

Unpaid Protectors: Volunteerism and the Diminishing Role of Federal Responsibility in the National Park Service

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Introduction

EACH YEAR, UNPAID VOLUNTEERS ARE PROVIDING AN INCREASING SHARE OF SERVICES in our national parks. By law, federal agencies are not permitted to accept the donated time of volunteers. However, special exceptions have been made for the National Park Service (NPS), and there are currently 10 volunteers for every employee in the NPS. From serving in visitor centers to assisting in resource management to conducting biological surveys, unpaid workers contribute to services central to the NPS mission.

In planning for the future of the NPS, it is critical to examine the underlying factors that are changing the way America protects its natural and cultural wonders. Simply, why has volunteerism become such a powerful force in the NPS? This paper posits that a complex and self-feeding cycle underlies the rapid adoption and continued growth of volunteerism in the national parks.

First, the Volunteers in Parks Act of 1969 established the legal grounding for a volunteer program in the NPS. Because work in the national parks is so desirable, an eager and seemingly infinite population of volunteers has arisen, willing to assist the parks. Park managers use volunteers in a variety of essential roles, and unpaid workers often fill in resource-responsibility gaps that develop in the parks. Park visitors are unaware of park funding challenges because they observe the health of the parks after volunteers have filled in resource shortfalls. The democratic feedback process is short-circuited as Congress is not pressured to increase NPS funding, and further demands are put on the parks. The result is that the resource-responsibility gap widens, more volunteers enlist, and the cycle begins again (Figure 1).

Methods

This research was conducted for a Northwestern University political science undergraduate honors thesis. Claims are informed by primary and secondary research. Data has been acquired from public records on Congressional hearings, employment statistics, and the Volunteers in Parks program. Interviews with superintendents, volunteers, volunteer coordinators, and NPS experts are used to bolster the arguments.

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Figure 1. The cycle underlying the growth of volunteerism in the national parks.

Initial infusion of volunteers

Unless otherwise specified by law, federal agencies are prohibited from accepting the work of volunteers (31 USC Sec. 1342). One such exception was created with the Volunteers in Parks Act of 1969 (16 USC Ch.1 Subch. II) which created the NPS Volunteers in Parks (VIP) program. At the time, the act was intended to provide legal protections for individuals assisting with reenactments in the parks.

During a Congressional hearing on the act, some concerns were raised about how volunteers would affect the work of full-time staff. George Hartzog, the NPS director at the time, assured lawmakers that volunteers would only carry out value-added services and the Act detailed that “the Secretary shall not permit the use of volunteers to displace any employee” (16 USC Ch.1 Subch. II, Section 18g). With little deliberation, the Volunteers in Parks Act passed easily.

The Act institutionalized a culture of volunteerism in the NPS that continues today. NPS managers regard volunteers as a critical component of their park’s ability to provide services. “The most important part of the volunteer program is engagement of the American public in the stewardship of the national parks. . . . So even if you had, in theory, 100 percent budget covering all core responsibilities of a park, you would still want a vibrant and robust volunteer program” (Superintendent A, pers.comm., telephone interview, 12 January 2011). The Act, responding to a relatively modest need at the time, has expanded into a dynamic force in our parks.

Large supply of willing volunteers

While the NPS volunteer program began slowly, its popularity has exploded in recent decades. The VIP program now receives the contributions of over 220,000 volunteers annually and the number is steadily growing (Figure 2). For reference, the NPS full-time equivalent (FTE) staff is just over 20,000. NPS work resonates with a great variety of volunteerism values. There are a multitude of altruistic and egoistic motivations that drive individuals to donate their time to the national parks.

There are distinct altruistic values that are fulfilled by national park volunteerism. By working in a park, an individual can fulfill their need to contribute to environmental preservation. At the same time, being a federal agency, national parks offer volunteers an opportunity to engage in public service. Finally, many park visitors become attached and devoted to the protection of particular places. Volunteering gives them the power to help preserve the area for future generations.

Egoistic motivations can also play a significant role in the decision to volunteer in the parks. Paid NPS positions are notoriously hard to acquire, and even seasonal opportunities can be highly competitive. Volunteering in a park gives an individual valuable experience and skill development, while granting them exposure to potential hiring managers. Some volunteers may also enjoy privileged access to our country’s most beautiful places. Acting as a campground host can give volunteers the rare opportunity to spend extended periods of time in a park. “It has been our dream to live in a national park . . . and one means of doing that is volunteering” (Volunteer A, pers. comm., telephone interview, 21 January 2011).

Whatever the combination of motivations, many feel compelled to volunteer in the parks. Annual VIP participation growth is roughly equivalent to the entire full-time equivalent workforce in the NPS.

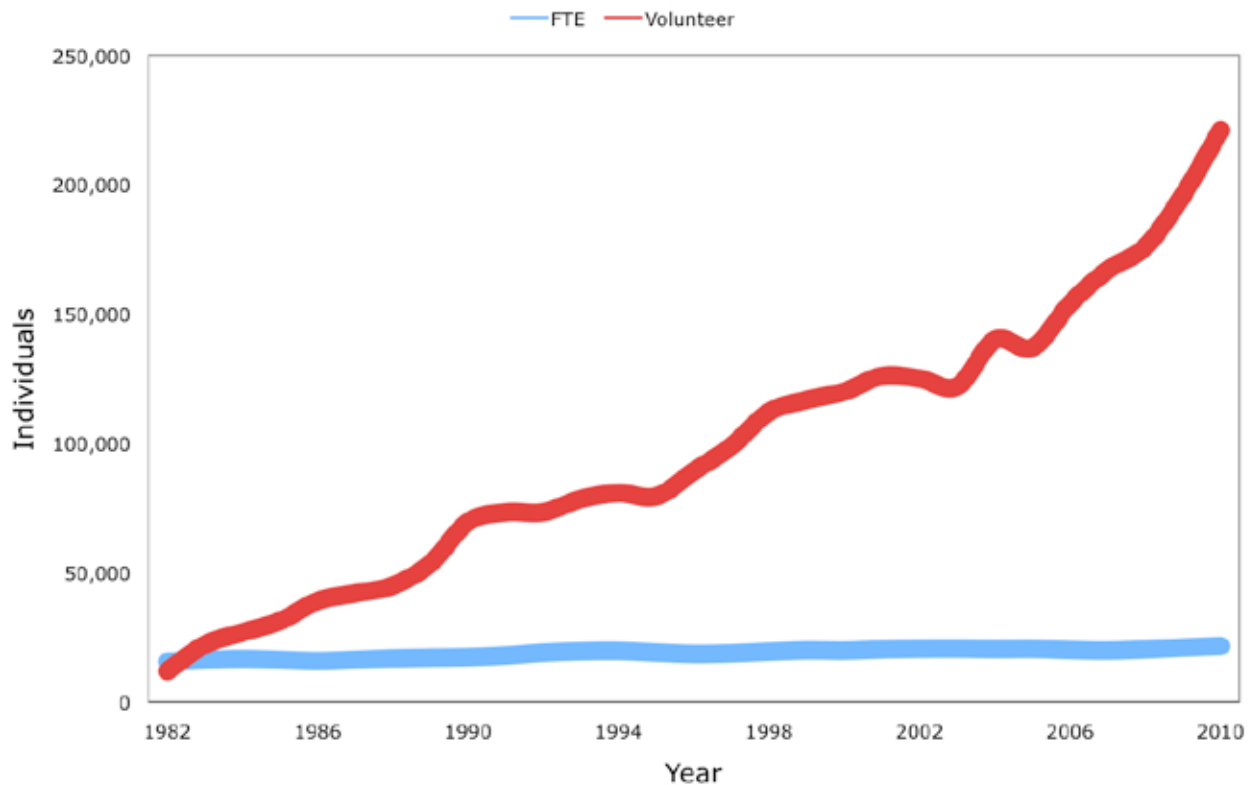


Figure 2. Volunteers and full-time equivalent (FTE) staff, 1982-2010 (NPS 2011).

The role of volunteers expands

Throughout the NPS, volunteers have been deeply integrated into operations. Among many diverse roles, volunteers conduct research for the parks, help guide visitors, and monitor campgrounds. “Volunteers across the service are often times being used in the same way in the exact same location alongside permanent employees. Administratively you can make a distinction ... but at face value, most people would say they are pretty much doing the same thing” (Superintendent B, pers. comm., telephone interview, 8 February 2011).

As a result, the distinctions between staff and volunteers can become blurred and ill defined. “The Volunteers-in-Parks (VIP) initiative was intended to augment, not supplant, the services provided by NPS employees. In fact, the NPS policies still make that distinction. It is clear, however, that volunteers now are no longer supplementing the work of uniformed, full-time employees; they are replacing them through programs such as ... Volunteers in Parks” (Wade 2005, 65). Wade’s observation is perhaps most clearly displayed in NPS interpretive services. In visitor centers, it can almost be expected to see volunteers and paid staff working side-by-side, performing the same or very similar roles.

One NPS volunteer coordinator claims, “I use the same terminology as we do with employees because they apply, we interview, we check references, and we hire them. We just aren’t going to give them a paycheck” (Volunteer Coordinator A, pers. comm., telephone interview, 15 February 2011). The contributions of volunteers are not always well advertised; staff and volunteer uniforms and patches are distinct but similar in design. It is reasonable that many casual visitors to the parks would leave without being able to distinguish whether paid or unpaid staff assisted them.

“[Visitors] probably have a vague peripheral awareness of [volunteer contributions] but are not aware of the volume—the simple amount of it.... I would say that the public probably isn’t as

aware as some of us might like” (ibid.). Thus, volunteers perform nearly identical roles to many NPS staff, and are likely indistinguishable to the casual visitor. At the very least, visitors are not aware of the magnitude or extent of volunteer contributions.

The resource-responsibility gap

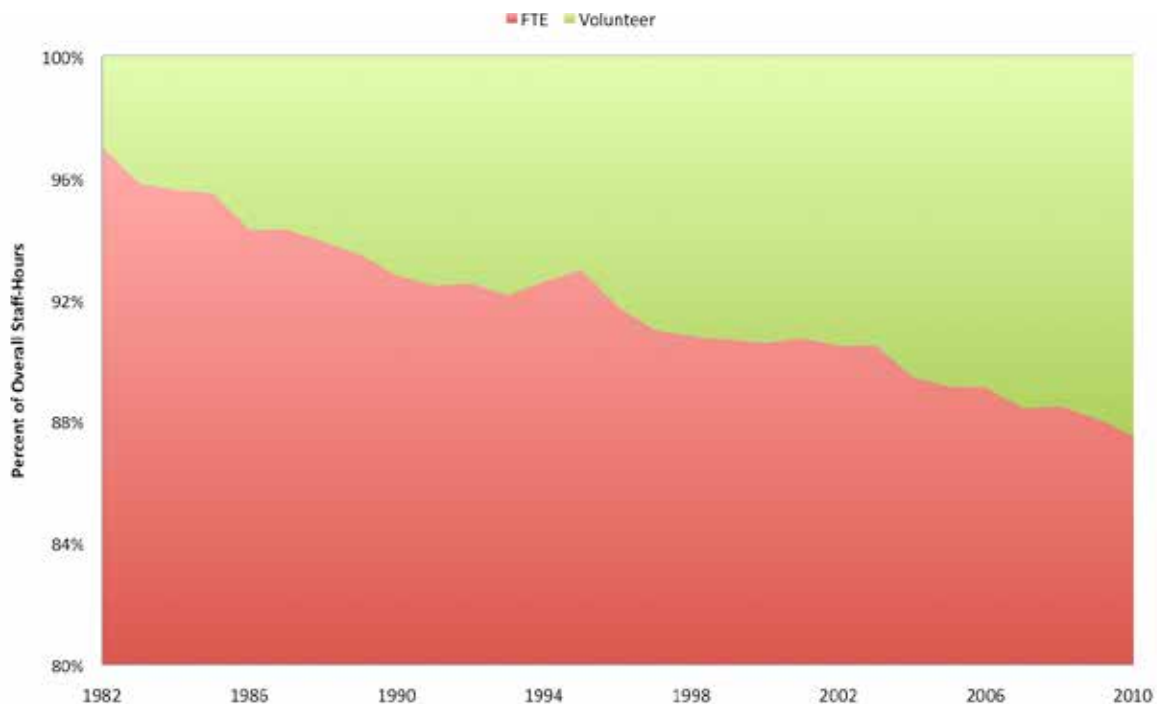
Many familiar with the NPS would agree that the agency operates within a “culture of organizational poverty” (Galvin and Pitcaithley 2008). More visitors, additional acreage, rising fixed costs, and maintenance backlogs are all steady and growing strains on the NPS. New programs and responsibilities, such as research learning centers, show that the expectations of a modern NPS have expanded as well.

Park budgets have grown, but many are skeptical that they have been commensurate with these new demands on the NPS. It is reasonably argued that the NPS is in dire financial straits and facing serious budgetary challenges. Former Chief Historian for the NPS, Dwight Pitcaithley, observed that the average budget shortfall uncovered in the National Park Conservation Association’s Business Plan Initiative was 32 percent. Pitcaithley concluded that, “national parks have been operating on only two-thirds the funding required to preserve, research, and interpret to the visiting public” (Pitcaithley 2007).

Sentiment in the parks echoes this figure. “When [the NPS is] the caretaker of all of the history of all the country as well as some really outstanding natural resource real estate, is it funded fully for that mandate? It’s not” (Superintendent A, pers. comm.). Parks are frequently expected to do more than what their finances allow.

Logically, the resulting gap is commonly filled by the work of unpaid volunteers. Already working alongside paid staff in many roles, such as interpretation, it is no surprise that volunteers are utilized strategically when resources are strained. According to a Government Accountability Office study, “park officials ... reported that they increasingly relied on volunteers and other authorized funding sources to provide operations and services that were previously paid with allocations for daily operations from the ONPS [Operation of the National Park System] account” (GAO 2006, 12).

Figure 3. Share of national park staff-hours, 1982-2010 (NPS 2011).



Over time, this has led to volunteers shouldering an increasing share of work in the national parks. Volunteers currently contribute over 12 percent of the staff hours needed to run the parks (Figure 3). That figure is growing and shows no signs of slowing.

The emerging truth is that current budgets are insufficient to support the programs and services expected from the national parks. This resource-responsibility gap is filled by the work of an eager and growing volunteer force.

Short-circuited democracy

While the national parks are often revered as beacons of American democracy, I posit that the democratic feedback process is somewhat short-circuited in the parks. A 2010 Hart Research Associates Poll found that 98 percent of Americans feel it is important for the federal government to protect the national parks (Hart Research Associates 2010). Why, then, have Americans put little pressure on Congress to rectify these serious budget shortfalls in the NPS? The presence of volunteers may obscure citizens from the true condition of their parks.

“[A public official] cannot fully succeed unless the citizens intelligently cooperate with him by making known their wants.... Citizens, however, cannot exercise that obligation effectively if they are ignorant about their government” (Capes 1922, 14). In order for Americans to make an informed decision about the management of their parks, they must first be given accurate information on national park health. In the NPS, a public-facing agency, this information can be gathered by one’s experience visiting a park.

In truth, visitors are exceptionally satisfied with the current condition of the parks. The University of Idaho’s Park Studies Unit gauges visitor satisfaction each year with their Visitor Survey Card Project. For the past decade, satisfaction with both park staff and the overall park experience has remained between 96 and 98 percent (University of Idaho; data originated from the University of Idaho Park Studies Unit, Visitor Services Project, and database creation is supported by funding from the NPS Social Science Division, and from individual NPS units). The survey, however, makes no mention of the work of volunteers.

It is remarkable that parks, operating with two-thirds the appropriate funding, leave citizens superbly satisfied. They do so by “hiding the hurt” (ANPR 2004, 4). Well-intentioned park management shields visitors from the realities of a struggling NPS. “The last options chosen are always those that impact visitors. The perception of visitors from their short visit is not the same as the informed view over time of NPS employees and other professionals engaged daily in resource stewardship. The typical park visitor does not see the effects of patrol and resource program cuts ... so the degree of true damage often goes unnoticed and undocumented” (ANPR 2004, 4).

It is in the culture of the NPS to create a positive visitor experience at any cost. “We work very hard to not make those cuts obvious to visitors. That’s probably not to our own best interest” (Superintendent C, pers. comm., telephone interview, 11 February 2011). This culture leaves visitors ignorant of the challenges the parks are facing.

The use of volunteers to fill in the resource-responsibility gap limits the public’s exposure to budget cuts. Visitor satisfaction is undoubtedly impacted by the work of volunteers but, as discussed above, it is unlikely that the casual visitor is aware that 12 percent of the staff hours supporting the parks are not provisioned by citizen taxes.

Because the public is ignorant of the true state of our parks, no notable public outcry is evident when the NPS continues to be asked to do more with less. Congress faces little pressure to close the resource-responsibility gap and, as it widens, the need for additional resources steadily grows. The NPS’s seemingly endless volunteer corps is happy to heed the call and the cycle begins again.

Conclusions

The importance of volunteerism in the NPS is undeniable. This research aimed to uncover the dynamics that underlie the rapid and continuing growth of the VIP program. I argue that a complex and self-feeding cycle has propelled volunteers to hold a significant and increasing role in the parks.

The Volunteers in Parks Act laid the groundwork for the institutional integration of volunteers in park services. A great variety of motivations compel individuals to volunteer in the parks, creating a volunteer corps that is more than 10 times that of the full-time equivalent NPS staff. Park management allows volunteers to become ubiquitous and help fill in gaps left by budget shortfalls. This shields the public from the agency's challenges; the resource-responsibility gap widens and the need for volunteers intensifies.

There are many opportunities for additional research on national park volunteerism. Further study would help us understand to what degree visitors are aware of volunteer contributions. Likewise, it is important to determine how volunteerism alters park management. How will parks be affected if the volunteer corps stagnates or begins to decline? Ultimately, if the NPS is to effectively plan for the future, it must critically examine the VIP program and craft deliberate volunteer management policies.

Volunteers have become too important to ignore in the NPS. In the process of helping to save our parks, they are altering the way in which this public service is provisioned. In the end, a thorough discussion of these issues will strengthen the NPS that we, especially the volunteers, love so intensely.

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