The National Parks: Political Versus Professional Determinants of Policy

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There are many diverse opinions and views regarding the proper direction for our national park policy. As a scholar, former seasonal, and one who is concerned with both the protection of the national parks, and the National Park Service, I offer a perspective drawn from the fields of public policy, public administration and political science. It is my hope that this article furthers the policy debate so admirably begun in Forum.

Understanding Park Policy: Setting the Framework

Almost all debate about the purpose of and the policy for national parks begins with the 1916 Act which created the U.S. National Park Service (NPS), and especially the section which established the so-called "use and preservation" mandate. This section of the Organic Act has had different meanings to different people at different times. It has also had different meanings to the NPS, both historically and within the agency at any given period. Yet, it remains the touchstone for everyone concerned with the purpose of the national parks. In an important sense this section performs the same function as the U.S. Constitution has for the larger political system; it has remained flexible enough to adjust to changing conditions and demands. In the 1920s, the agency's first Directors, Stephen Mather and Horace Albright, used the 1916 Act to promote visitation in the parks to establish a constituency for them and to make it more difficult for the Forest Service to assert control over the parks.¹

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1986 superintendency course held at Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area, and a longer version of it can be found in the Public Administration Review, May-June, 1989.
Today, this same section is used to limit visitation in the name of preserving "unimpaired" park resources. Yet curiously, no one has really tried to examine what those involved in drafting this section meant by such terms as "enjoyment" and "unimpaired" in the context of 1916.2 Perhaps the discovery of such intentions is impossible today, but such information might help to provide some guidance on possible interpretation of this important section.

What is perhaps more important, from a policy perspective, is the determination of who has the most influence over how the 1916 Act's mandate is interpreted and implemented. One of the most useful models for studying these questions of policy has been provided by Francis Rourke.3 Rourke's perspective centers on agency power. In the case of park policy, he thus describes what conditions create power for the National Park Service. Rourke asserts that bureaucratic or agency power has two components, politics and expertise. Agencies can use either, or ideally both, to increase agency power. Upper level managers are likely to rely on the politics component, while technical specialists favor expertise.4 Enlarging his framework, these two measures can be said to apply to the entire decision environment surrounding national park policy and not just the NPS. Park policy decisions can be made by experts (the Park Service), by the political system (other actors), or by both. Drawing on the 1916 Organic Act mandate, decisions made within the park policy area can be said to be oriented more towards "use" or towards "preservation." Thus a two-dimensional continuum can be used to locate actors in the park policy arena, as shown in Figure 1.

Making Park Policy

Experts and Preservation

Beginning in Cell I are actors who favor park preservation over park use and who are Park Service professionals (hence experts). These actors believe that their expertise should guide park policy decisions towards park preservation. One group of experts in this area consists of park scientists. They are generally specialists who perform research in national parks in areas of their professional expertise. Their professional orientations can lead them to startling views of the national parks, as illustrated by the following scenario outlined in Forum:

What happens.....when park science is viewed as an end in itself rather than as a tool of park management? When significant numbers of scientific and lay people (presumably environmentalists) view certain parks primarily as scientific benchmarks, gene pools, and relict environments of inestimable value to mankind in a trembling biosphere?

An extreme scenario might go like this: First, certain parks or segments thereof are designated ecological reserves. Second, scientific study, not enjoyment and use, becomes the controlling purpose in such reserves. Third, traditional park management is relieved in favor of a science management board.5 Visitor use of parks becomes secondary, subordinate to the needs of science, based on this scenario.
A somewhat less radical description of park scientists' positions is the belief that research should guide decisions regarding visitor use. A good example is the "limits of acceptable change" (LOC) concept. Under this tool, visitor use of park resources could be managed and controlled to minimize change in park resources and the park experience valued by visitors. In theory, parks are preserved "for the benefit of future generations," according to the 1916 Act. The danger, as Douglas Wellman has noted, is that park visitors may be perceived as "threats" to be managed to protect resources, rather than as integral to the NPS mission.

Another group within the Park Service that also favors expertise-centered preservation management are resource management specialists. They differ somewhat from park scientists in that they are supposed to be on-the-ground managers of park resources (rather than park rangers, park interpreters, park maintenance employees, etc.). They often have advanced degrees in a natural resource-related subject.

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Figure 1. National Park Policy Continuums

In 1986, a fascinating example of intra-agency conflict arose between park resource specialists and traditional management at Yellowstone National Park. The Yellowstone Park Preservation Council, consisting primarily of park employees, was formed to counter what it says was the "pro-development" (pro-use) bias of park management. Members of the Council felt that they could "make an important contribution to the park's planning process because of their diverse scientific
and professional backgrounds. Park management, the Council charged, was too oriented to the demands of local congressional delegations. Thus, the Yellowstone Park Preservation Council appears to fit into the expert-preservation cell created by the two continuums.

Policy Generalists, Preservation, and Use

Controversies over Yellowstone relate to Cell II in Figure 1. Most of the key decisions regarding individual parks are made by park superintendents, with some supervision by regional and national management. Park managers (and upper level managers, as well) are policy generalists. A generalist, according to Rourke, "is likely to be far more sensitive than professionals to the need for compromise in pursuing objectives — the necessity of settling for half a loaf, or of taking the view of other groups and organizations into account in reaching decisions," thus moving the managers down the politics/expertise continuum towards the politics end. Rourke also points out that professionals are not comfortable with this "compromising" nature of their generalist manager-bosses and are much more pure in their attitudes towards decision making, which seems to describe the Yellowstone Park Preservation Council.

During the 1984-1986 controversy over tar sands development in southern Utah, professionals served a helpful function for management. The NPS and Bureau of Land Management prepared a joint environmental impact statement to help them decide whether to allow leasing of the tar sands resource. Information provided in that document by park resource professionals was used by the NPS to oppose leasing because of the potential harm to several park units in the area. The final decision was elevated to the secretarial level, where Secretary Hodel chose to make no final decision on leasing. Mineral development is not a traditional use of most parks, but in this case the information provided by resource professionals was essential in supporting management's decision.

When a more traditional use of parks is contemplated, the situation is rendered more ambiguous and the role of natural resource professionals is less determinant. A controversy has raged at Yellowstone over what to do with the Fishing Bridge park development which is said by wildlife biologists to be located in important grizzly habitat. Initial NPS plans to relocate most visitor facilities away from the Fishing Bridge area have been slowed and altered because of local pressure from a park gateway community and members of Congress, who feared the relocation would have had an economic impact on Cody, Wyoming, a community close to Fishing Bridge. It is not clear whether more scientific information on the grizzly could have brought about a more preservationist decision in this case. The Fishing Bridge example suggests that scientists and resource professionals are more helpful in some situations than in others. They are most useful when resources are clearly threatened, either by outside activities or by attempts to expand park uses greatly, or when a preservation decision does not have an obvious
impact on traditional park use. Experts may be of less value when their expertise cannot clearly resolve a choice between use and preservation.

What should usually be seen, then, is park management walking the line between preservation and use because of competing signals and demands placed on them by other political actors, while they attempt to prevent the decision environment from becoming completely political. Natural resource expertise, in many cases, is simply one of many factors to be taken into account by park managers. They may favor resource protection over visitor use, but the demands placed on them by others may often preclude the public appearance of such pro-preservation sentiment. As Robert Barbee, Yellowstone's superintendent, said about Fishing Bridge: "The political bottom line was underestimated. It's as simple as that. The parks are very much the children of politics. It is naive to think that politics doesn't have an influence on policy." Compromise is "not something the Park Service would have chosen," Barbee is reported to have said. The obvious question is how the Park Service can make acceptable compromises, by learning how to manage that political bottom line better.

Politics and Park Use

Cell III of Figure 1 includes decision makers and groups that are more in favor of park use and people who desire to use the political process to have their decisions "imposed" on the Park Service from outside. The use of the word "imposed" can connote a number of different behaviors and strategies. For example, the local interests involved with the Fishing Bridge decision approached members of their congressional delegation to affect the Fishing Bridge plan. More generally, the Reagan Administration reflected the use of presidential appointment powers to locate key park policy decisions in the hands of assistant secretaries and secretaries of Interior. Many students of public administration have noted the increasing tendency of presidents to use appointees to carry out presidential policies. The Reagan Administration appointed administrators who favored park use over preservation, and those appointees removed some decisions from park management and located them instead at higher levels of administration, leading to the charge that it was politicizing the parks and the Park Service.

George Hartzog, a former NPS Director, has charged that politicization had its successful beginnings during the Carter Administration. In this case it was environmentalists appointed by Carter who were politicizing the Park Service. During Hartzog's tenure the NPS developed a "three-tiered" management policy, dividing park units into natural, historic, and recreational categories. The Carter appointees threw out these policies in favor of a single policy. To Hartzog: "Suddenly everything had become the same and, thus, nothing was any longer special—not even Yellowstone. Instead of America's great national parks as crown jewels, all areas in the system were now jewels in the crown."

In 1988, the House of Rep-
representatives, led by congressional park policy specialists like Morris Udall (Cell IV), passed legislation which would have required that the Director of the NPS be appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate for a five-year term. In addition, many key functions of the Secretary were transferred to the Director’s office, except the budget.\textsuperscript{17} The legislation was an attempt to address the politicizing discussed above. All of the Republican House members opposed the bill, and the Senate took no action on it.\textsuperscript{18} The Reagan Administration has allies in this pro-use, political approach to park policy. A 1987 book by Don Hummel, who was a national park concessionaire, has argued that the NPS is too preservation oriented. He decries what he feels is a "locking-up" of the parks by environmentalists and objects to their political influence on the Park Service. Hummel argues that "all National Park policies should be analyzed for anti-concession, anti-access intent and consequence."\textsuperscript{19} Because the NPS "caved in" to environmentalist pressure, according to his view, the agency "must be made to understand its legal responsibility to provide 'public use and enjoyment' of the parks for the common person and not just for the highly sensitive and elite nature lover."\textsuperscript{20} One way to "make the Park Service understand" is through the use of political appointees as agency policy makers, who would presumably stress the use aspect of the NPS mission.

\textbf{Politics and Park Preservation}

Actors in Cell IV favor park preservation over park use, but they also appear to favor having park decisions made through the political process. Important actors located in this cell are environmentalists. In 1983 a coalition of environmental groups declared in a major policy document that "any activity which degrades their (the parks) pristine quality is contrary to the purpose for which they were established,"\textsuperscript{21} Almost any activity could be prohibited under such a definition. It might be argued that this statement represents a strategic positioning on the part of these groups, taken to set off a position which they could then compromise on. Yet it is rare to find much that is supportive of park use from the environmental interest groups. In the summer of 1988, the National Parks and Conservation Association (NPCA), an environmental group whose primary focus is the national parks, objected to potential NPS development of the Needles campground area in Canyonlands National Park in Utah. The NPCA opposed enlargement of a relatively small campground and the provision of several flush toilets.\textsuperscript{22} NPCA opposition did not discuss any potential damage to park resources. This example, drawn from the margin in terms of park use versus park preservation policy, is illustrative of certain environmentalist attitudes towards visitor use of parks.

More importantly, environmentalists expect their vision of the parks to be the vision implemented and adhered to by the Park Service. To put it differently, environmentalists appear to expect and demand that the Park Service adhere to a strongly preservationist definition of proper park
politics to factionalize, leading to a system of government "of the activists, by the activists, and for the activists." The danger, to Heclo, is that "a large and growing proportion of all Americans are reporting that government and politics have become so complex that they cannot understand what is going on, that decisionmaking is in the hands of interests outside their control." Conducting a dialogue about the parks solely in the language of science and ecology may have the potential to contribute to this problem.

The NPCA issued its National Park System Plan, timed in part to coincide with the 1988 elections. The NPCA made a series of recommendations regarding the "preservation" side of park policy. Those recommendations included appropriating 50 million additional dollars a year for resource management, mandating annual NPS reports on park resources, creating a new research division within the NPS, and increasing scientific research in the parks. The "use" policy recommendations were less clear. NPCA stated that "the NPS should not continue (emphasis added) to strive for maximum accommodation of visitors—by widening roads or enlarging parking lots—when such use exceeds park carrying capacities or impairs park resources." Instead, the NPS should strive for providing "compatible" use which would not impair preservation. Compatible use apparently refers to a "high quality" visitor experience, something the NPCA said the Park Service was "unwilling to make value judgments" about, instead opting for recreational activities which were inapprop-
riate in the national parks. The NPCA discussion makes no attempt to outline what it considers appropriate use of parks, leading to the conclusion that the association is more concerned with park preservation, and favors NPS decisions favoring preservation.

NPCA's solution to the problems of the parks is similar to that of some Congressional park policy specialists. The Association wants to make the Park Service an independent agency outside the Department of the Interior. The group advocates the selection of an agency Director subject to approval by the Senate, as well as the creation of a Board of Regents reflecting "business acumen, scientific expertise, and citizen preservation advocacy." The NPCA would appear to have more ability to influence park policy under such an arrangement.

NPS Director Mott requested key personnel in the agency, including regional directors and some superintendents, to forward comments on the NPCA plan to his office. What is perhaps the most notable facet of these comments is where they take issue with the NPCA plan. There are three areas of disagreement which have bearing on this article. These areas concern whether the NPS should be made an independent agency, the role of visitor use, and the role of research.

Almost all commentors, including the Director, disagreed with the suggestion that NPS be removed from the Department of the Interior. Comments ranged from supporting the "buffering" provided NPS as an Interior agency, to Director Mott's perceptive comment that "I suspect that NPCA would prefer more political guidance from an Administration that shares your views on how parks should be managed." Many NPS comments also took NPCA to task for not recognizing the "use" aspect of the NPS organizational mission: "There is little concern in dealing with the issue of providing recreational opportunities. A blueprint for the future of the park system would need to provide a balanced approach between recreation and conservation for the mission of the Service." The comments frequently mentioned visitor surveys showing over 90% of park visitors satisfied with park experiences, leading one commentor to assert that "you would never know, reading the subject sections, that parks are for people also."

Finally, almost all commentors resisted the separation of research from direct linkage to park management. As one commentor noted: "By segregating research from field realities, we risk creating an 'academic' community which will be more concerned with pure research and science for its own sake than with resolution of pressing field problems." Another commentor provided an example of the above when he noted that the separation of research from management could lead to a repeat "of the famous Isle Royale case where the research funding was studying populations of field mice when the real pressing issue at Isle Royale was the wolf-moose relationship." Perhaps the most telling criticism came from one superintendent who noted that "this plan provides for an ideal park system with unlimited funding and free of economic,
political, and social restraints."

The Future of Park Policy

What, then, might be the future of park policy? Will it be focused on preservation or on use, and who will be the actors who have the most control over that policy? Analysis may reasonably start with the role of the Park Service, as it is in charge of managing the parks. The NPS faces two questions when it comes to park policy. One has to do with whether the agency will manage more for preservation or more for use. The second is how to sustain whatever policy decision the agency chooses to make, whether it be focused on use or on preservation.

In 1988, the Park Service revised its management policies for the first time since 1978. These policies, currently in draft form, include a general statement on the use/preservation management question. If one simply reads the draft policies, however, an incomplete picture emerges of what must have been an important policy battle.

A 1986 internal "draft" of the 1988 draft management policies stated that "National Park policy holds that the 1916 Organic Act refers (not once but twice) to a singular "purpose...to conserve," with the stipulation that the Service will provide for the enjoyment of areas in a manner that does not "impair" them." This statement in the draft was reviewed by Assistant Secretary William Horn, who responded quite emphatically to it in notes written in the margin of the document. Horn commented that "as a lawyer, I would disagree with this. The law is straight-forward. Conserve and provide enjoyment does not impair the conserve objective." He went on to say that "enjoyment is an objective...not a mere stipulation." Someone in the NPS was apparently trying to redefine the relative positions of use and preservation within the park system, something with which Assistant Secretary Horn, a political appointee, disagreed.

The rewritten draft management policies do not reflect the subordination of use to preservation. Rather, the NPS appears to have returned to the more traditional "weighing" of the two management tasks facing the agency.

Only in those instances when impairment is a consequence of current activity does the conservation mandate take precedence.

There will inevitably be some tension between conservation of the resource and the public use and enjoyment of the resource.

...if a development might irreparably damage an established park resource, the development will be postponed or reconfigured until it can be established whether "might" is "will" or "will not" within reasonable limits of certainty. Absent that assurance, the action will not be taken.

Each park unit is to be managed under both its specific enabling legislation and under the Organic Act. Thus NPS policy regarding use and preservation is to be a policy of some tension and some judgment, with use an equal management task to preservation.

The next question which arises is whether NPS decisions will be made solely by the agency or
partly within the agency and partly by other actors. Another way to state this question is to ask whether the NPS fits the model of an agency which has a great deal of control over most of its decisions. A recent example of such an agency is the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) during the 1960s. NASA was given a specific, technologically-based task to accomplish (landing a man on the moon), and the rest of the political system appeared to defer to NASA on how to accomplish that task. Romzek and Dubnick describe NASA as having what they term a "professional accountability" system during the 1960s. Under this system, "the central relationship is similar to that found between a layperson and an expert, with the agency manager taking the role of the layperson and the workers making the important decisions that require their expertise." It is doubtful that the NPS fits the model of such an agency. If the agency task were to manage parks as scientific research preserves, without the additional task of providing for public use, such a deference to expertise might be possible, if not desirable. But that is not the mission of the Park Service. The celebrated American writer Wallace Stegner has suggested what the mission of the Park Service is about. Parks are, he says, "absolutely American, absolutely democratic, they reflect us at our best. Without them millions of American lives would have been poorer." What does Stegner's phrase mean in terms of public policy and the NPS mission? It means that the Park Service is not an expert agency but more of a responsive one. A responsive agency, in the words of Romzek and Dubnick, is concerned with questions of representation, access, and responsiveness to public demands. "The potential constituencies include the general public, elected officials, agency heads, agency clientele, other special interest groups, and future generations. Regardless of which definition of constituency is adopted, the administrator is expected to be responsive to their policy priorities and programmatic needs." This type of agency they define as "politically accountable" rather than professionally accountable. Such an agency is thus squarely within Stegner's definition of parks as "absolutely democratic."

The NPS might do well to be constantly on the lookout for managers who understand the role of such a responsive, politically accountable agency. Being able to sustain decisions for a responsive agency may have more to do with building consensus among the agency's constituencies than with dominant reliance on science and expertise. Science and expertise are tools for a manager in building consensus, not ends in themselves.

Building consensus is hard, but not impossible. For the Park Service, consensus building should start from the understanding that national parks are essentially public spaces. It thus behooves the NPS to try to engage the public to participate in decisions about the parks. The NPS has done this at times in the past; the management plan for Yosemite was written with extensive public involvement.

Yet, more is possible for the Park Service. Charles Reich has
argued that it is the role of the public administrator to help the public deliberate over difficult policy choices. "Rather than view debate and controversy as managerial failures that make policymaking and implementation more difficult, the public administrator should see them as natural and desirable aspects of the formation of public values, contributing to society's self-understanding." 48 Thus, "the adroit public administrator can carefully select concrete local examples to set the stage for a national debate over difficult value-laden policy choices." 49 Park managers could set the park policy stage by presenting their visitors with the difficult choices that they must make as managers.

In conclusion, national park policy will continue to be decided in the political arena. The parks mean too many things to too many different groups and individuals to expect that this should be otherwise, as the policy continuums indicate. The best hope for the parks could lie with the Park Service, if it can revitalize the political skills and resources to go along with its increasing development of natural resource management skills. There are no easy prescriptions on how to do this, but there are role models in past agency directors, such as Stephen Mather, Horace Albright, and George Hartzog, among others. As Hartzog has noted, an NPS director must possess "managerial skills, awareness of park values, respect for scientific knowledge, appreciation of professional integrity and a lively understanding of politics—that medium through which the public gets its common business done." 50

The Park Service stands in the middle of the sometimes shrill debate between environmentalists and user interests over the purpose of the parks. Yet this stance also provides opportunities. As Stephen Bailey once wrote:

Public servants are always faced with making decisions based upon imperfect information and the inarticulate insinuations of self-interest into the decisional calculus. Charity is the virtue which compensates for inadequate information and for the importunities of self in the making of judgments designed to be fair.....Its exercise makes of compromise not a sinister barter but a recognition of the dignity of competing claimants. It fortifies the persuasive rather than the coercive arts. It stimulates the visions of the good society without which government becomes a sullen defense of existing patterns of privilege. 51

Park Service employees who take Bailey's advice to heart have the opportunity to provide parks truly for all.

Notes


2. Although there are excellent histories of the Park Service's early days, none of those histories examine the question of intent of the 1916 Organic Act. For a thoughtful discussion of how some people may have viewed use and preservation in an earlier period see Joseph Sax, Mountains Without Handrails (Ann Arbor:University of Michigan Press, 1980). Sax discusses the ideas of Frederick Law Olmstead, architect of Central Park, who wrote a
management plan for Yosemite in 1865. Olmstead is the father of the man given credit for authoring the key passage of the 1916 NPS Organic Act, Frederick Law Olmstead, Jr.


7. Wellman, p. 264.


12. *Idem*.

13. *Idem*.


17. U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, "Establishing a National Park System Review Board, and for Other Purposes" (House Report 100-742) June 30, 1988. There have always been members of Congress who have taken special interest in national park policy. They cannot all be viewed as "dictating" park policy to the Park Service, but many can be viewed as being very concerned with the protection of park resources, such as Senator John Chaffee of Rhode Island and the now-retired Congressman John Seiberling of Ohio.


21. National Parks and Conservation Association and the Wilderness Society, *Towards a Premier National Park System*, (mimeo copy 1984), p.5. In the December 5, 1988 issue of *High Country News* the argument surfaces again. George Frampton, President of the Wilderness Society asserts that the Organic Act "says that the Service (NPS) should conserve resources so as to leave them unimpaired, and that unfortunately the Service is not now meeting that mandate."


23. Ronald Foresta, *America's National Parks and Their Keepers*, (Washington-
24. Ibid., p.122.
26. Ibid., p.312
29. Idem.
30. Consult Joseph Sax's *Mountains Without Handrails* for this discussion.
32. Letter from NPS Director Mott to Paul Pritchard, President of NPCA, contained in the comment file on the NPCA *National Park System Plan*, Office of Policy, NPS, Washington, DC, and comments of the Superintendent, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, in comment file.
33. Comments of the Regional Director, North Atlantic Region, NPS, in comment file.
34. Various comments of NPS personnel, in comment file.
35. Comments of the Chief, Ranger Activities Division, NPS, in comment file.
36. Comments of the Superintendent, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, NPS, in comment file.
37. Comments of the Superintendent, Lassen Volcanic National Park, NPS, in comment file.
38. Comments of the Superintendent, Lassen Volcanic National Park, NPS, in comment file.
40. Idem.
43. Ibid., p.227.
45. Romzek and Dubnick, p.229.
46. Idem.
47. Hartzog, p.273-74.
48. Wellman, p.221-228.
50. Ibid., p.1638.

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**Potpourri**

.....continued from page 25

**International Perspectives on Cultural Parks**

GWS member (and former GWS President) Doug Scovill has sent Forum a copy of "International Perspectives on Cultural Parks," which was sent to him by Robert C. Heyder, Superintendent, Mesa Verde, with the following note:

"The George Wright Society was an important contributor to the funding and success of the First World Conference on Cultural Parks which was held at Mesa Verde National Park between September 16 and 21 of 1984. The publication of the proceedings of the Conference officially brings the conference to a close. We have enclosed a copy of the proceedings for your library...."

**Potpourri**..continued on page 40