

New National Parks for the Next Century

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What could a structure on 0.02 acres in downtown Philadelphia have in common with 13.4 million acres of wilderness in Alaska? The Thaddeus Kosciuszko National Memorial and Wrangell–St. Elias National Park and Preserve reflect the extremes of size and resource types in the national park system. Although these disparate sites are managed by the same agency, they seem to have little else in common beyond being listed in the National Parks Index.

In 1978 Congress declared that the areas managed by the National Park Service (NPS): “though distinct in character, are united through their inter-related purposes and resources into one National Park System as cumulative expressions of a single national heritage” (Dilsaver 1994, 374). With such an ambitious vision, we could hope that some logical scientific and scholarly framework and process guides the growth of the system. In fact, the growth of the system has been characterized more by sporadic responses to opportunities than by any organized planning.

In 1936 the advisory board on national parks buildings and monuments suggested that the key consideration in selecting new parks is that they should be “outstanding examples of their respective classes” (NPS 2005, 104). This standard of seeking the best examples of each resource type was reflected in the 1972 National Park System Plan, the only document prepared by the National Park Service with such a title. This “system plan” provided a framework of boxes to be filled like a bingo card to get a full set of what some scientists and scholars considered at that time to be the sites that characterize the national heritage. However, the plan did not articulate a clear vision of what the system should accomplish or any sense of priorities for what might be most important to achieve some goals.

Envisioning the future shape of the national park system usually has expansionist overtones, but there have been cycles of proposals to shrink that system. For example, in 1954 the national park system advisory board considered proposals by the Department of the Interior to make certain areas of the system available for administration by state or local governments, suggesting 13 candidates. In 1981 Secretary James Watt made a similar request for the advisory board to investigate the potential divestiture of parks. In 1978 Congress directed the National Park Service to submit an annual list of not less than 12 candidates for addition to the system, providing an opening for the “park a month club” tag line. In the 1990s Congress considered another swing from expansion to contraction in the form of legislation that would remove units from the national park system using the model applied to military base closures. Instead of the base closure model, Congress withdrew NPS authority to study new parks without specific authorization and abandoned any interest in developing a system plan.

As the National Park Service approaches its 100th anniversary, what might be ahead for the next century? The National Parks Second Century Commission, an independent group of distinguished scholars, scientists, and former legislators, has been asking this question and suggesting that the national park system should evolve with some thoughtful design. The

commission's report is scheduled for release in the fall of 2009, and the summary below outlines some preliminary ideas about how to approach defining the future shape of the system. Many of these ideas were reflected in discussions during sessions at the George Wright Society Conference in March 2009.

Ideally a first step in designing a system would be to have a vision, and in the last 20 or 30 years very few individuals or organizations have even attempted to articulate one for our collection of national parks.

The second century commission's committee on future shape has envisioned a system that works effectively for everyone: plants, animals, our ancestors, and generations to come. One key part of a vision for the future system of national parks is that it should contribute to the preservation of biological diversity. This presents enormous challenges since the areas managed by the National Park Service comprise about 1.5% of the land in the lower 48 states. Preserving biological diversity or even helping to reduce the rate of loss is a global issue beyond the reach of any one agency, especially one that lacks jurisdiction over 98.5% of the nation's landscape.

Most of the 243 units of the national park collection containing natural resources were selected for their spectacular scenery, rather than biological productivity or diversity. As a result, the national parks have been characterized as high and icy, with low productivity soils (Svancara and Scott 2007). The national wildlife refuge system is characterized by being low, wet, and populated by ducks. Even a substantially expanded national park system is not likely to succeed in preserving biological diversity, but in combination with lands managed by others it might be a start. For example, the Land Trust Alliance reports that about 39 million acres, an area almost as large as the national park system in the lower 48 states, are being protected by conservation easements held by private organizations. With a mission to "conserve, protect and restore nationally significant landscapes recognized for their cultural, ecological and scientific values for the American public," the national landscape conservation system under the Bureau of Land Management encompasses approximately 27 million acres that also might be an important part of the larger picture. Add almost 30 million acres of designated wilderness managed by the Forest Service, and the scope of protected areas takes on a new dimension.

A somewhat less ambitious vision might be for a collection of national parks that have their ecological integrity intact. This commendable goal quickly confronts the challenge of addressing a vast array of threats to ecological integrity that originate in whole or in part on lands beyond park boundaries. For example, only five of the national park units in the lower 48 states encompass enough land to perpetuate a viable population of large mammals. Even with 2.2 million acres, Yellowstone is a small fraction of the larger ecosystem that by some estimates encompasses 18 or 20 million acres (Greater Yellowstone Coalition). Protecting the natural processes and the historic settings of our national parklands requires engaging a host of other federal agencies with sometimes conflicting missions, as well as private landowners who are not always motivated by a concern for our national heritage.

Discussions about the role of national parks for the next century often call for a new vision, but the cultural resources programs of the National Park Service offer an established model that might help chart a course for the future of natural resource protection. The

National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (NHPA) assigns responsibility for leadership in historic preservation to the Secretary of the Interior and provides a suite of tools to encourage other agencies and the private sector in achieving its goals. Recognizing that preservation of historic properties is beyond the capability of any one agency, the NHPA is designed to enlist a wide range of partners in protecting the nation's cultural resources. On the other hand, several different agencies and organizations can claim leadership responsibility for the protection of natural resources, biological diversity, and ecological vitality: Fish and Wildlife Service, Forest Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and The Nature Conservancy, for example.

Three concepts to help shape a national park system for the next century include:

1. A new national network. Although they may reflect the “best idea America ever had” the national parks should be recognized as a relatively small but critical part of a national network of protected areas managed by other agencies, state and local governments, and the private sector. The success of this network relies substantially on local citizens to make informed decisions about what they value and want to protect. NPS, or another entity like The Nature Conservancy, could become the catalyst and convener of regional and national efforts to conserve biological diversity and cultural heritage, recognizing the need for many agencies and organizations to be part of this work. Some of the key players in this larger system include the national wildlife refuge system, and the national landscape conservation system managed by BLM, and national monuments, wilderness areas, and national recreation areas managed by the Forest Service, wild and scenic rivers and trails that connect these areas, state parks, and land trusts. Identifying, managing, and evaluating the effectiveness of a protected area network would be a step toward following the spirit of the Convention on Biological Diversity (www.cbd.int), adopted by every country in the world except the United States and the Vatican.

“Our vision for the 21st century is an interconnected network of open space across the landscape that supports healthy ecosystems and a high quality of life for Americans. Fully realized, this network will include . . . public land, riparian areas and wildlife corridors, and urban green spaces. Private and public open spaces will complement each other across the landscape to provide ecosystem services, wildlife habitat, recreation opportunities, and sustainable products.” This captures a clear vision for the future, but it did not come from the National Park Service. It appears in an open space strategy adopted by the Forest Service (USFS 2007, 4).

2. A new national park system plan. The National Park Service could be directed by Congress or the President to develop a system plan that defines its place in this larger network. This system plan for national parks would identify priorities for the type of areas that should be managed by the National Park Service to serve as models for a stewardship ethic. For natural resources, the system plan would recognize the importance of representation, resiliency, and redundancy, but look beyond NPS “units” to consider how other lands contribute to an effective system. For cultural resources emphasis would be placed on recognizing and protecting sites that tell stories that will promote civic engagement, highlight the diversity of the American experience, and inspire new generations. A real system plan could

also highlight the opportunities to consider sites that reflect a combination of natural and cultural resource values rather than separate them into distinct categories.

This system plan should reflect the strong public interest and congressional support for National Heritage Areas, where NPS is a partner and catalyst rather than a land manager. Pursuing a goal of spreading the national park ethic suggests a much broader view of the National Park “System.” The public and their elected representatives have expressed their strong support for NPS as a partner by authorizing 40 National Heritage Areas since 1983, and authorizing 9 more in the most recent Omnibus Public Lands Act. Nevertheless the Heritage Areas have been treated as an additional burden rather than embraced as part of the core mission of the National Park Service.

The idea of promoting a stewardship ethic, including reverence for the earth, may seem radical when so much attention and energy in NPS is focused on operational shortfalls and facility maintenance backlogs. Perhaps a goal for the system could be: “to assist in the development and application of an environmental stewardship ethic for our society, based on ecological principles, scientific knowledge ... and a sense of moral responsibility.” This goal may seem new and ambitious for NPS, but the words come from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s manual (USFWS 1998, part D).

3. New strategies to protect parks as part of sustainable communities. A recent study on the state of the parks by the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) found that adjacent land development represents a significant threat to natural resources in 89 percent of the parks assessed, and development beyond park boundaries also threatens the integrity of cultural resources (NPCA 2008). Park boundaries cannot expand indefinitely, and NPS needs to enlist the cooperation of its neighbors to help assure that resources are unimpaired for the benefit of future generations. Congress could authorize NPS to apply a suite of tools and incentives around national parks to help perpetuate sustainable communities and the integrity of landscapes. These could include tax incentives for conservation of natural areas, parallel to those that encourage preservation of historic resources. Technical assistance, grants, and authority to acquire conservation easements are other tools to be applied. This suite of tools could be similar to the national heritage area designation, but available around each unit of the national park system. Legislation or executive orders also could require consultation and consistency for actions by other Federal agency undertakings, permits, grants, and licenses. Section 106 of the Historic Preservation Act, and the Coastal Zone Management Act offer examples of consultation and consistency requirements that could help protect parks. The Advisory Council on Historic Preservation could serve as a model of an institution that would help resolve conflicts over projects, licenses and permits that might damage park resources.

These and other ideas being considered by the National Parks Second Century Commission will have a wide variety of implications for the organization, funding, and management capacity of the National Park Service. Several previous evaluations of the National Park Service and system have produced recommendations that languished with the changes of administrations. The current commission includes several distinguished former legislators and other members who are committed to seeing action on their recommendations. Many of

those recommendations can be expected to reiterate a vision expressed by the national park system advisory board's 2001 report on "Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century": that by caring for the parks and conveying the park ethic we care for ourselves and act on behalf of the future. The larger purpose of this mission is to build a citizenry that is committed to conserving its heritage and its home on earth.

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