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National Parks in the United States

An Overview of Current Conditions

Based on remarks presented at the IUCN Commission on National Parks and Protected Areas North American Regional Meeting, Lake Louise, Banff National Park, Alberta, October 1995.

Franklin K. Lane, secretary of the Interior in 1916, directed Stephen T. Mather, the first director of the U.S. National Park Service, to "stay abreast of what other park services are doing elsewhere in the world." It was a good idea then—and it's even a better idea today.

In the more than 7,500 parks and protected areas in over 145 nations, we have remarkably similar goals, shared objectives, and many issues in common. Among the most challenging issues are: reduced or static budgets in economically unstable and inflationary times, unsustainable and often incompatible surrounding land-use practices, increasing social pressures for demonstrable public benefits and short-term gains, the growing necessity for greater cost efficiencies and wrenching institutional streamlining, the contradictory and perpetual desire for more personnel and increased management capabilities, and the erosion of public trust reflected in a growing cynicism toward governments.

It is just common sense that our common issues can be addressed more effectively with a common effort. The world park community and the resources for which we are responsible will be better served with a pooling and sharing of renewed commitment, information, techniques, concepts, and innovations—among ourselves and with our public beyond the walls of the Chateau Lake Louise.

In the 21st century, no one organization, agency, or institution responsible for parks or protected areas can reasonably expect to survive intact, much less effectively resolve these challenging public-trust issues, without significantly strengthened partnerships and unprecedented cooperation in meeting common goals. When you are up to your belt in alligators, it is difficult to protect the swamp.

In the United States, parks at all levels of government and protected areas across the country grew in numbers and popularity between 1985 and 1995. In the United States, national park rangers emerged as the most-liked of all federal employees in nationwide polls. An active Congress added 31 new national park areas in the last decade. We now manage a total of 369 units covering more than 80 million acres (about 3% of the U.S.). Combined with other wildlands such as public forests, wildlife refuges, sanctuaries, wilderness and the state park systems, the U.S. is approaching 12% of its territory under conservation management. In national park areas, we had a 26% increase in visitation to about 270 million visits per year during this same period. More than 700 million additional visits were made to state parks this year.

As you well know, however, the popularity of parks is a double-edged sword. Budgets did not match this affectionate embrace. After decades of modest funding increases for the USNPS to a level of $1.4 billion in fiscal year 1995, we now anticipate declines as measured against both appropriations and inflation. Our total USNPS appropriation for 1996 is a huge 6.6% drop from 1995—and 11.5% less than we asked for. Internal adjustments to respond to the legislated requirements of a more complex and expanded system, however, has resulted in a growing backlog in maintenance from an estimated cost of $1.9 billion in 1988 to $4 billion today. Our entire infrastructure—roads, emergency and patrol vehicles, bridges, buildings, water treatment plants, trails, fire-fighting equipment—is in a growing state of disrepair.

Despite increases in visitation, services in parks are being curtailed. Public facilities, visitor centers, even entrance stations where fees are collected are open fewer hours a day, during shorter seasons. Interpretive programs, long believed to be the key ingredient to an aware, interested, and involved public, have been reduced in diversity, duration, and dimension. Frequent and intensive employee development programs, required to prepare a capable, skilled, and cohesive field management staff, will lapse almost entirely this year—training fund requests were entirely lost in the appropriations process in Congress.

According to a recent Government Accounting Office report to Congress (published in August 1995), national parks are at a crossroads. We are advised in this report that we must do one or more of the following: (1) increase our financial resources; (2) limit or reduce the number of units in the National Park System; (3) reduce the level of visitor services. Further, we must, along with all other U.S. federal agencies, stretch the available fiscal resources with more efficient management and performance measurement systems. Remember the alligators!

Interpretive programs at Shenandoah National Park have been cut 80%; last year life guards were no longer on duty to protect swimmers at Padre Island National Seashore. And at the same time, the U.S. House of Representatives is proposing to reduce the size of the currently authorized boundary at Shenandoah. The result would be development in areas critical to the environment of this lovely park on the doorstep of the urban Eastern United States.

Research and resource management budgets have suffered as well in an effort to address broad ecosystem issues and avoid "ecological train wrecks." A consolidation of scientists and financial resources from several agencies was accomplished with the creation of the National Biological Service (NBS). Greatly reduced funding support for NBS, however, has left us with a net loss of capability, rather than gain. And we are still not able to monitor the condition of many vulnerable resource systems in areas we manage. The train clearly is off the track. The loss of funding that was originally part of the National Park Service's science program and the erosion of the ability of the dedicated scientists who were paid with this money to do critical park-related science could well turn out to be the "Love Canal" of the national parks—the most serious assault on our ability to protect the parks in the history of the National Park System.

Fiscal conditions in other park and protected area agencies in the United States are no better, and in most cases worse. There is an inescapable irony in that, as we gradually have refined our economic modeling techniques and now have the basis for concluding that 11 of the national parks each generate close to $1 billion per year in regional economic revenues, we're going broke. An additional 25 national park areas each generate an estimated annual regional revenue of close to $100 million in services, sales, employment, and taxes. And we are still going broke!

The ongoing work of one of IUCN's CNPPA members, Lee Thomas of Australia, and his USNPS counterpart, Ken Hornback, have gone a long way to help management refine presentations on socioeconomic benefits. But it is going to take further persuasive refinements of broader regionally based assessments to bring asset- and investment-protection arguments home to legislators and their constituencies. And even more work for them to understand that national parks are not just theme parks, and that the reasons for their popularity lie in their inherent natural and cultural resources, their ability to remain our real heritage as we move through an ever-changing future, more devoid of our cultural past and our natural base in every passing year.

In the United States, the response to park revenue enhancement and cost recovery has been most successful at the state level. While the state budgets have exhibited relative declines and have unquestionably been affected by federal grant reductions (now eliminated in the 1996 appropriation), at least several state park systems have managed to meet, or almost meet, full annual operating expenses; a 65-85% coverage is more common. USNPS doesn't come close to these levels—nor are we likely to. Revenue generation often comes at high cost. According to the *State Government News* (January 1995), in an article titled "Nature Under Siege," state parks "have become more expensive to visit and less natural as park managers increasingly focus on generating enough revenue to stay in business." Most chillingly, I don't believe the visiting public knows what they have lost. David Weizenicker, Wisconsin's state park director and president of the National Association of State Park Directors, called the constant struggle for funding the biggest change he has seen in 32 years of park management. It is not a positive comment.

In today's climate of tight fiscal constraint, it is unlikely that needed additional funds will be provided through normal appropriated means. Of the possible alternative sources that remain, increased entrance and other user fees, higher returns from in-park concessioners, and funds from non-federal agreements appear to have the highest potential for supplementing budgets. Currently, less than 8% of the national park annual operating budget is generated through such means. For benefits to be realized, such funds would have to stay in the parks. Until recently, all national park revenues went into the general receipts of the U.S. treasury.

For each park visit, an average of $0.33 is received—it costs USNPS an estimated $4.12 for each such visit. In some areas, a fee of over $25.00 per visitor would be required to cover a unit's annual operating costs, assuming visitation levels would remain the same and we had the staff to collect the fees. With entrance fees fixed in law on a park-by-park basis, there is little chance of significant off-setting growth of return in this area, unless both the price of entrance fees were dramatically increased across the board and this amount could be retained for park use.

However, increases beyond some level would no doubt affect levels of visitation, and perhaps exclude segments of the society from access to their heritage. Fee increase proposals must be carefully thought through. The 1996 appropriations bill establishes a fee demonstration program for all land-managing agencies. It is a start. USNPS has a fee bill in the Congress, which we are currently working to improve even more.

Additionally, repeated efforts have been made to increase revenues from concession operations—changes in contracts including shortening leases and renegotiating the percentages to government have improved the rates of return. This wouldn't take much. Concession leases of the past averaged only 1-2.5% of gross sales. Just several years ago, combined concession revenues returned totaled only $13 million per year, equal to approximately 1% of the USNPS budget. Currently most such funds also go into our treasury as well, not back to the parks, although this is changing in some instances. USNPS has a bill in Congress to improve competitiveness and return higher percentages to the parks. Both the fee and the concessions bills are critical.

Most national park unit budgets average as much as 70-95% in employee salaries and benefits. Some, if they were to operate in 1996 as they did in 1995, would need 110% of what they will receive for all park operations just to pay people currently on board. To reduce central overhead costs and increase efficiency, we are in the midst of a major restructuring of regional and headquarters offices. Our intent was to reduce central offices by 40%, decentralize essential functions, and redistribute suitable personnel and their salaries directly to the parks. This process is well under way. However, because of eviscerating budget restrictions and lower appropriation expectations, the primary benefit gained will be reduced central-budget-office overhead costs with few actual gains to park budgets or personnel ceilings.

Are there other more creative alternatives? Last month one of our distinguished colleagues asked if greater economic benefits could be achieved by turning the management of Grand Canyon over to a large corporation like Disney, Inc.—perhaps a Club Med-like resort, or Safari Land? A legitimate question. Many, but not all, such corporate theme parks have proved highly profitable. What are the consequences of a poor return on investment? Who has the proprietary interest in our national (and international) resource base? What is the real value of an approach that does not afford all citizens access to their parks at reasonable costs? And one that is built first on entertainment principles, not natural or cultural resource protection principles? Such schemes are not appropriate to park systems dedicated to retaining our national and cultural heritage for the benefit of future generations. I do not believe such an idea is worth the risk. Nor do the American people, if we can judge by what happened when Disney proposed to build a Civil War theme park in Virginia—and got run out.

Elsewhere in the world in recent years, alternative private non-profit management considerations have indeed become accepted and implemented. While only time will tell if such actions are in fact in the long-term public good, early World Bank reviewers were hard-pressed to identify successful case studies of such expediencies. Unfortunately, most have proven to be short-lived phenomena with externally funded, high front-end costs and built-in obsolescence. Managing heritage in perpetuity is a long time, and even the great conservative economist Adam Smith wrote that this function should be reserved "to the Crown."

To further fix and reduce costs, it has also been suggested that the National Park System be limited to no further expansion, or perhaps even should cut the number of its units. Congressional initiatives to establish a commission to review, identify, and remove areas from the System are still alive. There is no certainty that such efforts will not be successful. To achieve substantive cost savings, the equivalent to closing some of the larger national parks would be required. To save 10% of the USNPS operating budget would require eliminating the equivalent of the 200 least-expensive parks.

What is important is for Congress to establish strong criteria to use when considering new additions to the National Park System, and rejecting the less-worthy suggestions. If there are existing units that would not meet such criteria, Congress already has the authority to deauthorize them. It has happened in the past, and just last year Congress moved the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts out of the National Park System. If Congress wants to change what they have put into the System they already have the authority to do so. Do we really need a new law that will open up the potential to take a run at federal heritage protection, at a tradition that spawned park systems worldwide?

All federal land-management agencies in the United States (as elsewhere) are faced with rapidly mounting private-sector pressures for commercial resource development. When our successors look back from the bicentennial of the park idea and the first century of ecosystem management, will we be judged as having demonstrated that we adequately understood the "limits of acceptable change"? "Risk analysis"? And be proud of our legacy of "sustainability"? Our pledge to future generations requires at the very least that we be cautious. There are very few quick fixes in our business. Concerted efforts are currently being made to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) to gas and oil exploration. This area, as our Canadian friends have long been aware, is essential for the transboundary health of the Porcupine caribou herd. Continued oil and gas exploration, hard rock mining, habitat fragmentation, exotic species introduction, clearcutting, and continued development in the Yellowstone ecosystem potentially threaten the very resources determined to be of World Heritage status in the world's first national park. As was pointed out during a public forum there in September 1995, a body of gold ore may have the potential extracted value of millions of dollars over 40 years, but Yellowstone generates close to $1 billion every year in its current state—and always will, if protected.

Congressional initiatives for reinstating timber harvest in currently protected wildlands of the Tongass National Forest in Alaska could potentially threaten the integrity of the transboundary Canadian and U.S. World Heritage site from Kluane National Park through the Tatshinini-Alsek drainage to Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve, the largest managed wilderness in North America.

I would like to share with you a few of my own thoughts about the World Heritage designation—this increasingly visible management tool. For two decades after ratification of the World Heritage Convention, the U.S. quietly went about implementing our legal treaty responsibilities in identifying and nominating properties which it believed to be of outstanding universal significance. Over the last five years, the Convention has become operational as an instrument for domestic conservation and international cooperation.

The listing of Everglades National Park in Florida as a "World Heritage Site in Danger" by the 21-nation intergovernmental World Heritage Committee supported critical negotiations and litigation resulting in the cost sharing of an $800 million wetlands restoration program. A proposal for the realignment of highway Route 101 through Redwoods National Park, a World Heritage Site in northern California, was modified from an original plan of removing 750 old-growth redwood trees to the now-acceptable level of no more than five (and probably only two) after the intervention of the World Heritage Committee.

In the U.S., Canada, Mexico, and the 140 other countries that have ratified this convention, we as individuals and collectively have perhaps our most effective emerging tool for broadening our global base of support, strengthening public resolve, and reinforcing national pride, while more effectively conserving biological diversity. Such long-term international cooperative goals must not be precluded by the context of our admittedly stretched situation or current political exigencies.

For the last one and a half years, the USNPS has been brilliantly and critically represented in the Middle East peace negotiations between Israel and Jordan by Rob Milne. This summer, I personally traveled with Sharon Cleary (who, like Milne, is with USNPS's International Affairs Office) to Tiberias to participate in these ongoing deliberations. At this time, all parties have agreed that disputed boundaries in the Jordan Rift Valley between Aqaba and the Golan Heights can be addressed in part with the creation of an international transboundary peace park. A joint international marine park has been designated in the Gulf of Aqaba and plans are under way for similar action in the area of the Dead Sea. When such opportunities and the need for international cooperation are presented they simply cannot be ignored.

Closer to home, after decades of productive interchange, the USNPS and Parks Canada have negotiated and will sign at the earliest appropriate opportunity a memorandum of agreement which will further strengthen heritage cooperation between our two countries. As with Canada, we share ecosystems and many areas of common heritage with Mexico. The USNPS, in fact, has jurisdiction over the northern side of 28% of the Mexico–USA border. With the recent designation by Mexico of several border and near-border biosphere reserves, significant strategic steps have been taken to strengthen joint conservation efforts in the Chihuahuan and Sonoran transboundary ecosystems. By definition, such systems can only be managed with the collaborative involvement of many individuals and organizations from both nations.

These are significant and hopeful steps forward, and should be applauded. But as we do that, let us look soberly in summary at the state of protected areas in the United States.

The 1996 budget cuts are terrible for the National Park Service. They are worse for the rest of the agencies. Even more alarming is the pattern of combining the budget process, under the legitimate concern for deficit reduction, with other legislative approaches to mount a massive assault on the environmental protection side of the equation for a sustainable future. Combine the current political climate with the pressures of an increasing population and their need for jobs, a better life for their children, and a secure future, in concert with an urbanizing citizenry with little understanding of their direct ties to the natural world. The result is the greatest pressure against continued, let alone increased, opportunity for protected area conservation that we have seen since World War II.

At the moment, the environmental organizations in the United States are less influential than they have been in decades. A complete reversal of this trend is needed. It can only occur through grassroots citizen education, understanding, and involvement, in which we must all participate. It is my hope that the diversity and professional capacity represented in the membership of the CNPPA continues to expand, and be increasingly activated in North America to meet these park and protected area challenges and opportunities of the next century.

This is clearly a time for developing coherent strategies; a time for convergent, not divergent, efforts; a time for cooperation. As Jay D. Hair said in his remarks to you here, this is a time to climb mountains. I climbed the Grand Teton this summer—hard work for me. What lies before is harder work, but the reward is a brighter future for this planet. We won't hear our great-great-grandchildren say, "Thank you." But they will.

Editor's note: Copies of the Government Accounting Office report mentioned by the author are available from the National Park Service's Office of International Affairs, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, D.C. 20013-7127.

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