The Ill-Fated NBS: A Historical Analysis of Bruce Babbitt's Vision to Overhaul Interior Science

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Nearly two decades have passed since the formation of the National Biological Survey (NBS)—adequate time to begin to examine from a historical perspective this turbulent crossroads for the U.S. Department of the Interior. The NBS was the creation of Bruce Babbitt who, by secretarial order, gathered nearly all research scientists from Interior's land management agencies into a new, independent bureau. The NBS was wildly unpopular from the start, both with the agencies that supplied the NBS its scientists, and a conservative Congress unwilling to fund the new bureau. Renamed the National Biological Service midway through its brief existence in the 1990s, the NBS did not survive the major political schism of its day. In 2011, as Congress and the Obama Administration battle over partisan ideologies and an unprecedented budget crisis, and with the possibility of a government shutdown looming over federal workers, echoes of the infamous 1995 to 1996 shutdown and the sharp partisan divide of that era, which defeated the NBS, are especially poignant—if not downright eerie.

The origins of the NBS date back to the 1980s, when ecosystem management emerged as the new paradigm in resource stewardship, at least in scientific circles. Agencies began to adopt this holistic approach to resource management only gradually, much to the chagrin of watchdog groups outside the federal government. Critics argued that both research priorities and resource protection were grossly inadequate across federal lands. In the case of the National Park Service (NPS), Richard West Sellars put this critique in historical perspective in his influential book *Preserving Nature in the National Parks*.

Much of the celebrated environmental legislation of the 1960s and 1970s—most notably the Endangered Species Act—had yet to be satisfactorily executed by federal land management agencies by the mid-1980s, and the patience of environmental advocates grew thin. Numerous lawsuits were filed against the U.S. government for failure to obey its own environmental laws. By the close of the decade, implementation of ecosystem management had effectively defaulted from the agencies to the courts. On a number of fronts, from the Florida Everglades to the old-growth forests of the Pacific Northwest, the fate of the nation's most vulnerable ecosystems depended upon the decisions of federal judges with no biological training. Court proceedings stalled, and increasingly judicial outcomes looked less likely to provide long-term solutions to critical envi-

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ronmental quandaries that pitted economic interests against saving species and landscapes. There had to be a better way. In this heated, contentious climate, a new political appointee in Washington decided that drastic times called for drastic measures.

Profound change came to the organization of the biological sciences within the Department of the Interior in 1993, with the arrival of the Clinton Administration. Soon after taking office, Interior Secretary Babbitt announced his grand plan to consolidate the biological research and inventory efforts across the department into one separate agency. The new NBS was to be independent from all the existing Interior bureaus. The NBS would parallel the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) in its mission of collecting, analyzing, and disseminating scientific data without any entanglement in the regulatory and managerial responsibilities of its sister agencies. "What we are doing is strengthening the credibility of science," Babbitt said, by putting some distance between federal scientists and those in government who make policy and execute it. The NBS would also provide science to agencies beyond Interior, to state governments, to local governments, and to non-governmental organizations as well. Serving the gamut of science users, "NBS will provide the scientific knowledge America needs to balance the compatible goals of ecosystem protection and economic progress," Babbitt stated with confidence.[1]

Authorizing legislation for the NBS was introduced to both the House and the Senate in the summer of 1993. In support of the House bill, Babbitt testified that the swiftness with which he intended to transfer the department's biological functions into one agency was due in large part to mounting litigation challenging the Endangered Species Act. Getting on with a "systematic biological inventory of the entire nation at an appropriate scale and feasible level of detail" could help prevent future Endangered Species Act "train wrecks," such as the spotted owl case in the Pacific Northwest. This urgency aside, Babbitt was intent on consolidating his department's research capabilities and "getting good science across jurisdictional boundaries," a must for ecosystem management, he argued.[2]

But Babbitt didn't wait for congressional action to implement his idea. In September 1993, Babbitt established the NBS by secretarial order. The new agency was authorized to draw from existing personnel in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the NPS, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the Minerals Management Service, the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement, the USGS, and the Bureau of Reclamation. Babbitt's order became effective in November with the passage of the 1994 Interior Appropriations Act, which allocated $163 million to NBS operations, most of which was transferred from the budgets of the research divisions of the other Interior agencies. Two-thirds of NBS appropriations for 1994 were drawn from the USFWS budget.

That fall, the House did pass a version of the NBS bill, albeit with amendments that Babbitt opposed. The Senate bill never left committee. The absence of an organic act for the new agency meant that the NBS's existence rode precariously upon a series of annual renewal orders from Secretary Babbitt's desk, and the budgetary whims of Congress, which did not, as it turned out, sanction funding for an independent NBS for long.[3]

When Babbitt approached University of Georgia ecology professor Ron Pulliam to be director of the NBS, Pulliam expressed concerns about Congress's poor track record of funding biological research in the Interior Department. Babbitt replied that with a Democratic president and a Democratic Congress, NBS support was a sure thing. The renowned ecologist reported for duty in Washington, in June of 1994. Personnel transfers from the various Interior agencies followed soon thereafter. Within a year, over 1,800 scientists and staff had been moved from the research divisions of other Interior bureaus into the NBS, the largest number—about 1,300 employees—coming from the USFWS. Most of its $110-million research program, the agency's largest single division, was transferred to the NBS. The NPS lost personnel, nearly 170 full-time positions and about $20 million in base funding. The BLM's science program was just gearing

up in the early 1990s when the NBS "inherited" its 35 lead researchers, and $8-million annual science budget.[4]

At the start, Pulliam was optimistic that the NBS could be that objective scientific authority upon which federal and state land managers, as well as private landowners, could depend for data necessary for responsible and conscientious decision making.[5] Babbitt envisioned greater efficiency, and the capacity to tackle more complex, cross-jurisdictional ecological problems. He also stressed that a science delivery system independent of Interior policy makers and resources managers would more likely produce consistently unbiased data.

But almost immediately, a very vocal contingent of the American public came to view the NBS as the exact opposite of neutral or impartial. Many opponents of the NBS believed the new agency to be a troop of advocate scientists intent on locating endangered species on private property, and these scientists would serve as harbingers of dreaded Endangered Species Act restrictions, deflated land values, and even land seizure. As Pulliam traveled around the country to meet with groups of citizens concerned about the NBS and private property rights, he soon realized "an organized misinformation campaign" launched by "wise-use" proponents was one step ahead of him. "I was told that NBS scientists would soon be cutting fences in the middle of the night and trespassing on private property with the aid of hoards of untrained volunteers, most of whom were probably card-carrying members of radical groups like Greenpeace and Earth First," Pulliam recalled. Many people mistakenly believed that the NBS was to undertake a comprehensive new "ocean-to-ocean" survey of all the nation's plants and animals, across all public and private lands, an undertaking that far exceeded any possible combination of governmental fiscal resources. In fact, the NBS inventory program constituted less than 15 percent of the agency's efforts, while the bulk of its work was a continuation of research programs initiated by its parent agencies. Despite Pulliam's best education efforts, letters of protest against the NBS flooded U.S. congressional offices, and NBS support on Capitol Hill was anything but secure.[6]

In November of 1994, the Republicans won majorities in both the House and the Senate for the first time in four decades. In January 1995, Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich set about to implement his party's "Contract with America," a list of promises upon which a united Republican front rode to victory in the midterm elections. Among the conservative reform measures of the contract was the elimination of the NBS, and debates over the purpose and legitimacy of the NBS intensified in the 104th Congress. In a revealing memoir of his time as NBS director, Pulliam recounted a number of harrowing exchanges with the agency's most ardent opponents, both in Congress and across the country. These people considered the NBS "the private property owner's worst nightmare."[7]

The NBS was also extremely unpopular with many Department of the Interior employees. A common criticism from within Interior agencies was that the NBS goal to prioritize long-range, ecosystem studies would displace the short-term, site-specific research that resource managers relied upon most. While study of "the big picture" was commendable, park, refuge, and BLM managers still needed science-on-demand to address problems as they arose. Many NBS scientists did remain in their previous field locations, working on the same research for their parent agency, but in time the work of many of these people began to drift from what they had pursued as in-house researchers. Critics also called for some sort of rules securing the validity of NBS-produced science, including systematic training for volunteer data collectors, and peer review of NBS reports.[8]

Interior agencies were not happy to relinquish their science divisions to the NBS, and many of the scientists were disgruntled about their transfer into the NBS. These individuals were uprooted from the agency culture and mission they had been part of for years, often decades, to join forces with other scientists of differing agency cultures and priorities. "The human side of that equation," merging the Interior biological scientists into some sort of NBS solidarity, was a

daily struggle for the new organization, recalled Denny Fenn, a former NPS scientist and administrator, who became Pulliam's deputy director. Some NBS scientists also found it hard to retain solid relationships with, and respect from, their former colleagues in their former agencies. "We were no longer one of them, we had become somebody else," Fenn said.[9]

Although Secretary Babbitt did not tinker with the organizational structure of the NBS, he did attempt to appease NBS critics by changing the agency's name to the National Biological Service in January 1995. The name change was intended to dispel the misperception that the agency's sole undertaking was a blanket survey of all biota across the nation, on both public and private lands—or worse yet, a fanatical drive to find endangered species and seize private property. The new secretarial order addressed other sticky issues as well, including, on the subject of private property access, the requirement of prior approval by land owners.[10]

But these terms did not move Congress. After funding the NBS at levels below the administration's requests for its first two years, both the House and Senate voted in the spring of 1995 to cut the fledgling agency's already barebones budget by almost nine percent. President Bill Clinton vetoed this bill, but in light of the new Congress's resolute hostility toward the NBS, Director Pulliam began to ponder which NBS facilities to shut down, should Congress succeed in slashing the NBS budget drastically the next fiscal year. Since the assembly of NBS scientists still lacked administrative support and any kind of cohesive structure, the new agency's viability depended upon "ramped up" funding from Congress. Yet the opposite trend was obvious. NBS opponents were also talking more forcefully about terminating the NBS altogether. They questioned Babbitt's authority to establish the NBS in the first place. In lieu of an organic act, Babbitt had collected an assortment of statutes sanctioning ecological research from across the Interior Department as authorization for the NBS. Congress could abolish the NBS by simply denying its appropriations.[11]

The NBS lasted as an independent agency only three years. After starving the NBS of funding for those three years, Congress excluded it altogether from the 1997 Interior budget, and in October 1996, the NBS ceased to exist. All NBS scientists merged into the USGS, forming a new USGS branch, the Biological Resources Division (BRD), which was later renamed the Biological Resources Discipline. Despite BRD's improved stability within the USGS, Interior agencies remained dissatisfied with BRD's ability to deliver them research that was relevant to their management needs.[12]

When Interior Secretary Babbitt and NBS Director Pulliam could see the end was near for the NBS, they lobbied moderate Republicans in Congress to salvage the department's doomed science program. Babbitt saw the USGS as an appropriate home for NBS scientists, since it operated independently from all regulatory and policy-making agencies within Interior. The transfer to the USGS was a good political compromise. "The Republicans could take credit for abolishing the NBS, but yet Interior's biological capabilities would remain intact, as part of the USGS," said Denny Fenn, who assumed leadership of the NBS scientists when Ron Pulliam resigned, and became the first USGS associate director of biology.[13]

Some people agreed with Fenn that Babbitt's NBS was an admirable idea, at least in theory, but the political timing of its implementation could not have been worse, and Babbitt was unable to effectively communicate his vision to an antagonistic Congress. Yet with failure came opportunity. As the Republican Congress reined in budgetary spending, the Clinton Administration encouraged all sorts of creative means to "reinvent" government. This reform effort, spearheaded by Vice President Al Gore, challenged agency employees to overhaul their operations so that government could "work better and cost less." For innovators within the Interior Department, Gore's "reinventing government" initiative provided fertile soil for new means of science delivery. "We had a wide open field to rethink things," said University of Idaho professor Gary Machlis, who together with Mike Soukup, natural resource chief for the NPS, devised the plan for the Coop-

erative Ecosystem Studies Unit (CESU) Network. Today, the CESU Network includes federal agencies beyond the Department of the Interior, and represents one positive, far-reaching legacy of the ill-fated NBS.[14]

This paper is part of larger administrative history of the CESU Network, which facilitates partnerships between federal land managers and university researchers with natural and cultural resources expertise.

Endnotes

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