

Toleration of Ambiguity

A Critical Skill for Managers

Robert L. Arnberger
Big Bend National Park, Texas

Recently I received a letter from a park ranger with "8 young years of experience in the National Park Service." In this letter, the ranger reflected upon USNPS Director James Ridenour's comments made before the Association of National Park Rangers at their annual Ranger Rendezvous in 1989. The ranger wrote that he "was pleased that the Director made a commitment to the protection of natural resources."

Still, I've heard directors, regional directors, superintendents, chief rangers, district rangers, and subdistrict rangers make this same verbal commitment, but somehow that commitment seems to get lost on its way to the field employees. If protection of resources is our priority, then that's where the money and personnel should go. Endorsing protection of natural resources to a crowd of park rangers is pretty safe, and I think it's quite easy to say, but . . . "where's the beef?" Resources are easy to ignore because they can't complain. Without supporting funding and personnel, resource protection in the NPS will continue to remain an unfulfilled promise.

I found the comments somewhat troubling. Perhaps it was the candor

in displaying a bit of institutional cynicism. Perhaps it was because I also sensed many "unfulfilled promises" and might have made a few of my own. Perhaps it was the naïveté (or was it idealism?) in the comments that prompted me to reply.

I wrote of the "difficulty of managing resources in this age of budgets and decreasing flexibility of discretionary funds to do anything about the platitude." Somehow I wanted to convince this young ranger that the issue is extremely complex and affected by many factors that make it difficult to carry out the mandate to the extent or with the ease that he suggested. I wanted him to understand that simple propositions can get quite complicated and what we would like to do is often far different from what we can do. And when we fall short of our expectations, it shouldn't always be interpreted as a lack of commitment to fulfilling the promise.

The ranger wrote back and once again drove the stake to the heart. Admittedly, he said, he had

no real idea what political and budgetary pressures are on park managers. Yet in my short career I continue to hear from managers how important protection of resources is, and I have not often seen this correspond into consistent action on their part. There do seem to be those rare individuals who will go to the wall to support their beliefs. Flexibility of discretionary funds should not have anything to do with protection of park resources. Protection of park resources is our mandate; so when a park manager defines his needs in terms of a budget, there should be no discretion on protecting park resources. This is where the money

should go, and everything else is discretionary.

All of a sudden, I felt old and jaded in what I still consider to be my own "young 21-year career." How can something so simple be so complex? The ranger was so right in the absolute that there "should be no discretion in protecting park resources." But he is so wrong because there is no absolute when resource protection issues are thrust upon us with no clear solutions, and judgment and discretion must accompany every decision. The ranger was so right in the absolute that protection of the resource must always come first. But he is so wrong in the belief that flexibility of discretionary funds should have nothing to do with protection of park resources.

The ranger ended his letter with the view that the realities of resource protection and management in the U.S. National Park System are

at odds with the rhetoric which the NPS passes out to the public and its employees about how protection of resources is the most important thing to do. If we are going to be true to our mandate, and if I'm going to be true to the reason I became a park ranger, then I've got to continue to point out to park managers that action (money and planning) for resource protection speaks louder than flowery, idealistic speeches or memorandums.

Is it really rhetoric or is it reality? The time in which we now manage our national resources is fraught with conflict and ambiguity. Never before has such a set of pressures and stresses been brought to bear on the vitality and survivability of those resources we manage. Never before has the job been so complex and susceptible to budgetary and political events, to the external forces that

threaten ecological integrity, and to conditions that have no easy answers or solutions. Our mission to preserve and protect for the enjoyment of present and future generations is clearly more difficult to interpret and implement. The job of a park manager has changed from a strict custodial and technical response to agency regulations, guidelines, and manuals, to a more wide-ranging, strategic profile pursuing stated but often vague public purposes, through programs whose outlines are rarely more than sketched. Now, we often work with, and within, mandates and missions that can be vague, contested, or ambiguous. There are fewer and fewer "absolutes." Resource protection issues are not so clearly defined as we would like. The job of protecting the resource grinds on within a confusing context of changing public values, political realities, harsh budget and personnel constraints, and strategic linkages to programs and events greater than those within the parks we manage. The extent to which we can manage and tolerate ambiguity now constitutes perhaps one of the most essential ingredients of successful resource management.

Contrast much of our job in managing resources with the Webster's definition of ambiguity:

Having two or more possible meanings; not clear; indefinite; uncertain; vague; obscure; doubtful or uncertainty in meaning or intention; more than one meaning; difficult to comprehend, distinguish, or classify; equally capable of two or more interpretations.

I do not promote practicing a vague and uncertain management style. Instead, the manager must not expect clearly defined issues and circumstances which are absolute and

must be ready and able to manage within ambiguous conditions. The inability to function under these conditions creates managerial anxiety. The reality of resource management in today's world is characterized by ambiguity. The great challenge is how to maintain idealistic integrity in the face of this ambiguity.

Managing within the climate of ambiguity requires a resource manager to become more strategic, giving shape and form to broad program outlines, taking vague and often conflicting mandates and reforming them into concrete goals. Managers must be responsive to program realities and must find ways to position key resource programs to be responsive to changing political demands. They must be creative in dealing with the reality that not every resource preservation or protection program can be funded. They must be an important part of the process of policy formulation and redesign. They must develop the capacity to understand what creates public value. Seeking and exploiting new opportunities for providing services, responding to change in political demands in innovative ways, and building a mandate for changes they believe are in the public interest must be the cornerstone for resource protection action. The job requires substantial discretion. It demands political consciousness. It insists upon decision making and risk taking. It is essential that a manager recognize ambiguity, sort out the facts, and strategize effective linkages that lead to solutions. Rarely will the solution be absolute.

Those least comfortable with ambiguity seem to me to be technical managers who adhere to management principles that constitute too narrow an image of their responsibil-

ities, of being defined primarily by strict guidelines, manuals, and regulations. Ambiguity is quickly resolved in the refuge of "by the book" and viewing the job as simply implementing programs through ordinary administrative systems and controls. Measurable products provided by monitoring systems, internal controls, rules, and procedures are created to assure strict conformance to the implementation mandate. These controls, in and of themselves, are not wrong. These "conformance systems" provide useful management and organizational tools for analyzing, directing, and controlling our jobs of managing park resources. But they can also handicap strategic management and unnecessarily add to the ambiguities of our job of managing resources.

As I re-read the letters from the young ranger, I found that I was really in agreement with many of his points. After all, can you truly disagree with the statement that "protection of park resources is our mandate," or that "there should be no discretion in protecting park resources," or that "this is where the money should go"? Yet, only the most naïve would not agree that great ambiguities exist within the framework of those same simple and truthful statements. I suspect it has always been so. When the need for management policies within the U.S. National Park Service was first articulated by Secretary of the Interior Franklin K. Lane in a letter to the first USNPS Director, Stephen T. Mather, on May 13, 1918, Lane stated that administrative policy should be based on three broad principles:

First, that the national parks must be maintained in absolutely unimpaired form for the use of future generations as well as those of our time;

second, that they are set apart for the use, observation, health, and pleasure of the people; and third, that the national interest must dictate all decisions affecting public or private enterprise in the parks.

These principles, based on the 1916 National Park Service Organic Act, remain as valid today as they were when first written. Yet, then as now, these principles contain ambiguities and contradictions that create difficulties when we attempt to take these broad meanings and formulate clear, achievable goals. We now know that many of the parks brought into the System then, as well as now, are ecologically impaired. To what level of original ecological integrity do we strive? We also know that setting apart parks for the use and pleasure of the people also creates ambiguous situations bringing into fundamental conflict competing programs. What human carrying capacity upon a resource will we allow to impair that resource? And finally, the national interest must dictate decisions affecting public or private enterprise in the parks. To what extent do the political agenda and values of the public control our decisions in protecting resources? Ultimately, the national park idea is an expression of the nation's will, and "will" will always be a changing and fluid representation.

It seems to me the number and context of the ambiguities we now face have greatly increased from those early years. I am not sure that our ability to cope with and manage them has similarly increased. Some things bother me—things that are both custodial and strategic in nature. It seems I never know enough about the resource I manage and protect. It seems my ability to monitor a resource is regularly infringed upon

by the lack of data bases, and by not knowing enough about how the ecosystem really works and to what other elements it is linked. It seems there is a sense of management confusion, and an institutional inability to cope with the spectrum of problems we face, and a lack of leadership in defining a strategy for an equation of success. Sometimes I feel we have lost the intuitive feel of what the System stands for and how the USNPS is to represent the "great, grand idea." I frequently feel that management of natural resources has changed almost exclusively to issue reaction rather than a measured, strategic implementation of long-term goals. Resource managers are necessarily now cast in the role of gunslingers, frequently shooting from the hip.

Change and transition are several of those many ambiguities we must now manage. Clearly, our world today is locked into an ever-increasing period of change: changes in fundamental and long-held geo-political balances, changes in world ecosystems, changes in public values and aspirations, changes in workforces and family needs, changes in our knowledge of national park ecosystems and what is required to care for them. Perhaps it is change that is the most fundamental ambiguity of all.

In retrospect I really enjoyed the two letters I exchanged with this young ranger who registered some of his doubts and strong beliefs. I appreciated his candor and insight. The idealism was refreshing. As he continues in his career, I hope he holds firm to his beliefs and learns the lessons that will be taught. There is never an easy answer. There never was, and there probably never will be.