

# A New Beginning: A Vision for the Future

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Years ago someone said that the national parks are the best idea the United States ever had. *Idea* is the key word in this essay.

An idea is something intangible and aspiring. It bids us to shift from the shambling gait of just getting by.

An idea needs good soil to flourish. Yet both within the U.S. National Park Service and System and beyond—in the socioeconomic, political, and environmental context that nourishes or stunts—that “best idea,” embodied by serving people and sacred places, faces malnourishment. Society fragments and wars upon itself—nationally and internationally—over diminishing resources. Politics degenerates into a theater of the absurd that mocks values and ideals. Local and world en-

vironments strike back after centuries of pillage and rapine.

Small wonder, in such a debilitating context, that the National Park Service and System suffer deficits, deficits spiritual and material. Glitter gets the gold. Things of substance waste away.

The USNPS, as guardian and trustee of the System, faces two choices. It can shuffle along with the rest of the pack, its highest goal the pragmatics of survival. Or it can lead with its founding ideals. Like the salmon leaping over the falls, powered by the energy of the stars, the USNPS can transcend the givens of this world. One thing is certain: Neither Service nor System can perpetuate that “best idea” if we join in killing our motivating ideals.

The U.S. National Park System must be viewed as a cultural achievement unparalleled in world history. It must continue to be seen as a standard of excellence in a world bent on degrading excellence—excellence of spirit, mind, and body; excellence of both built and natural environments.

Deep attrition at all of these levels has already occurred. The *élan vital* of the Service, the physical patrimony of the System have suffered. But they are not yet dead.

We know the foreseeable future will be hard, for it is mortgaged and our children and their children will still be paying the bills incurred in our times. We know that centuries from now humankind will still be trying to re-establish the balance with Nature so prodigally upset by the excesses of recent history. We can hope this imperative, peace with Nature, will act as solvent in human affairs as well. The alternative is too bleak to discuss. So, in summary, our job will not be easy.



Initially, the national parks represented a social investment for the inspiration, edification, and enjoyment of the people. They still do, of course. But now we are beyond that simple innocence of purpose, which was aesthetic at its root.

In the world just described we have the opportunity to repay society with coin of a different sort, not more valuable but more utilitarian. In the process we can find ourselves again. We can shake lethargy and apathy. We can resurrect our *élan vital*. And we can save the parks, our first obligation as trustees.

There have always been those who viewed the parks as mere amenities of an enlightened and affluent society. An amenity is nice, but not necessary. We members of the choir have always viewed the parks as necessities, as foundation blocks in a civil, caring society. But, to be specific, we seldom hear about reciprocal harmonies from the federal government's Office of Management and Budget. There, gimlet-eyed budgeteers deal in measurable quantities, including votes for the party in power. In the lean years ahead, sharp-pencilled Philistines will wield ever more power and will support only the starkly necessary. Nice won't count.

You may have guessed the direction of this argument. We—meaning pre-eminently the parks, but also their committed guardians and trustees—must be *necessary* elements of this society: not only to those who have consistently shared our values and helped us stick to them, but also to those whose values have heretofore questioned the value of parks.

Now, there are many levels of necessity. The USNPS from the beginning has (if not shamelessly, at least enthusiastically) consorted with railroads, tourism boomers, and the economic interests of neighboring communities to promote the System. Even—in fact, especially—the great founders Mather and Albright knew that the higher appeal of the parks could not alone suffice in a society whose main motivations tended to focus on the Almighty Dollar. Nor has the USNPS been altogether loath to further the cause of parklands by playing the quid-pro-quo game of politics.

These forays into the real world continue and will always be with us. They are not evil. Within reason they are the price of acceptance for high-order values in a society only partly composed of Thoreaus and Muirs.

But what if we could find a role for parklands central to the necessities of this stressed society (and species), a role untarnished by lower-order economics and politics?

We have that opportunity—in a dual, entirely complementary thematic nexus that is also central to the original and evolved mission of the USNPS.

Most readers of this essay and increasing numbers of the lay public know that the states of health of society and the environment are reciprocal. An unhealthy, unstable, and warring society (or species) wastes the environment. A wasted environment produces chaos and lacks the buffering sustenance to calm such chaos. In these circumstances, the haves fight to keep, the have-nots fight to get. Thus the wars—economic and military—go on, further wasting the environment. Add to these daily headlines the ominous

global trends of climate change and the like: the products of two centuries of techno-fantasy that imagines still that a finite world is infinite in resources and capacity for absorption of waste, all compounded by the astronomical increases of population in modern times.

This is not a pretty picture. Unchecked, this progression promises to invade and consume every last combustible, mineral, rock, body of water, and gasp of air. National parks, as already in less fortunate lands, would cease to exist—whether consumed, flooded, or desertified by the combination of desperate humans and berserk natural forces.

In this context let us revisit the National Park Service Organic Act: To preserve and protect the national parks is the first and constant prerequisite to the end that they remain "unimpaired for future generations." Only an idiot could fail to see the connection between what has been written above and the central mission of this Service. If one accepts the premises of this argument, then the current interpretation of that central mission registers like a two-by-four to the temple: The USNPS must dramatically expand its functions as social and biological solvent and healer in a world desperately needing succor.

On the *social front* the parks provide one of the few truly democratic facilities for enjoyment and inspiration for *all* of the people. To the extent that we become inclusive in our welcome, understanding, accommodation, and interpretation of all the constituent populations of this nation (and beyond), we help reduce fragmentation and strife. Use of the Columbus Quincentennial opportunity to redefine our national history

by fully and fairly interpreting the contributions of the diverse cultural elements of our society provides an example of this social function. It aims to make the parks the cultural property of all culture groups in this country, not the exclusive resort of the dominant group that until recently monopolized our historiography.

Remember, only a unified society can move with vigor in the cause of environmental reform.

On the *biological front* our already established programs and local planning involvements to convey the environmental ethic must be geometrically enhanced by a two-part (science and interpretation) leadership role in the biospheric science network now building. The national parks of the United States provide a large number of the best baseline geographies left in this world. As research and monitoring stations in the worldwide network that checks and forecasts global change, they are, in aggregate, unparalleled. But only through the most skillful interpretation can the messages of science be delivered to help humankind and avert the worst consequences and adapt to those that can't be solved.

Remember, only a sustaining environment can save our society and species, and the national parks.

Note that sociology and biology are one.