

Nation's version of ancient Arcadia and Academy.....a geography where the public consciousness is raised, where environment and experience come together in soaring thought, spiritual adventure, and new possibilities, some of which persist to enhance daily life "back home."

The stewards of the System sometimes lose sight of this overarching function, this central social purpose and ultimate reason for having a National Park System. Their work—as protectors, interpreters, scientists, administrators, maintainers—breaks down into small pieces and hidden couplings over which or through which the vital ethos passes unrecognized.

Yet it is this ethos that must be rejuvenated if philosophy is to have content and technique is to have purpose. Only thus can this organization overcome bureaucratic sterility, task specialization, burgeoning size, and geographic dispersion.

In its role as steward and interpreter, the Service—through its individual people—either contributes to or detracts from the System's potential to fulfill high purpose. In the quality and spirit of the settings and stories offered resides that potential. For none of the System's physical and intangible benefits can be compelled. The offering is all.

Perhaps the Blue Ribbon Panel should start here.

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## **National Park System Advisory Board Report on "Overcrowding" in the National Parks**

**George Barley**, Committee Chairman  
and **S. J. DiMeglio**  
with staff assistance by **Priscilla R. Baker**

[Editor's Note: A letter to the Editor from Steven H. DeBenedetti, Resource Management Specialist at Pinnacles National Monument, Paicines, CA 95043, carried in full in the Spring 1987 issue of Park Science, calls this report 'seriously flawed' and 'totally unacceptable' as a 'direct affront to the principal mission of the National Park Service.' DeBenedetti asks how the Board can act or base conclusions 'upon assessments of an assertedly undefinable concept; one that in its own judgment has been only superficially studied?' He faults the Board for 'reducing the park environment to the physical

*tourist facilities provided to accommodate visitors and by claiming ignorance of the body of literature that relates human influence to park ecosystems." DeBenedetti concludes that "it is more accurate to state that park managers, when confronted with scientific data on the relationship between visitor use and impact are hesitant, unwilling, or unable to make the hard decisions necessary to protect park resources because of external political considerations than to say that the data upon which to base such decisions do not exist."*]

**T**HE COMMITTEE held two meetings in Washington, D. C., reviewed reports of a recent National Parks & Conservation Association study of park carrying capacity, monitored media coverage relating to national park visitation, received and reviewed a report from the Conference of National Park Concessioners and conducted a survey of all national park areas. (The Survey follows at the conclusion of this report.)

As the National Parks & Conservation Association found and as many park Superintendents indicated, the term 'crowding' or 'overcrowding' is used to express an individual's personal judgment rather than to describe any scientifically-established measures of a park's visitation. As the Superintendent of Canyonlands National Park put it, the term "...is based on individual perspective and varies with locations. What is crowded to one person may seem to be wilderness and solitude to another."

On their survey instruments, park Superintendents had the same sort of difficulty trying to define 'overcrowding' as the late Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart had many years ago when he needed to try to define the term 'pornography.' Justice Stewart finally admitted that although he had not been able to establish a precise, acceptable definition of the condition, he most certainly could recognize it when he saw it.

When parks' campgrounds, parking lots and restrooms are full and more visitors are waiting in lines, the parks' staffs have no difficulty recognizing the problem.

Our survey results show that many parks need to add staff and/or redesign facilities to alleviate existing problems. However, since crowding occurs only sporadically and at fairly predictable times for most parks, the problem is not an overwhelming one systemwide. As more than one survey respondent indicated, the National Park Service cannot afford to design and maintain facilities for peak visitation periods any more than churches can afford to build with Christmas and Easter solely in mind. The alternatives are to regulate the flow of visitors using techniques appropriate to the site and to work through travel and recreation industry organizations to try to affect park visitation patterns where problems have occurred.

The results of the committee's survey of 'overcrowding' show that

Where funds and staff have been made available, scientific carrying capacity studies are underway. But as the Superintendent of Castillo de San Marcos National Monument put it, "...physical damage is slow and difficult to prove."

Although several Superintendents felt that it would be desirable to undertake more research in this area, some were concerned that it might be difficult to affect park operations based on the results of the research. As the Superintendent of the Gettysburg National Military Park put it, "except in extreme, dramatic cases, the use of 'carrying capacity' as a scientific justification for imposing restrictions on visitor use will probably not be widely accepted by park users in the near future."

It also is important to recognize that visitor counts do not provide accurate measures of resource use in all parks. The Great Smoky Mountains National Park's Superintendent stated that "to correlate crowded highway conditions to resource damage and impacts from those same visitors is incorrect. For example, we had a record year (over 9.3 million visits) in 1985, but our backcountry use tumbled 50% from its peak seven years ago. More people are driving through, but less people are physically 'using' the park."

The Superintendent of Tumacacori National Monument, after 22 years of service with the National Park Service, stated that he feels "we may put too much emphasis on the number of visitors, rather than on the quality of their experience." He and many others commented that with adequate staffing, the National Park Service can protect the resources within the parks and assure the visiting public of the best possible experiences. Under such conditions, most parks indicated that they would welcome aggressive efforts to increase visitation during periods when facilities are not already used to capacity.

### **Committee Recommendations**

1. The National Park Service should increase its efforts publicly to promote the use of less well known parks and the advantages of off-peak time travel to the better known parks.

2. The National Park Service should continue to experiment with reservations systems and other limited entry systems in one or more parks or sections of parks where crowding problems have occurred. A systematic record should be made of the characteristics of these experiments and of their results in order that all parks may have the benefit of the information that is produced.

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