

Reflections on Vail:

A Report on the 75th Anniversary Symposium of the U.S. National Park Service

William E. Brown

The George Wright Society delegate to the Symposium,
held in Vail, Colorado, October 1991

I was honored to be The George Wright Society representative at the Vail 75th Anniversary Symposium. The experience was, as expected, stimulating. People of soul and substance—both friends and employees of the U.S. National Park Service—spoke inspirationally and worked hard to perfect reform recommendations previously prepared by working groups composed of distinguished citizens, scholars, and Park Service leaders. The biographies of these people span experience immense in range and wisdom profound in depth. The symposium steering committee and staff did everything possible within the official frame of operations to assure a favorable result for this unprecedented effort. The goal: to critically analyze the problems of the USNPS and set its course for the 21st Century as an organization, as steward of the parks, as host to their visitors, as environmental leader. Basing their work in part on recent parallel efforts such as those of

the *Conservation Foundation*, the *National Parks and Conservation Association*, and USNPS's own *21st Century studies*, reinforced by current interviews with park operatives across the country, the work groups and the symposium participants touched all critical bases in their recommendations. The post-symposium revision of recommendations has just been circulated at the time of this writing. This revision will be presented for any final comment at a public hearing in Washington, D.C., on December 17. Then it will be printed and formally presented to the USNPS Director, James Ridenour, who, along with Secretary of the Interior Manuel Lujan, listened to the summary recommendations at the final session of the Vail Symposium.

The immediate responses of Messrs. Ridenour and Lujan were favorable as to the work of the symposium and the intent of its recommendations, though their praise was qualified by the need to examine scope and cost.

Thus the symposium has completed all but the final flourishes of its work. It struck in the heat of the 75th Anniversary media coverage, at a crisis time for the Park Service and System—a time of deferred nurturing of the people and the soul of the Service, a time of deferred work on the physical substance of the System. The two people who must carry these recommendations to greater or lesser fruition have shown favor, but with caution. What more could we want?

And yet . . . the context of the times is unfavorable. The central recommendations of this symposium and of the previous studies all point to the immediate need for

massive infrastructural investments in both the *organization*—more people, better paid professional people—and the *parks*—now degrading in a quagmire of deferred maintenance and preservation work, a backlog measured in billions of dollars and increasing at an accelerating rate daily.

And let's look at the symposium document itself. With all the best efforts of the very best people who could be called to this task, it is still a wish list of ninety distinct recommendations, grouped under twenty issues, which in turn are assembled under four areas of concern. It is a document pointed and brilliant in many places. But after reading the fourth or the tenth or the twenty-seventh recommendation it all begins to flow together in an impossible congeries of insoluble problems.

Is this simply a failure of presentation? No! It reflects the lack of faith in today's political and economic climate that anything this big could be faced frontally and entire. So, analysis and piecemealing have been employed to, in effect, dull the senses and soften the impact. Thus is the integrated picture and the urgency lost. Nowhere is the cost of recommended stewardship mentioned, and yet everyone knows that billions are required. Nowhere is the cost of needed people and the pay to attract and hold them described, and yet everyone knows that the minimal thousands of professionally qualified people to do the jobs recommended will cost in excess of \$100 million a year.

I remember camping once at Anza-Borrego State Park in California. At dawn the cloud mass on

the ocean side of the mountains broke eastward across the crest, forming a flotilla of hundreds of white cumulus cloud puffs that sailed across the desert pan. Midway on their voyage across that rapidly heating bolson they disappeared, consumed in the hot flue that rose from the desert.

This will be the fate, I fear, of this flotilla of recommendations. Substitute for the desert the prevailing political philosophy regarding preserved lands and cultural sites, the blast of heat from the Office of Management and Budget, and watch these little ships evaporate.

Tears come to my eyes when I think of this, for it is tragic. Many very good people have worked hard against heavy odds of official constraint to prepare a priceless gift to the people of this nation and the world: the means to save and perpetuate our premier national treasure, the first and still the greatest national park system in the world. Those who will dispose of this gift, as trustees and representatives of the people, will plead the pragmatics of money. Then, depending on their ideological bent, they will shed a tear or hide a smile as they select a few token responses designed to quiet this nettlesome inconvenience. The likely upshot of these selections will be a call to accomplish them within present limits of people and money by squeezing a few more drops of blood from the withered turnip, already dry and fibrous from too many such calls before.

Fanciful? I wish it were.

Fated? Probably, unless the public intervenes.

Lacking a clear vision of the evolving national parks institution in our evolving society and devolving biosphere—for ourselves and for the people of this country and the world—we cannot transcend the present circumstances. Where in the symposium document is that vision stated? It was stated in pieces and brilliant flashes by several thoughtful people at the symposium. But it was not developed and cohered as the rationale for a revived public policy, long neglected, that would cherish and nourish this great social institution. The product of the symposium is instead a long list of hat-in-hand pleas to do what is self-evidently right in any system of public virtue:

Don't you see it? How valuable the parks are? Won't you help us? See, we need a little more money for research, and our people are consigned to poverty by their pittance pay, and we don't have enough of them with the needed qualifications, and our facilities and historic structures are falling down, and we don't know what's in or what's happening to our natural areas. Generally, then, we are hurting. Don't you think you could spare . . . a little?

And all of these requests, these pleadings, are addressed to people who either cannot hear them, because the value system eludes them; or, if they can hear them, they instantly feel the weight of defeat before the battle begins.

Where is our vision for the people of this country, in this doc-

ument? Where do we call upon them to save their parks by forcing their representative in Congress and their trustees in the Executive Branch to do their duty under law?

In such an assertion of legally mandated public policy these excellent recommendations, these means to an end, would be properly ordered and fitted under the overarching umbrella of that end, indeed, that vision. We would state categorically—because we have the law to back us—what the parks must be in our society, how they must be nurtured with people and resources to accomplish the social purposes that we as a nation have agreed upon for them. And the administrative, particularized recommendations would be in the budget appendix—yes!—with costs detailed and forcefully presented so that the public has a measure of accountability by which to judge the performance of their minions in the Congress and the Executive Branch. Thus did the *Mission 66* program succeed in winning the public policy debate and accomplishing its ends; however one views it, *Mission 66* succeeded in its frame.

We have directed this effort toward the wrong people, toward those who have already and repeatedly said no. The symposium should have aroused the nation, not gone begging to Washington.

Largely, this document comprises an impeccably groomed, technical, in-system budget request, without the unthinkable figures. What we need is a national crusade. The Park Service/System, in both its present plight and its dissolving potential, is symptomatic of the larger public-policy malaise of this nation. We need a sea change from the prevailing political philosophy that values only those things that can be measured in monetary terms, the profit side, to one that feeds the soul and the civility of our society—through resuscitation of a healthy and equitable environment: cultural, social, and physical.

Meanwhile, with whatever crumbs it can get the Park Service must hold this System together—this small part of the universe that still reflects the higher human values—and continue as best it can the good work that preserves some remnants of a once healthy world, the places and models that in some fair future will help us, as a society and as a species, to rediscover sanity and make it prevail.



22 November 1991

