

Feral Fish and Kayak Tracks

—Thoughts on the Writing of a New Leopold Report—

Paul Schullery

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I'm tickled to be here for two reasons. One is that knowing what I know about the history of the National Park Service, I recognize the immense significance of what this commission is up to, and I'm honored to have a chance to take part tonight. The second reason is that believing the things I believe about the parks, and hoping the things I hope for the parks, I really want a shot at you people.

I know that this distinguished Commission will be addressing more than just ecological issues, but I am going to concentrate on those, especially on the Leopold Report. I hope to suggest, not how difficult your job will be, but how amazingly stimulating and exciting it is. Among the many things the parks have given us is a precious and often underappreciated gift: the opportunity to think really hard about where we fit in our world.

A few years ago, as part of an assignment for *Newsweek*—except perhaps for brandishing an automatic weapon, there's nothing that focusses attention in a government office like saying, "Hi, I'm from *Newsweek*"—I interviewed some young men in Bozeman, Montana. These men were expert whitewater kayakers, and they were sneaking into Yellowstone Park and illegally floating some twenty miles of the Yellowstone River in its Black Canyon.

The Black Canyon of the Yellowstone is a spectacular gorge, singular not only for its beauty but for its primitiveness. If you walk or ride its trails you will be moved by what you see, but you may be even more impressed by what you don't see: rare is the river of this size in the contiguous forty-eight that has neither road along it nor boats in it.

For most of Yellowstone's history, that was just fine, but in the past twenty years the skills and equipment of whitewater sport have come a long way. About ten years ago a few local kayakers began eyeing the river, and finally a few of them decided to risk arrest and run it. Some of the ones I talked to had been caught. One had run it eight times and been caught three; the third time they fined him heavily and gave him a one-year suspended jail sentence. This river, he told me, was such a great ride that it was worth it.

The kayakers who sneak into Yellowstone to run the river aren't doing it to make a political statement. They love rivers, and they question the illegality of closing this one to them. One of them put it this way:

'Kayaks don't do much harm. They're not noisy like snowmobiles, they don't dig up trails like hikers, and they don't kill fish like fishermen. Except for where we need to put in and

take out we leave no trace. We don't leave any scars on the water.'

I can quibble with some of that. We now know that simply the passage of nonmotorized rivercraft can have the effect of reducing wildlife use of riparian corridors. We also know that there are many kinds of harm, including esthetic intrusions, and that a bright blue kayak can be a formidable one in an otherwise wild setting. But this man was onto something important, so I'll quote him some more.

'Take a look around the national park system. There are boats on rivers in the Smokies, in Glacier, in the Grand Canyon.... boats were the only way to *explore* the Grand Canyon. The uses that are considered okay in national parks today are mostly established by tradition, and there isn't a kayaking tradition in Yellowstone, so we're out of luck.'

And, as another of the kayakers chimed in, 'Hikers were there first, and that's all they have going for them. We could claim we don't like seeing *them* hiking along with their aluminum and nylon backpacks and digging up the trails with their shoes.'

This was strong stuff for me, because I went to them pretty sure I disapproved of what they were doing. I still did, and still do, but I know they've got a case of sorts. These were environmental activists, smart, nature-loving people. In fact, they had mixed feelings about the possibilities of legalizing kayaking, because they knew that once a bureaucracy got hold of it, there would be patrols and signs and formal put-in stations and the wildness of the whole experience would be diminished. Some of them preferred things to stay the way they were, so the trip would still be pure.

Let me pick at their arguments a little. One of their justifications for allowing rafting was that since it's okay to raft in other parks it's okay to raft in Yellowstone. That assumes a lot of things. It assumes, first, that it really should be okay to raft in those other parks.

I question the appropriateness of the inner tube parades on the Merced or the big streams in the Smokies. I don't question the appropriateness of floating the Grand Canyon as much, but everyone seems to agree that we have a lot to worry about in the Canyon in terms of the kinds and amounts of floating that go on.

But even if we accept his assumption that it's somehow 'right' for people to be floating pleasure craft down the rivers of these other parks, there's the bigger question—does that necessarily mean it's right for Yellowstone too? These areas we call national parks were set aside because each had unique qualities. That suggests to me that we should be prepared to apply unique management principles to them in order to do each of them justice.

Then there's this: the kayaker's argument implies that, because he's doing no more harm than the hiker, he should be allowed in too. The national parks are not democracies. Unlike the national forests, the parks have no legislative mandate to honor any multiple use concept that pretends to guarantee that everyone gets a piece of the pie. Do we perhaps have the right to more or less arbitrarily decide that *this* many uses in *this* area are enough, that others shall be excluded, not

because they are more harmful, or in some ultimate sense wrong, but just because the ones already there are enough?

These are difficult questions, and in the parks, as much as we may buttress our policy decisions with this study or that ecological wisdom, it still often, and I think necessarily, comes down to a certain amount of arbitrary, seat-of-the-pants judgment. Sometimes it's good, sometimes it's awful, usually it's political. But at its best it's one of the most exciting, creative things about the Park Service's mission.

We make so many subjective judgments—appropriateness is such a weaselly term—when we manage parks that nobody should ever feel too sure their use is perfectly right. *All* uses that actually involve entering the park have their faults in terms of what they may do ecologically, *and* in terms of what they may do to diminish the experiences of people engaged in other uses. For many people, there's nothing more distracting than settling in to enjoy a spectacular view of a mountainside and spending the next half an hour watching a blaze-orange backpack slowly move across the slope. For others, there's nothing more comforting than looking across a wilderness lake from a remote campsite and seeing, ten miles away, the bright lights of the park's largest hotel. Life is not simple.

So far I've been talking about parks as people perceive them—the famous 'park experience' we spend so much time analyzing. Let me turn to the other side of the story now, and go under those kayaks to the resource itself. Let me say a few words for fish.

Some years ago I wrote a book with John Varley, who is now Yellowstone's research administrator, about the fish of that park. John is among many other things a great recreational thinker, and one day as we were working on the book he asked me, 'Paul, what are we going to call the fish that are in the park now but weren't there before white men arrived?'

'Well, we'll call them exotics, I guess.'

'No, that's not right. Exotic means 'from another continent,' and the only exotic fish we have in Yellowstone is the brown trout, from Europe. The rainbow, lake, and brook trout are all North American.'

This may seem like a fine point to you, but we had it in mind to write a definitive book, and we didn't want to be careless here. We even considered calling them 'feral,' but that wasn't right, because feral usually suggests something domestic that has gone wild more or less against its keeper's will. You could argue that fish brought to Yellowstone as fry or eggs were domestic, but very few of them were there against anyone's will. We settled for unsatisfying terms like 'non-native,' which to us was a non-solution. It was sort of like the person who, when asked what grog tasted like, said, 'Well, it *doesn't* taste like pork.'

Non-native species are a central issue in preserving park ecosystems, not only because we want to keep them out, but also because there are already so many of them *in*. No park is without some life forms that were introduced artificially, and they offer some of the service's biggest challenges and biggest lessons. Again, I consider the fish.

In 1980, an Ad Hoc Fisheries Task Force of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed that, 'where appropriate and after careful analysis the Director, National Park Service, should be empowered to declare certain introduced species 'naturalized' and managed as natural components of the ecosystem.'

What seemed to be going on was an attempt to come to some final resolution of the problem of how to deal, philosophically, with the presence in a wilderness park of non-native fishes for which there was no known way to remove.

What was being proposed, of course, was the equivalent of shortening the mile by a few hundred yards so that more people could run it in four minutes. They were, as I wrote at the time, trying to trim the yardstick. We can't redefine the naturalness of an area. If we try, we're only fooling ourselves. The area, in its unique and elegant evolutionary character, 'knows' we are only creating a transient paper construct that will never become more than self-delusion.

More important, we don't need to make such artificial designations. Future managers can deal with exotics as have past managers. They can recognize them as unfortunate facts of life. They can use exotics to teach the public the hard lesson that we have caused irrevocable harm to all primitive ecosystems. They can do all those things, and still have an authentic ideal to hold up as a management goal: to come as close as possible to representing primitive America.

Starker Leopold and I had some interesting conversations about this goal. The Leopold Report has taken a bum rap for being idealistic and impractical because it suggested, at one point, that parks should be maintained, 'as nearly as possible in the condition that prevailed when the area was first visited by the white man.' Critics of the Park Service have used this statement out of context. It's one of their favorite cheap shots. They routinely trot out this statement to show that the Park Service's mission is naive and impossible: not only don't we know what the area was like, exactly, when it was first visited by white men, we couldn't possibly keep it that way.

Of course, Starker and his colleagues knew that. The whole Leopold Report is a discussion of just how we can manage and manipulate these areas in order to maintain a 'reasonable illusion' of a primitive state. Most of the report is devoted to coming to terms with the limitations of this goal. What Starker was doing in his statement about maintaining an area's pre-European condition was acknowledging that we dare not trim the yardstick; we can only approach it, we cannot achieve it fully. As long as we have that absolute to aim for, we have a consistent course in principle. Once we start short-circuiting the absolute, as we would have if we'd tried to pretend the European brown trout was native to the Great Smoky Mountains, we immediately lose our bearings. We may never achieve ecological purity, but we can still have purity of principle. It seems clear to me that Starker knew this.

In fact, what I found intriguing about Starker's position, and this came out both in our conversations and in his correspondence, was the extent to which he was willing to dampen and manipulate ecological processes in the interest of maintaining the primitive vignette he

thought was the right one. He knew that what parks were really preserving were wild processes instead of static scenes, and that the real resource was found in those processes as much as in the wildlife or plants.

But one day I was carrying on about the Park Service mowing Big Meadow in Shenandoah National Park. If nature wanted to close up that meadow, I said, what a great lesson for visitors, to see that there were other important things to appreciate about nature than calendar scenery. Starker rhetorically came down on my chest with both feet, something he could do very well. The important thing for people to see there, he insisted—and at the time it seemed it was all he could do to keep from shaking a finger at me as he talked—was what it looked like before they got there. That meadow was unusual, and if it took a little artificial manipulation to maintain it, it was worth it.

We had a similar conversation about fishing. About nine years ago, I wrote an article that stirred up some of my acquaintances in the fly fishing community. I love fishing, but I pointed out that sport fishing was on shaky philosophical grounds in the parks, that there was no reason except hoary tradition that we should be out there harrassing some wildlife populations just because they had the ill fortune to be hairless and lacking big grown eyes. According to the Park Service's accumulated mandates, all the life forms should be treated as if equal. I noted that sport *hunting* was generally eliminated from the parks a century ago, and quoted a wise fisherman who said that, "If fish could scream, a lot of things would be different."

Starker, though he would acknowledge that fish were sort of second-class citizens in the parks, was, like me, a hard-core fisherman, and understood the truth and beauty to be absorbed in a day astream; for him there was a reasonable tradeoff in letting people fish, especially if you controlled their harvest so that all they really took away from the park resource was a deeper appreciation for it.

I could quibble with that, too. You don't have to snare cougars in the mouth with big steel hooks in order to appreciate them, and cougars are even harder to see and appreciate than are fish. But, being a fisherman and pretty much wanting to keep fishing in Yellowstone, I'm inclined to agree with Starker that fishing is a useful compromise of the Park Service's underlying principles. You may not see it that way. Fishing is a use that has been questioned often in recent years, and it's part of a general trend away from human interference with park ecosystems.

The goal of protecting natural systems asks many questions, some of which you will be addressing. I often find myself thinking of some of these questions, and wishing Starker were still alive to give me his unique perspective on them. Let me conclude with a few.

National parks, like all natural areas, still have their vacancy signs out. They are in no sense ecologically finished, and thus pose certain problems for the creative manager. What should we do, for example, if a trout that is currently non-native to a park overcomes a natural barrier and makes its way into the park? What if it colonizes a stream that is the only remaining habitat for an endangered species of sucker? To which

native do we owe allegiance, and do we violate the park's principles if we choose to protect the sucker?

In a similar vein, what if one mammal in a park, because of, say, a natural shift in climate suddenly has a previously nonexistent edge over competitors, and it begins to push other species off the range they formerly shared? I'm pretty sure that Starker would want to meddle in that one, and I'd love to hear what he'd want to try.

Here's another tough one. The basin of Yellowstone Lake is tilting; in a few years the nesting islands of white pelicans may be submerged, drowning one of the great nesting sites in North America. Should we be hauling gravel out there, or celebrating the imponderable power of natural processes?

I know there are a thousand questions like this, and I envy you getting to ask them and consider them. As you prepare to do so, I would like to leave you with two thoughts about the original Leopold Report—two things about it that strike me as important.

First, like most great and enduring documents, it dealt in main principles. It is still at its best in its generalizations, and is at its most dated when it addresses specific management issues in specific parks. Ever since the idea of writing a "new" Leopold Report surfaced, I've thought of how important it is that the document deal in the grand scale.

—We are concerned with an agency whose soul is an unattainable ideal, and whose life is dependent upon creative, organic evolution, both ecological and bureaucratic —

While we must ensure that the rivers are kept flowing and undisturbed, we must also admit that no two are alike and thus no two will necessarily have identical management. While we must ensure that the primitive vignette for which the park is being preserved is kept as whole as possible, we must be sensitive to the unusual esthetic, biological, and even political needs of some part of that whole. We must remember that the Park Service, unlike many agencies, often generates policy from the bottom up, as problems crop up in the field that test and even shape the mandate and principles of the agency. The bureaucratic top must be able to respond to the evolving ecological wisdom of the bottom.

Such sensitivity will come from some compromise between telling the Park Service exactly what it should do in every situation—something nobody knows—and telling it so little that we leave it on its own. We think too much of the Park Service's managers to do the former, and we think too much of ourselves to do the latter. We must strike a balance that gets the best of both the agency's powers and the collective wisdom of the agency's friends and watchdogs. Only in that way lies any hope of success.

The second thing that has always struck me about the Leopold Report is even less tangible. It is something that has struck me about

many of the things Starker wrote or helped write. I am reminded of one of the most enduring of all American documents, the Declaration of Independence—that masterpiece of balance and principle. Thomas Jefferson was chosen by his committee to write it because his prose was, in the words of John Adams, 'remarkable for the peculiar felicity of expression.' Peculiar felicity of expression...in a different way, and for different reasons, I find the Leopold Report to have a similar quality. I know that this is hard to quantify, and may seem peripheral to the main mission of working out the principles. But if, as I suspect, great principles are by nature well-expressed principles, then my wish for you is that you produce a document that is not only brilliantly thought out but beautifully said. That way lies immortality. Thank you.

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Society Notes

Going into Our Tenth

The George Wright Society will enter its tenth year of life on August 18, 1989. We began in August 1980, and by November of that year had all of 9 members—8 of whom constituted the Officers and Directors of the Board. By the end of 1981—our stated 'Charter Year'—112 had become Charter Members.

The first issue of the Forum, which was to be 'a newsletter to enable members to correspond with one another,' was produced in the Summer of 1981. It had 12 pages, half of which contained Society Notes of various kinds.

As we begin our tenth year, Forum goes to 950 addressees: members and subscribers 375; US National Park Service parks and offices 354; Canadian Parks Service parks and offices 165; State Park directors 50; overseas 6. Of the original 112 Charter Members, 73 are still members in good standing; 13 are 'lost' (i.e., no known address); 2 have died.

Some «Lost Persons»

Over the years we've lost track of 14 members. No doubt some of these might not wish to continue membership—for any number of reasons. But in the event that anyone reading this might know the whereabouts of the following persons, we'd appreciate having their address:

Larry Barden
Denise Domain
Christopher Wright Lloyd
Robert G. McLean
Martin Price

Jennifer Bjork
L. M. Ehrhart
Catherine Lloyd
Ingrid C. Olmsted

E. Jennifer Christy
Judd A. Howell
Donald E. Magee
Charles E. Peterson
Benjamin J. Zerbey