

# Values and Purposes of The National Park System<sup>1</sup>

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In value systems as in matters of taste there are no absolutes. Value systems are cultural artifacts—part old, part new—that ideally guide a society on its way.

In stable times of social cohesion we *know*, in a general way, the values that guide us. In times like this one—the dynamo screeching, society fragmented, the future more threat than fulfillment—we must *define* our values. Then comes the question, who is "we"?

Tradition, the lodestone of value systems, is everywhere under attack. Innovation displaces the old and the trusted. Exploitation through commercialization degrades tradition. Cultural illiteracy breaks the links of tradition. Immigration brings its own traditions.

Traditions of social behavior and valuation derive from social practice, social function. Social evolution inevitably produces a social dialectic. Traditional modes and values either survive by adaptive modification in the new synthesis or they die after a period of nostalgic lingering.

In this context, defining the values and thus the social purposes of the National Park System is no easy matter.



In the very early days the parks themselves were all more or less alike. And their critical constituency (the elite, literate, and powerful) was similarly homogeneous. That constituency swung enough weight to establish and maintain an instant national parks tradition and value system. For several decades, until after World War II, that core constituency accepted recruits and converted them to the value system. This could occur because the flow of recruits was gradual. Increasing geographic mobility, meaning the possession of a family car, coincided with gradually increasing social mobility. For these recruits, visiting a national park was an earnest, a symbol of stepping up in American society. Entering a park was like entering a cathedral or a museum. And the recruits respected these sanctuaries and followed the rules. The inculcation of values was profound and personal. The patrons of the grand hotels set the social tone. Friendly park rangers mingled and talked with the visitors; their interpretive brethren took the people in tow and expounded personally and at length upon the glories of Grand Canyon, the Yosemite, and Yellowstone, or the heroic battles and personages of our history. All of this represented social progress and a genteel democratization of the parks. Very largely, the value system flowed from the center outward. And the substance of the value system was that the parks became more than pleasuring grounds; they became mythic landscapes and bearers of tradition.

It was during this period, when the parks began to be the property of

the people at large, that the positive ideals of the national parks became imbedded in our society and in the National Park Service. In essence, the parks became our secular church. They represented the best of a maturing America. In their preservation and respectful use we could show the heretofore condescending world that America had high ideals, a social system that worked, esthetic sensibilities, and cultural traditions of its own. Together, the parks matched, perhaps overmatched the ancient glories of the Old World. Here was our Chartre, our Acropolis, or Verdun, our Louvre, our civilized leisure.

Even today, the core of the national parks tradition and value system—in our society generally and in the hearts of its stewards—roots back to that time, say 40 years ago, when our national destiny seemed secure and the great national parks requited the esthetic, intellectual, and historical yearnings of a victorious and progressive people.



Of course, even then the picture was incomplete. 'Our society' was in fact the dominant part of it. The democratic mechanism of the melting pot allowed access to the dominant segment that controlled the definition of values, but selectively. Many people were left out. They lacked the social and geographic mobility to visit parks and their traditions were too often uncommemorated or travestied had they gotten to the parks. These things are said not to denigrate the imperfect lights and strivings of our forebears, but to state the facts. These facts help condition us to ensuing scenes, even to the one now spread before us, where the shaping forces of history still grind away at our ideals.



Followed, the deluge. Interrupted briefly by the Korean War, the pent up demand to share the national parks by a now almost universally motoring public broke down the gates of what was yet a pre-war park system. The Mission 66 response—a giant catch-up effort—produced its own response of esthetic and environmental concerns, still a leading theme of those fighting park overdevelopment. Numbers of visitors and a broadened constituency produced many effects:

1. The city moved to the park bringing both crime and social groups heretofore unknown to these precincts. Law enforcement and a tendency toward morals-squad attitudes changed the complexion of the ranger force.
2. Park interpretation resorted to mechanical, electronic, people-moving techniques to 'process' the unceasing flow of visitors. The old-style teacher in uniform, discursive and knowledgeable, became a rare bird.
3. Internally, the Service changed from a family of all-around park people to a bureaucracy in danger of sterilization by specialization and dosages of scientific management, whose business-style concepts of efficiency fit ill with ideals of public service.

4. Proliferation of programs and responsibilities diluted the mission of the Service, and the simplicity of work and reward. The shift into urban parks and programs of social amelioration exemplify this trend, which was swallowed with difficulty by the archetypal western park person.
5. Increasing politicization of the Service added another 50 lashes across the back of the institutional ethos.

In sum, the visitor wondered what had happened to the friendly ranger and the university in the giant grove; the park employee questioned the survival of the institutional soul.



The broader issues we now face—some of venerable evolution, others just coming into view—further complicate the search for guiding values and defined purpose—a few examples:

1. The melting pot idea has gone out of fashion. People who were here but who did not qualify for the melting pot 40 years ago—Native Americans, Blacks, Hispanics, Asians—are trying with varying success to revive or maintain their cultural identities and values; their recently arrived brethren are doing the same. Many and varied are the cultural combinations and adaptations of these subsets of the larger society. This diversity widens the spectrum of cultural approaches to national parks, expressed as valuations and uses of them. Does this mean that existing parks and the culturally determined valuations and uses now in place must be changed? Or must we establish new kinds of parks that fit the cultural needs of the subsets in our society? How many histories does this Nation have? Is that history defined by ethnic and cultural groups alone, or is there a *national* history of ideas and ideals that can be made to apply universally throughout our society?
2. Up until World War II, though the United States was rapidly urbanizing, the traditions of most of its people were still rural, or only a generation or two removed. Parks then were places mainly of passive enjoyment—contemplation of Nature, the meditative stroll through historic scenes and homes. With the triumph of urbanization and disposal of that last-link old farmstead, parks have become evermore targets of active recreationists. Recreation areas, as such, have proliferated. But still the great nature parks and the hallowed grounds of history are invaded by forms of recreation and technology-based activity that compromise their integrity. Where should the line be drawn in these crown jewels?
3. From earliest days scientists have used parks as outdoor laboratories. Now, in an evolved and threatened biosphere, many scientists assert the urgent international significance of the great parklands as benchmarks of environmental health and change. Are parks still parks for the enjoyment and edification of the people at large, or are some of them or some parts of them

scientific reserves that may contribute to the survival of mankind and the hosting Earth?

4. As competition for resources increases parks could become expendable. To date most threats to parks stem from encroaching land/water/air uses, but how long before first one then more boundaries are redrawn for urgent—as then defined—utilitarian purposes?
5. As numbers of visitors increase at favored parks we approach more decisions that limit visitor use in favor of resource preservation. Will carrying capacity or the political economy of gateway cities and the tour industry prevail? Can visitor dispersion and more parks be the only alternatives to destruction of park values in a future even more than now stressed for oil and land?
6. Our population ages. To what extent should sunbelt parks be modified in facility and operation to accommodate the aged?
7. Will parks be able to fulfill their potential as field schools for neighboring students, the voters of tomorrow whose environmental ethics will largely determine the fate of the System? Or will constraints on facilities and personnel reduce the educational function to the conventional interpretive programs that now prevail?
8. Will the plight of urban dwellers, many of them disadvantaged, be ameliorated by a comprehensive national urban park system? What form might such a system take, combining jurisdictions and administrations? At a deeper level, what is the role of the National Park Service in related fields of social reconstruction, such as aid to community parks and neighborhood or regional revival projects? Answers to these questions involve equity, dilution of core mission, provisions for inter-agency and inter-jurisdictional cooperation, and the danger of backlash and frustration lacking specially conditioned personnel and administrative funding/continuity.
9. To what extent is the international significance of the U.S. National Park System/Service a determinant or modifier of its intra-societal role and function? The NPS serves as model and technical advisor on many international park planning and development projects; it hosts exponentially increasing numbers of international visitors (with trade balance implications); and as noted above, it is a recognized international scientific resource, with opportunities now emerging for cooperative park and resource management programs with other nations, including a growing liaison with the U.S.S.R.



This has been only a sampler, but it is enough to throw the values/purposes collequy into pandemonium, lacking a compelling philosophy for guidance and a simplifying strategy for definition and selection.

Let us revive the old concept of moral philosophy in this work. The national parks institution of this country was founded upon a value system that found **intrinsic worth** in chosen landscapes and artifacts of the national patrimony. The other side of the founders' equation dealt with another form of intrinsic worth: the benefits accruing to the people from access to and enjoyment of those chosen places and things.

*The parks in all their variety and the varied people who use them are bound together by a system of applied ethics, stated in law and derived from experience. The core is that these places and things are to be passed on unimpaired to future generations. In our evolved and evolving society a flow of new demands knocks on the park gates. The choices of which to let in must always be governed by the founders' equation. By law and logic the hierarchy of values starts with the preservation of the physical patrimony, for without this base the System will erode and the benefits to the people, now and down the generations, will be lost. All other objectives and activities are subordinate to the preservation imperative.*

As to the Service, whose people protect the System, it is in charge of the operation of that imperative. Whether times are good or bad, expansive or constrictive, preservation of the physical base must always be the first order of business. All future options, all variations of access and use, all outreach that complements the System and spreads its benefits depend on the integrity of the physical base. Whatever good can come from the System, for visitors within the boundaries, for those beyond who seek inspirational models, the quality of the resource is what conveys the values.

*The first step in rejuvenation of the Service is tying all of its people, root and branch, back to the physical patrimony within the boundaries of the parks. The touchstone of the System's physical reality is unknown to or only faintly apprehended by too many Service employees.*

An ethical system stands on judgments between right and wrong. In the context of this discussion, aimed at judging uses **within** the System, the terms can be softened to appropriate and inappropriate. To preserve the physical patrimony we must keep out those proposed uses that degrade the patrimony, whether the degradation is physical or in the realm of esthetic intangibles.

*There is no way for the stewards of the System, whether Service personnel or friends of the parks, to avoid moral judgments at these moments of decision. The law helps, experience helps. But finally, there will come a new demand or a nudging into the gray that will force decision. This is usually a lonely business, but it goes with the territory. Sometimes it helps to realize that the value system girding the national parks – preserved land, intrinsic worth, edification of people – is an alien even blasphemous one for large segments of our society. But then utilitarianism has a long history too, and we have met before.*



Building upon the preserved System, what can this institution do for the society that created and sustains it? In the broadest sense the NPS (both System and Service) stands for a profound commitment to a civil society and to citizenship values. In ways that respect cultural diversity and, to the greatest extent possible, individual needs and interests, the NPS will continue to expose the people of this Nation and their guests from abroad to park environments where they can experience the *natural world* in all its depth and beauty; the *world of history*, its events and personages, the cultures of the past and the choices they made that meant success or failure; *recreational and social opportunities* in environments where amenity can flourish and new friends can share a sense of community.

In the hierarchy of values this is the second imperative of the NPS task, to provide for its visitors. The mode is a compound of courtesy and knowledge in a context of management and maintenance that preserves the sense of discovery in wild places and the echo of ancestral footsteps in cultural places.

That differing cultural groups may experience and perceive wilderness or scenery in their own ways, subject only to the preservation of the resources, is no problem. Artists, too, see the same things in different ways. Through discursive association perhaps we can share our various perceptions and thereby enrich each other. Through this means the NPS could sensitize itself to citizens of ethnic and cultural groups that need welcome and invitation to the parks.

In the field of human history we have made significant strides relating to Native Americans, Blacks, and Hispanics, though much more needs to be done. We need to reach out to newly arrived Asians. In all cases we can share the ideas and ideals—from whatever historical tradition—that transcend cultural differences and comprehend cultural diversity. And we must be sure that as the new arrivals make their marks, their histories are incorporated in the flow of our national history.

Sensitization to culturally distinct recreational and social

preferences can lead to modifications of facilities, time zoning, and other methods that accommodate those preferences. It is not contemplated here that a park need become an exclusively ethnic park. The same facilities environment, however, can be adaptively and modestly modified as a matter of courtesy to meet particular needs. We have often done this for other identifiable groups in the past; the spectrum is simply broadening.

The base value is that everyone likes a park. Our task is to welcome equally all citizens to the park family.

The parks, wherever they exist and of all types, offer stabilizing contrast to the relentless change and modernization of our fast-moving culture. In the parks we can experience primordial natural rhythms; glimpse other times, responses, and standards; risk and develop social contacts unthinkable on a city street. The Service is a part of that fast-moving culture, yet it must maintain the authenticity of the heritage properties that provide contrast. It becomes difficult for the Service not to reflect back onto those properties the temporal, shifting standards of the moment. To the extent that the Service gratuitously joins the prevailing pace—madness, some would say—in its management techniques, its personnel policies, its embracing, for example, commercial marketing techniques, it loses touch with its philosophy. If NPS values are to be perpetuated, if the environments of contrast are to survive, if serenity and social amenity are to be our marks on society, we must maintain a proper distance from the vortex. The kinds of sensitivity recommended above do not come out of a computer, a multi-media projector, or a time-and-motion study. This is not the cry of a Luddite. It is the plea of a humanist in a values-centered institution. The superficial kinds of efficiency have their places; so do the deeper kinds.



The discussions on pages 3 to 5 suggest a number of fields in which the values and purposes of the NPS can more actively reach beyond park boundaries, in addition to already established historic preservation programs. The four most important of these in this writer's opinion are 1) expanded cooperation with schools both beyond the boundaries and at field schools and research centers within the parks, 2) urban park programs and associated social and regional reconstruction activities, 3) cooperative science programs, including scientific reserve studies, and 4) international cooperation, with particular attention at this time to recently initiated US-USSR Heritage Preservation Projects, which have direct bearing on the new Alaska parks.

The NPS has a history and a cadre of experience in these fields. They represent direct extension of park ideals; they return direct, supportive benefit to the Service.

Always there are targets of opportunity that require instant commitment based on existing management resources. The US-USSR project is one of these. But long-term commitments, say to a system of

field schools throughout the System, must be carefully prepared, funded, and staffed. Otherwise they will bleed the operating System, be resisted, and die. The same is true of urban programs. In both cases specially selected and trained staffs must operate in a climate of administrative and funding continuity.



Reading over this paper, I detect many biases in selectivity and treatment. The values and purposes subcommittee will have little trouble discounting as appropriate. Perhaps the tone of the paper is more important than its particular, exemplary topics or the recommendations that crop up in my discussion. That tone reflects my conviction that the National Park System/Service—the whole institution—is a very special civilizing and socializing agent in the larger mix of this Nation. What it does and how it does it can fulfill some of the higher purposes of this Nation. It can be a healer and a democratic solvent, within the strict lines of its core mission. The reason is that the parks are dedicated lands—lands dedicated to something more than the daily grind of doing to others and being done to. They are neutral, sanctified ground. They are an exercise in civilization, a kind of refuge for people in a world growing less kind to people. It is because these values are embodied in landscapes—in actual physical places—that they have such power. Anyone can go to a park and see how that power works, on one's self and on others.

That is why the land base comes first, then the visitors, then—to the extent our energies can stretch—other things.

**Notes:**

1. A thought paper solicited by the National Parks and Conservation Association Commission on Research and Resource Management Policy in the National Park Service, and presented to the Commission on July 11, 1988 at a meeting in Washington, D.C.

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