

Thinning the Blood—Another Myth

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Former secretary of the Interior James Watt, like former director of the U.S. National Park Service James Ridenour, preached a gospel of containment. Contain the Congress and oppose congressional designation of new units within the National Park System. Secretary Watt proposed that Congress appropriate only minimal amounts of money to acquire lands, including lands within already-existing units of the National Park System.¹

Opponents of creating National Park System units assert that Congress must choose between protecting the nation's remaining natural and cultural areas *or* taking care of what the National Park System already has. That choice was, and continues to be, a false one.

When James Watt came to office as secretary of the Interior he testified before Congress that "our parks and park facilities have been deteriorating while we have been rushing to acquire more land." He proposed placing a five-year moratorium on expenditures from the Land and Water Conservation Fund for land acquisition in established parks, and proposed diverting the monies from the Fund to the task of "restoration and improvement of our National Parks."²

Congress ultimately dismissed James Watt's argument that the

USNPS faced a choice between land acquisition for parks or allowing the parks to deteriorate. Congress concluded that the long-term integrity of a park's resources requires more than sprinklers in lodges, paved roads, or more employee housing. Congress approved both \$200 million a year for five fiscal years to rebuild park infrastructure (the Park Restoration and Improvement Program) *and* \$332 million from Fiscal Years 1982 to 1984 for land acquisition in National Park System units.

In 1991, ten years after Secretary Watt, the assistant secretary of the Interior for Fish and Wildlife and Parks, Mike Hayden, said: "We believe the infrastructure needs to be shored up. But Congress is oriented just the other way. They want to run out and buy all kinds of new land and create all kinds of new parks. They created 16 new parks in the

last two years. And the Park Service has opposed most of those creations because we think the money should go to shoring up what we have.”³

Former Director Ridenour stated at the end of his tenure that his greatest legacy to the National Park System was halting the thinning of its blood. In the November–December 1992 issue of the *Courier* (the USNPS’s internal news magazine), Ridenour said, “I coined the term ‘Thinning the Blood’. . . . [E]very time the Congress creates a new area that is not of national significance, they have thinned the quality of the National Park System, both in terms of availability of funds and the watering down of the quality of the system.” In February of 1992, I asked Ridenour if he could specify the units that were “thinning the blood” but he politely declined to name any. Ridenour deserves credit for the term “thinning the blood,” but the theme has been with us at least since Watt’s day and perhaps for many years before.

NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM GROWTH IN THE REAGAN-BUSH ADMINISTRATIONS

The record does not support former Assistant Secretary Hayden’s assertion that Congress has “run out” and created “all kinds of new parks” in the last twelve years. Congress authorized 27 new units in that period, and abolished one. For perspective, consider that in one year alone, 1978, Congress and the President together established more than 30 units.

The 97th Congress (1981–1982) did not authorize a single new National Park System unit. That Congress thus became the first not to authorize a unit for USNPS administration since the 70th of 1927 and 1928.⁴

The 99th Congress (1985–1986) added two new units to the National Park System: Steamtown National Historic Site in Scranton, Pennsyl-

vania, and Great Basin National Park in Nevada. That Congress also abolished one unit, Lehman Caves National Monument, incorporating it into Great Basin National Park.

The 100th Congress (1987–1988) authorized thirteen new units: Jimmy Carter National Historic Site (Georgia), El Malpais National Monument (New Mexico), Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve (Florida), Charles Pinckney National Historic Site (South Carolina), Natchez National Historic Park (Mississippi), the National Park of American Samoa, Poverty Point National Monument (Louisiana), Zuni-Cibola National Historic Park (New Mexico), City of Rocks National Reserve (Idaho), Hagerman Fossil Beds National Monument (Idaho), Mississippi National River and Recreation Area (Minnesota), Bluestone National Scenic River (West Virginia), and Gauley River National Recreation Area (West Virginia). San Francisco Maritime was given separate status as a National Historic Park, but the unit was previously a portion of Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

The 101st Congress (1989–1990) authorized Petroglyph National Monument (New Mexico), Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Site (Missouri), and Weir Farm National Historic Site (Connecticut).

The 102nd Congress (1991–1992) authorized the Niobrara National Scenic River (Nebraska), Mary McLeod Bethune Council House National Historic Site (District of Columbia), Salt River Bay National Historic Park and Ecological Preserve (Virgin Islands), Manzanar National Historic Site (California), Marsh-Billings National Historic Park (Vermont), Little River Canyon National Preserve (Alabama), Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site (Kansas), Keweenaw National Historical Park (Michigan), and the Dayton Aviation Heritage National Historical Park (Ohio).

unable to meet their basic operational needs. Some of the real increase in ONPS has been used to fund large, expensive, and necessary special units in the Washington Office, such as Air Quality, Water Resources, Geographic Information Systems, Mining and Minerals, and Hazardous Waste. The Federal Employee Retirement System (FERS) increased the costs of benefits for newly-hired employees who now constitute an increasing proportion of all employees. The staffing levels in regional offices have increased dramatically, with the creation, not only of new divisions, but also of new associate and deputy associates directors and new assistant regional directors. The ranks of the Denver Service Center have swelled dramatically in the last twelve years. Special funds dedicated to Service-wide initiatives that are not incorporated into park bases but arrive instead as "soft money," also help mask the real increase in ONPS.

From 1981 to 1992 the number of units in the National Park System increased approximately 7%. The National Park System, measured in number of acres, grew in that same period by approximately 2.9%.

THE EFFECTS OF NEW UNITS ON THE FISCAL HEALTH OF THE NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM

ONPS, the operating budget of the U.S. National Park Service, supports the salaries and benefits of its employees, rental of office space and equipment, utilities, procurement, travel, and training, among other things. ONPS does not include appropriations for land acquisition or construction.

ONPS has fared well over the last twelve years. Consider that ONPS for Fiscal Year 1982 (beginning October 1981) was \$521 million. ONPS for Fiscal Year 1993 (to date) (beginning October 1992) is \$984 million. After discounting wage and other inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index, the real increase in ONPS is approximately 40%.

One of the most-often-cited reasons for the poverty in unit operating accounts is the creation of new units. Yet, the total operating budgets for all the new units created since 1981, according to data compiled by the House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands, makes up \$15 million⁵ of the total FY 1993 ONPS of \$984 million.

There are, in fact, many reasons why, despite a real increase of 40% in operating dollars, many parks feel

unable to meet their basic operational needs. Some of the real increase in ONPS has been used to fund large, expensive, and necessary special units in the Washington Office, such as Air Quality, Water Resources, Geographic Information Systems, Mining and Minerals, and Hazardous Waste. The Federal Employee Retirement System (FERS) increased the costs of benefits for newly-hired employees who now constitute an increasing proportion of all employees. The staffing levels in regional offices have increased dramatically, with the creation, not only of new divisions, but also of new associate and deputy associates directors and new assistant regional directors. The ranks of the Denver Service Center have swelled dramatically in the last twelve years. Special funds dedicated to Service-wide initiatives that are not incorporated into park bases but arrive instead as "soft money," also help mask the real increase in ONPS.

There are many reasons why parks find it hard to meet operational needs. Among the least of them, however, is the creation of new units. In short, while some blame new units (and the Congress that authorized them) for the lack of operational dollars, there is no evidence upon which to base this claim.

The solution to the problem of impoverished park operating accounts does not lie solely in increasing ONPS more rapidly than inflation. Congress has consistently done so in the last twelve years. Nor does the solution lie in halting the creation of new units, or in placing a moratorium on land acquisition.⁶ Part of the solution may lie in more creative and intelligent allocation of existing dollars.

Perhaps the National Park System would benefit by fewer units. For example, it could have seven, as opposed to ten, regional offices. While it is not the intent of this pa-

per to suggest that the USNPS needs fewer regional offices, it may be time to consider such "unthinkable" options before we close parks, campgrounds, and scenic drives, or fail to protect valuable resources, such as the East Mojave Desert in California.

THE EFFECT OF NEW UNITS ON THE INTEGRITY OF THE NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM

Has Congress adulterated the National Park System by creating unworthy units? This question is at the heart of the debate over expanding the System. James Watt stated that "most of the truly unique areas of national significance requiring Federal management and funding are already a part" of the National Park System.⁷

In 1988, the National Parks and Conservation Association produced a study entitled *The National Park System Plan: A Blueprint for Tomorrow*. Volume Eight of the Plan listed approximately 46 natural and 40 cultural sites that merit protection as part of the National Park System. For Watt, the National Park System was essentially complete. For others, the System has yet to encompass some areas of true national significance.

The question, then, of whether additions enrich or detract from the National Park System is a subjective one. For some, the addition of Wind Cave National Park in 1903, or Cape Hatteras National Seashore in 1937 adulterated the System. Those who envisioned the National Park System as being a phenomenon of the West, thought that Shenandoah and Great Smoky Mountains would dilute the System.

The 1933 Executive Orders⁸ of Franklin Roosevelt added more, and different kinds of, units to the System than at any other single time. More than a thinning of the blood, the Roosevelt reorganization was akin to a blood transfusion. In our

lifetime, the addition of urban recreation areas touched off intense and still smoldering debate about the propriety of including them with Yellowstone. The debate about thinning the blood has always been present.

When Congress directed the secretary of the Interior to study an area in Florida for possible designation as the "Tropical Everglades National Park," Congress did so with some doubt as to "whether such areas measure up to national park standards."⁹ In 1993, none of us, including perhaps James Watt, would doubt the worth or merit of the "Tropical" Everglades National Park. Society perception of what is valuable and worth protecting in the National Park System has changed with time. In 1950, Congress would not have conceived of setting aside a site to commemorate the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II. In 1993, such a site, at Manzanar, California, is a valuable addition to our heritage.

The process of establishing parks in the United States has always been, like the enactment of any law, a political process. Parks are expressions of social value as Congress determines that value. The process of park designation is therefore not static. Congress may, from time to time, authorize a unit that may be truly unworthy of designation. We must bear in mind, from the examples of the past, that what we deem unworthy today, our children may cherish in the year 2050.

The Park Service has some newfound political friends, such as some of the minority-party senators from the West, who oppose adding new units to the System ostensibly because of concern for the integrity of the existing units. Oddly, many of these political friends may also advocate increasing commercial uses of the very same park system they do not want adulterated by the addition of more units.

Before the USNPS finds common cause with such allies, be aware that hiding behind their proffered concern for the parks may lie another agenda. In the 102nd Congress, a group of minority-party members introduced legislation in the U.S. House of Representatives that would require any federal agency to divest itself of lands in several western states if the federal estate grew by any acquisition, whether purchase, donation, or exchange. As a key objective of the "Wise Use" movement, similar proposals have been introduced into state legislatures.

Not all citizens subscribe to the USNPS mandate of preservation. For some citizens, multiple use of lands for grazing, timber, water diversion, hunting and other commodity extraction is the model for all federal lands, including parks.

It can be argued that increasing demands to open parks to commercial and recreational consumptive uses pose a far greater threat to the National Park System's long-term integrity than the establishment of a Steamtown.

No one disagrees that the USNPS director and the secretary of the Interior must be intimately involved in the process of designating new units. The USNPS may use a tool that Congress fashioned for that purpose in 1976.

On October 7, 1976, in Public Law 94-458, Congress directed the Secretary of the Interior "to investigate, study, and continually monitor the welfare of the areas whose resources exhibit qualities of national significance and which may have potential for inclusion in the National Park System. At the beginning of each fiscal year, the Secretary *shall transmit . . . comprehensive reports on each of these areas upon which studies have been completed.* On this same date . . . the Secretary *shall transmit a listing . . . of not less than twelve such areas which appear to be of national significance and which*

may have potential for inclusion in the National Park System" [emphasis added].

Beginning in the Kennedy Administration, the president sent an annual Conservation Message to Congress, a practice long-since abandoned. The 1962 message to Congress from John F. Kennedy¹⁰ contained a list of units to be added to the National Park System.

The message urged the establishment of the following units: Point Reyes National Seashore, Great Basin National Park, Ozark Rivers National Monument, Sagamore Hill National Historic Site, Canyonlands National Park, Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, Prairie National Park (in Kansas), Padre Island National Seashore, a National Lakeshore in northern Indiana, and Ice Age Scientific Reserve in Wisconsin.

The foresight of past leaders, like John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, enriched the heritage of the United States and its people. It is not too late to demonstrate that same foresight after its long absence from the halls of the Department of the Interior. The Prairie National Park still remains unconsummated. The California Desert and a dozen other places furnish our generation an opportunity to place ecosystems and historic places under conscientious custody for the future.

It is time for the USNPS to come out from under the rocks and once again assert that lands placed under its stewardship serve a broad public good; that Federal land acquisition for parks is no less vital for our society's health than was federal land acquisition for military bases during the Cold War.

Some of the elected officials whose political agenda only thinly masks an underlying antipathy for strict preservation are gone. Now USNPS managers who fail to protect natural and cultural values, wilderness, water rights, or habitat, or who

do not err on the side of preservation, may no longer blame others.

The call of the "Vail Agenda" for USNPS "Environmental Leadership" will not be served by cosmetic actions and lip-service. The season now favors a re-enunciation of a singularly noble yet difficult mission: to conserve for the people of the

United States and the world, "the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life" of the national parks, and to "provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."¹¹

NOTES

¹ U.S. Department of the Interior, Budget Revisions Fiscal Year 1982, at 2, 3, 96, and 98 (March, 1981).

² U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Appropriations for The Department of the Interior and Related Agencies (March 6, 1981).

³ *Federal Parks and Recreation*, Vol. 9, Number 18 (September 26, 1991).

⁴ Congress established Bryce Canyon National Park in 1928. However, the lands in that unit were actually reserved and established by Congress in 1924 as the Utah National Park. In 1927 and 1928, Congress authorized three National Military Parks under the control of the War Department that would later be placed under USNPS administration in 1933.

⁵ ONPS for all units created since January 1983 is \$15,329,000. However, even that figure overstates the net impact of unit creation on total ONPS expenditures of \$984 million. Of the \$15.3 million, approximately \$4.2 million is ONPS for Timucuan and San Francisco Maritime. Had Timucuan and San Francisco Maritime not been established, the NPS would still have spent ONPS on Fort Caroline National Memorial (now administered and funded as part of Timucuan) and on the San Francisco Maritime unit of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. Perhaps the real figure of the impact of new units on overall ONPS is closer to \$12 million.

⁶ One may propose, like James Watt, that if Congress halted land acquisition, that money could be used to augment ONPS. Yet the \$80 million for land acquisition in Fiscal Year 1992 would have increased ONPS by only 9% that year.

⁷ U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Appropriations for The Department of the Interior and Related Agencies (March 6, 1981).

⁸ Executive Order Nos. 6166 (June 10, 1933) and 6228 (July 28, 1933).

⁹ Act of Congress, March 1, 1929 (45 Stat. 1443).

¹⁰ President Kennedy's Message on Conservation to the Congress of the United States (U.S. Department of the Interior, March 1, 1996).

¹¹ Act of Congress, August 25, 1916 (39 Stat. 535).

