

Thoughts & Observations from an ex-Regional Director

Howard Chapman
San Rafael, California

•

(Howard Chapman, formerly Regional Director of USNPS's Western Region, delivered these remarks at the opening plenary session of the Society's El Paso conference last November.)

•

It is a distinct honor to be asked to address this conference—but even more so, I am humbled by the responsibility I shoulder here in the shadow of those who first led the way by their stewardship of the early U.S. National Parks. Those

people made significant contributions to park management on a worldwide scale as they formulated the early policies and standards for that fledgling System. Then, as subsequent generations picked up the unfinished work, each had to ponder his or her ability to live up to the challenge laid down by these early pioneers. Too often we take for granted these personages whose names we take for our academies or our forums where we find common goals. It is as though we take on their cloak of authority and seek to use it as a shield, behind which we wish to advance our own ideas and rationalize where we break with the past, because we feel our situation is so unique—for after all, we say, times have changed. And yet all the time we espouse the philosophy that parks are forever! To which I would add: *but in what condition?*

Speaking of change, I would be the first to agree that there is change. As individuals, you and I change, and collectively we change. I will readily admit that retirement has brought change to me! There was a day when retirement was the furthest thing from my mind; I could not even think of leaving the organization except in a pine box. But, unbeknown to me, I was becoming lethargic. Inside of me selfish personal goals as well as comfort levels were replacing what I wanted others to believe was committed devotion to the parks—to the visitor and all the great things that parks could become. But events in our lives have strange ways of breaking with the past and describing new horizons. It has been no different with me. I look back and see actions set in self-protecting and self-rewarding patterns that were justified by saying, "But that was the way the system

worked!" However, *now*—there is a new freedom. An exhilarating one, in fact, though there are limitations. Now I stand as an individual. If I am listened to, *maybe* it is because of what I have to say, but *certainly* not because of a position title that expects attention. If there is truth and meaning in what I say it is because of the substance of the remark and not because my position demanded acceptance. Unbridled by the expectations and limitations of an organization, I can now view events from a different perspective. I have to remember, however, that my exhortations may bring retorts of being "bitter," "unrealistic," or just plain windy. For there is always a price to pay.

It was Horace Albright who said some years ago, "As bureaus grow older, and men, too, advance in age, and as bureaus inevitably take on new activities and responsibilities, they tend to become too bureaucratic, have more red tape and more rules and regulations, and in time get farther away from the people, and ultimately will become just another bureau." Sadly, if Mr. Albright were alive today I have no illusions but that he would say that it has come to pass. This is a harsh assessment and I do not escape my own part in bringing it about. But, equally, and with whatever hazard there is associated with it, I intend to speak out because of the one thing that has not changed—the idea personified in the parks themselves—the National Park System. I owe it to Frank Kowski who beat it into my head at the training center that "System" and "Service" are not interchangeable when speaking of National Parks. He meant it when he said, "And don't you ever forget it!"

When I retired I set a goal to visit every unit in the U.S. National Park

System, and no park visited during my active career was to count. Now, after three and a half years, I have been to 237 areas from the Virgin Islands to Aniakchak, from Cabrillo to Lowell. As I believe many others visitors experience, I have been moved by visualizing the struggle at Antietam or to imagine life as it might have been along the Chaco wash. In each case it is the scene, the subtleties of natural process, or the historic events that have moved my senses and brought awe, appreciation, or understanding. The park's existence as a unit of the National Park System gives geographic location and the expectation of its preservation and how it will be cared for.

Which brings me to the USNPS and those who bear responsibility for the care and management of the System. In whatever way we wish to describe the period of time when Horace Albright, George Wright, Joseph Dixon, Ben Thompson, or Harold Bryant left their mark, the Service would do well to pay attention to their admonishments, their basic honesty in their efforts, as well as their fundamental commitment to the parks. They came from an era where it was the idea that was important—not who said it or how it was said!

However, as my career progressed I sensed a meddling by political forces in the affairs of the National Park Service. Then, in my latter years, the involvement of the Interior Department became more and more intense until I felt it personally. It caused me to reflect back to that fateful night in October 1963 as superintendents were gathered at the closing banquet of their Service-wide conference in Yosemite, when Interior's John Carver rose to ring down the curtain. Instead of sending forth

those park men recharged with new energy, he chose to berate them for their spirit and commitment to their Service. He spoke of the homage they owed to their parent, the Interior Department. He was also critical of them as being insular and unresponsive. He made it clear that every park entrance sign would include the inscription "U.S. Department of the Interior" *above* and in larger letters than "National Park Service"! Let it be clear on every mountain, in every valley and across the breadth of the land: the National Park Service was neither one nor only!

Before we allow ourselves to rise up and defend the Service as an end unto itself, we must remember *what* some of our own parks would teach us—if we are listening! That is: our government is of the people, by the people, and for the people. Somewhere, then, the politics of carrying out a citizen's expectations must meet the steward who minds the parks! While I may question some of Mr. Carver's directives and I may be sympathetic to some crushed egos, I have to admit that he did have the principle correct.

In one way, Mr. Carver was demonstrating the Department's envy of the National Park Service's pride in its role as steward of the nation's heritage. It had not gone unnoticed that there had been a proud history of professional men within the ranks who had risen to eminence, such as George Wright. With an academic background, seasoned experience, and a professional commitment, he and others like him had set high standards as they brought recognition to their fields. Their leaders—such as Mather, Albright, and Drury—were respected and deeply committed to the parks' mission. They demonstrated beyond any

doubt the importance of the integrity of the park's resource and they worked tirelessly to build support for the emerging U.S. National Park System. No one questioned their motives; they were for the parks—first, last, and always! It was little wonder there was an *esprit de corps*.

Then, as events unfolded through the succeeding years, we see the direction of Departmental involvement becoming more and more active, though sometimes hardly obvious, while at other times almost blatant. Again, however, let us be very clear: there is a place for that interface, but not where it was headed a year ago. What was being proposed was to place several senior park superintendents in the Senior Executive Service. Playing to the recognition of the incumbents, the Department said it wished to provide pay and bonus incentives for the demands made on those individuals. Except the harsh reality was that the positions would come under the direct influence of the Assistant Secretary, who would control appointment, promotion, transfer, and performance evaluation. Thus, Mr. Carver's principle had moved past its logical relationship with the Director of the Service, only to bolt past the Regional Directors and down to the final bastions where lasting decisions are (or were) made. Only when the Congress threatened legislation did the Department move to shelve the proposal.

The array of influence the political appointees of the Department have had in usurping the authority of the Director in the day-to-day affairs of the National Park Service is almost unbelievable. We have seen the Assistant Secretary require appointments to Service-wide positions at GS/GM-13 and above [i.e., the high-

est-paid positions] be cleared in that office. We have seen the Director being required to create new positions to place high-graded Departmental people in the Washington Directorate. We have seen the Secretary attempt to force an office reorganization that was opposed by the Director, and only after being faced with punitive legislation did the Secretary back off. We have seen the Director testify before Congress in opposition to important legislation designed to give essential protection to a park's integrity. We have seen the Director testify before Congress and voice no strong objection to the politicizing of his major superintendencies. Thus, what we have seen has been the Assistant Secretary of the Interior taking over from the Director as the decision-maker of the National Park Service.

Against that backdrop of political manipulation, particularly as it has occurred over the last ten years against the National Park Service, it is not surprising that I have found disarray in the field. It is only by virtue of the field people's devotion to the Service's mission that the parks function at all today. There is no one in charge, they say. Information is passed to outside sources in hopes of accomplishing that which can't be done within the organization. In some areas they believe the concessioner virtually runs the park. They see political maneuvering that affects people's assignments as well as driving decisions that affect the very resources the employee is trying to protect. Many complain that personnel management lacks integrity, that it's who you know that gets you ahead, and out of utter frustration trying to resolve position issues, they file complaints that only result in more bitterness. After being

told of significant increases in a particular year's budget, they frequently find whatever increases were to be passed on to them wiped out by central office assessments. Finally, they are told again and again that they will be expected to do more with less and less, while their own dwindling paychecks in some cases hardly raises them above the poverty level. To many employees there is the feeling the organization is no longer their champion.

I believe the spirit of an organization lives or dies by its leadership. I speak of a leadership that shows concern for the principles of fairness, is open in its deliberations, that builds loyalty and respect as it shows an unflinching allegiance to the organization's mission. Inspired leadership can be cited time and again as being the catalyst that has brought people together for the achievement of goals far beyond their wildest expectations. But, when the leaders are manipulated by faceless political appointees, they lose control of their organization and they fall prey to every political pressure point that is brought their way. Then, when the political intrigue becomes a fact of life to virtually every level of the Service, it is little wonder that some members of Congress believe the Service must be reorganized in ways to minimize and control this political influence.

A spin-off of this political manipulation over the years has been to direct more and more attention to process and procedure—the very elements that Mr. Albright warned would diffuse the focus from the basic mission and thereby cause the Park Service to lose touch with the park resource and its visitor. In some parks, one is left to believe that internal process and procedure are more important than visitor service.

As an example: Contrary to a time when service to visitors was paramount, the message transmitted to the field now seems to be that it is more important for a limited staff to be together to meet, write reports, and be available when the central office calls than it is to spread their members to cover weekends in the off-season. To be sure there are fewer visitors; yet the visitor in need of help, be it for information or emergency assistance, has fewer options open to them in the off-season than the visitor under similar circumstances in the regular season. Out of sight, out of mind, the off-season visitor runs a distant last compared with meeting deadlines for reports that for all practical purposes are filed away and forgotten. Nearly 300 reports were on the report calendars of every park, large or small, only a few years ago. Today you know better than I the exact number required, but, more important, I can tell you the visitor—and the management of the resource—stands wanting in many instances. But then, complaints about reports have always been around, and probably will be as long as there is an abundance of the central office people who generate them!

After being exposed to Watergate, Iran-Contra, the savings and loan scandal, as well as the recent U.S. federal budget deficit issue, the public has become skeptical about government—its integrity as well as its responsiveness. While the National Park Service has a high approval rating, it is not something that is so impervious that shortcomings won't be noticed and could become embarrassments.

Here's an example. In 1980, after a long and intense effort of some eight years, the Service approved a master plan for Yosemite that set a

goal to de-urbanize the Valley by 1990, the park's 100th birthday. Little realizing we were entering a decade which would best be described as the Age of Adversaries, we sought in that plan to meet the public's expectations about lessening the impacts made by automobiles and overnight accommodations on one of the greatest parks in the world. However, swept up by concerns over health and safety, we chose plan elements that dealt with sewers, water supply, and electric power distribution. We expended time on transportation studies that produced few results and ducked the infighting with a concessioner who was well-protected politically and whose very aggressive development stance had set the stage for the plan that evolved in 1980.

What was happening was the lack of a Service-wide commitment to meet its 1980 commitment to the public. Instead, as priorities were hammered out for each year's budget it was easier to divide funds among ten Regions than forge a commitment which would rise above the provincial turf and recognize obligations made to the public. Unfortunately, the National Park Service had already developed a reputation for seldom meeting its target dates, whether they were related to Congress or the public at large. Thus, lacking accountability, the Service saw little problem in its slippage. As a result, we blithely marched toward 1990 as the public waited. For several years we planned for a centennial celebration—for everything but what we had committed ourselves to in 1980! And then what did we do? The Service re-examined the 1980 plan and said that while the goals were noble, they were unrealistic since it was too

hard to separate the public from their automobile and the graying of America was more concerned about a bath in each guest room than removing the clutter from Yosemite Valley.

Instead, however, the public became aroused when a plan that had developed consensus through compromise was now being watered down without even an opportunity to comment. Suddenly caught, the Service retreated behind what they now called a "scoping document"—implying that they never meant to shy away from those now-noble goals of 1980! And that now they were affording the public a chance to comment. But the public's outrage was only heightened as they read of MCA's [the Yosemite concessioner] profits while the park's budget was falling further and further behind in meeting Yosemite's needs. Then, amid angry charges directed at the Service, the superintendent rose in indignation and told his cooperating association to cease and desist their criticism or he would banish them from the park. Unquestionably, he was frustrated at the blame being directed toward him that had not been of his making. But the attempt to muzzle those who were devoting their energies in support of park programs was the unfortunate display of the Service's deep-seated uneasiness of how to deal with public participation in the decision-making process.

It is my contention that when we are talking about the public's involvement, whether it relates to their generic participation or a specific subject area, our success or failure revolves around our leadership's commitment to listen and be responsive. It is not the "I'm listening but my mind's made up" syndrome, but a demonstrated willingness to re-ex-

amine and the ability to rally competing forces and bring them together as an inspired entity directed toward a common goal. We have already seen what the manipulation by political forces outside the organization has done to USNPS credibility and leadership. Then, when elements of the internal organization whose self-centered interests are competing with each other for resources and attention, we have come full circle in destroying the principle of team effort.

I have observed occasions when several USNPS Regional Offices dealt with the same issue only to develop diametrically opposed solutions while Washington stood idly by. Seasonal maintenance personnel would face differing interpretations of procedures for handling step increases [in pay] as well as employment benefits as they moved between Regions. Clearly, Washington leadership has abdicated its responsibility to require consistency and build consensus toward solutions fair to everyone.

In our spare time as Americans, there are few things that elicit more attention than sporting events. We cheer and the wave moves through the stands as offensive units execute with precision or defensive units hold against what seems overwhelming odds. And how many times have we witnessed fan disapproval when just one team member fails in his or her assignment? No quarter is given and fan disapproval soon results in drastic action if the offender fails his or her obligation to the team. Clearly and unmistakably, success is measured by how well the efforts of every person are integrated, whether they are on the playing field or in any multitude of activities on the sidelines. Such an effort means sacri-

fice, but it offers the best chance for organizational success. It also means greater satisfaction for all members of the whole team than what is gained independently at the expense of others.

Unfortunately, we have seen in the National Park Service rewards going to those who cast their lot as individuals and who were oblivious that their efforts in the long run resulted in shortcomings for the organization. An example comes to mind of an event that occurred several years ago. It dealt with an issue now under study by the National Academy of Science.

Periodically, the USNPS Washington Office has pondered the effectiveness of the Service's science program. As had been the case for some time, each Region had been allowed to organize its science and resource management program to meet its own peculiarities. But, a few years ago the USNPS Director registered distress about how research was being done throughout the Service and asked his science staff to make an internal review. Out of this study came a menu of options from which the Director made his choice. In fact, he moved to make the plan even tougher than what had been presented to him. In simplistic terms, it would result in focusing more Washington involvement in these programs, direct a more uniform science organization in each region, and elevate the science and resource management function to an equal footing with other divisions in appropriate parks and Regions. For in some Regions there was no parity between this function and other divisions such as ranger activities, which appeared to demonstrate lip service rather than commitment to make the program strong. The staff then prepared for

the presentation at the next Regional Directors' meeting. But, when that meeting took place, the subject had hardly been identified when outrage came forth from the Regional Directors that couldn't have been any worse had the proposal been to turn Yosemite Valley into a second reservoir. Reasons all the way from "It is working fine in my Region, so why fix it?" to "Over my dead body is anyone going to take this away from me!" The emotional attacks designed to protect individual turf were so intense that any opportunity to examine the proposal objectively quickly evaporated. It demonstrated again that internal examinations to find new solutions seldom succeed when they upset the status quo of people who are comfortable where they are. It was one of the clearest examples of the self-centered actions that continues to result in the fragmentation of the Service into a loose consortium of ten Regional fiefdoms.

Recently, a respected non-USNPS scientist looked into the Service's science program and delivered a critical review, describing it as "dismal, abominable, and almost criminal." Given the fact that the National Park System is composed of unique lands—supposedly the best of this country—and facing the awesome threats the human race is unleashing on the planet by the fallout from all its technology, it is unconscionable that there is not a more comprehensive science program. What notable science there is in the USNPS has been the result of some parks and Regional efforts, but not from the national level. In the reviewing scientist's words, "There is no capable national leadership."

Science in the Service today is only based on perceived USNPS needs, generally of a crisis nature. Its

narrow focus fails to recognize parks as parts of larger systems that are subject to global influences. As an example, the scientist made clear he had in mind areas far larger than the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem. If the idea behind what is conceived as the mission of the parks is to survive, the Service must understand that its science program is not just for the parks; it is essential to target it toward society as well. In this way parks demonstrate to society that they are an indispensable part of their social and ecological fabric and not merely luxuries.

To achieve this means the establishment of an altogether different relationship between scientists and managers. Since they are not natural partners, it will require real dedication to forge the kind of partnership to meet the kind of aggressive program envisioned. To meet such demands, the Service will have to go to Congress and seek a charter that recognizes science as a major program that requires funding stability to be an effective long-range effort. From the standpoint of the individual scientist, a true professional cadre has to be developed that is challenged by the offerings of a career ladder which inspires rather than results in stagnation. It means linkage with scientists in other agencies, together with a peer review that occurs on a broader basis than just within the Service.

Pursuing publication of research results in professional journals sharpens peer review, and sabbaticals designed not only as benefits to the agency's science but to the professional enhancement of the individual as well are essential if stature in the scientific community is to be achieved. While it is recognized that organizational alignment, control of budget, supervision, and setting priorities have been closely guarded prerogatives of management, there is little doubt that if the Service is to embark on a science program equal to meeting the challenge of the 21st century, then a whole new vision is necessary!

I would only add a footnote to this in closing. George Wright and others who worked alongside him contributed significantly to the U.S. National Park System as we know it today. They may have lived in a simpler time by our standards, but the challenges of a known and unknown world about them were, without a doubt, just as troubling as we find ours today. They showed vision and provided stature to the Service as they defined principles that helped to chart the direction for the parks of their time. Your efforts in picking up where these men left off can be the basis on which a professionalism can once more emerge that will carry forth the mission that will truly keep the *parks forever!*

