valley to the Monitor Valley study area. As the study progressed, the team utilized traditional contacts and data collection as well as devising an evaluative tool that not only focused on natural and cultural resources as well as themes outlined in the NPS Plan, but added eight other criteria that included recreational values, visitor potential, location in reference to population centers, scenic qualities and future scientific research value.

The team narrowed the four study areas to one--the Snake Range/Spring Valley area astride the Nevada-Utah border. Following internal and inter-agency review and comment, the NPS printed the Great Basin Reconnaissance Survey in January, 1980. Containing a positive recommendation regarding further study, this document became the foundation for the second phase of work the following summer.

Given the green light by the Washington Office, the core NPS team and representatives from the USFS, the BLM, the Heritage and Recreation Service (HCRS) and the Nevada Division of State Parks drove, hiked and climbed throughout the 811,000 acre study areas in July, 1980. Following an exciting two week trek through this spectacular and remote natural resource containing deserts, lofty peaks and ruins of nineteenth century mining communities, the interagency team met in Baker and Ely, Nevada to evaluate the field data, discuss future management options and prepare an initial draft study of alternatives.

During this interval the study team also held several public meetings in Baker and Ely to apprise local citizens about the study and seek grass roots input on the draft alternatives. During these meetings, citizens articulated personal concerns that a change in management jurisdiction of the Snake Range/Spring Valley area might impact their lifestyles and livelihoods. Then too, the proposed MX missile project engendered additional concerns, and although missile placement had not yet been finalized, many Baker and Ely citizens expressed their apprehensions.

Following the July, 1980 fieldwork, the DSC team made two additional trips to eastern Nevada to present refined alternatives

to the public and to meet with other team members to polish the draft document. The team printed the Great Basin Study of Alternatives in February, 1981.

This project, unlike several predecessors that had originated as far back as the mid-1920s, was not oriented solely to the creation of a national park or monument calling for large scale private land acquisition. In fact, the public sector (principally the USFS and BLM) already managed approximately 92 percent of the study area. Although the Great Basin theme is not currently represented in the National Park System, the interagency team prepared seven widely differing management alternatives. These ranged from the continuation of current management of the Snake Range/Spring Valley areas by the BLM, USFS and private sector to an alternative that features interpretation of numerous natural and cultural sites scattered throughout the Great Basin. One alternative suggested designation of a Great Basin National Park to be managed by the NPS. The alternative generally favored by the inter-agency team called for designation of a Great Basin Area of National Concern to recognize the protection, conservation and restoration of identified major representative resource values. It would allow orderly planned development and growth that would not adversely affect those resources for which the area was established. In order to accomplish this cooperative planning and management strategy, an advisory commission could be established.

Since the completion of the project, emphasis has shifted scarce resources from the creation of new NPS areas to the maintenance and improvement of existing ones. ☐

