

Our National Park Policy: Some Thoughts on Politics and the Role of Science

A place is nothing in itself. It has no meaning, it can hardly be said to exist, except in terms of human perception, use and response.

Wallace Stegner, 1989

The National Park Service (NPS) often ranks at the top of lists which purport to show the most admired U.S. federal agencies. The reasons for this have never been definitively “proven,” yet it is not difficult to conclude that they center on feelings about the worth of national parks, and on positive experiences with field-level NPS employees. Given the high rankings, it might be easy to conclude that NPS has a lot of control over the direction of national park policy. Yet such is not the case. This essay will seek to explore why this might be so.

The Institutional Context

The U.S. Constitution parcels out political power among three branches of government. It does so because the authors of the document had a profound distrust of locating power in one place. Hence our political system is fragmented and open, and there are many institutional rivals to NPS autonomy over park policy. Interest groups, as most in NPS know all too well, use any point of access (such as the courts, members of Congress, and executive branch appointees) they can to influence park policy-making, whether those groups be the National Parks and Conservation Association, or park concessionaires.

More importantly for NPS, there is *no* mention of the public bureaucracy in the U.S. Constitution, at least in language that would be understood as

referring to the enormous institution of modern government with its important discretionary powers of public policy-making. This gap means that there is no clear consensus in American political theory about the proper powers and roles of a large section of the modern American state, a section which has come to be known as the “fourth branch of government” and which is as significant as Congress or the courts.

To put this observation somewhat differently, this theoretical confusion leads us to ask what the best way is for NPS to understand and defend the legitimacy of what it does in the name of park policy? This question deserves some consideration as the bureau moves with the rest of government into the post-election period. The legitimacy question is

important because of the nature of the U.S. political system. It is, unfortunately, not enough for us to assert that whatever NPS does is in itself legitimate, because of the numerous examples of other actors successfully "overruling" the bureau.

The Power and the Limits of Expertise

The model of legitimacy which has great appeal to professionals within NPS centers on the role of expertise. NPS decisions have legitimacy in this model because NPS knows the most about the parks, and has been given that authority by Congress. Congress created both the parks and NPS, then delegated the day-to-day management responsibility to the bureau. The bureau uses its professional judgment (hence discretion) on how to manage the park system. This model works well, to a point. NPS is at the top of the most admired federal bureaus, due in part to what the public associates with NPS, but also because NPS must be doing many things right. Yet, as mentioned above, there are many NPS decisions which are not left to the bureau; there is not complete deference to the bureau's expertise because of that expertise.

The expert model has its roots in the conservation movement of the Progressive Era as summarized by Samuel Hays:

Conservationists were led by people who promoted the "rational" use of resources, with a

focus on efficiency, planning for future use, and the application of expertise to broad national problems. But they also promoted a system of decision-making consistent with that spirit, a process by which the expert would decide in terms of the most efficient dovetailing of all competing resource users according to criteria which were considered to be objective, rational, and above the give-and-take of political conflict (Hays 1980:7).

The agency which best personified this era in natural resources is the U.S. Forest Service. Today, however, even that agency cannot rely on expertise to control its decisions. The reason, in part, is that there is such fundamental disagreement about the purposes of the national forests that the agency has no real room to move anymore. Indeed, many observers of federal land policy have come to the conclusion that the umbrella policy of "multiple use" does not serve either the Forest Service or the Bureau of Land Management well anymore. A number of proposals have surfaced, including land transfer, agency consolidation, policy decentralization and consideration of the state land-trust model as options worth consideration. NPS appears to have escaped much of the severity of this negative scrutiny, though it too has its critics. All this is to say that there is simply not much societal deference to expertise these days, and as a model for park policy-making it

does not appear to be enough.

Ecology and the Politics of Science

Further confounding the discussion is rise of a new optimism among some that several sciences, notably ecology and conservation biology, will somehow offer a way out of the dilemma. Here, as in the past, science serves as the underpinning of bureau expertise. The way out, however, depends on the role of science in public policy discourse. Science either can be viewed as a truth claim, or it can be viewed as more of a necessary but insufficient condition for public policymaking.

For example, my research into the politics and policy of visibility protection offers one case study of this latter role for science. It is hard to see how the Navajo Generating Station near Page, Arizona, would have had to install retrofit technology without the source identification work of the NPS Air Quality Division and others. But the work that went into identifying the power plant as a source contributing to visibility impairment at Grand Canyon could not "force" anything on its own. That required the teeth of the Clean Air Act and political coalition building. Yet, without the work of the air quality scientists and specialists, nothing would have happened either. Of some interest here is that this policy "success" relies on the park visitor's experience of a park resource.

What if we are discussing the protection of a park resource *from* people, however? Here, the role of sci-

ence remains the same. It is one thing to show through research the fragility of cryptogamic soil. It is another thing to use this "finding" as justification for large-scale exclusion of people from park units, unless the people themselves have accepted the necessity of some of that exclusion in the name of the resource and the visitor experience of the resource.

Of course, most resource and park managers, as well as scientists, would agree with that observation, in my experience. Yet if one follows some of the debate in say, the journal *Conservation Biology*, it is clear that something else is at work. There is an interesting argument about whether some in the conservation biology community know where they wish to end up with public policy, and are attempting to "find" the science to get there. Others in the debate urge caution, suggesting that such a course might well damage the credibility of sound conservation biology research.

We have been here before. Consider the current arguments over forest health. The Forest Service is asking the American public to trust it to manage the forests to make them more "healthy." The bureau notes that one reason the forests are not healthy is because of the many years of fire suppression. But wasn't it the Forest Service which spent years suppressing fire based partly on science and partly on telling the American public that only "they" could prevent forest fires? Now it admits that policy was in error. Can some in the public be blamed for being sus-

picious of claims of forest health problems, even if those claims are accurate?

The best example of this danger can be found in the words of conservation biology proponent Ed Grumbine: "We must avoid the *democratic trap* (emphasis mine) of giving equal weight to all interest groups: many would destroy biodiversity for economic gain" (Grumbine 1990, cited in Fitzsimmons 1996:220). Understandably, such a stance makes many people nervous about the real goals of some biodiversity advocates, even if most federal land managers strongly deny that they hold such views. Grumbine's position assumes the stance of ultimate "truth" which denies the need for democratic discourse.

Is There Another Option?

There may be a more useful way to think about managing parks, however, which can build on the expertise which NPS has. The 1916 Organic Act charges NPS to manage parks "for future generations." The clause gives NPS a focus which is different from all of the other actors who claim to have an interest, or

power, over agency policy. NPS can act in the name of park resources, and in the name of visitor experiences with a long term "public interest" perspective. But, NPS must speak in those terms, rather than solely in the language of expertise or of science. There is no guarantee that NPS perspectives on park management issues will prevail, but such a public interest perspective is different from a perspective which looks out for constituents or is based on political ideologies and agendas currently at play. The future generations who will visit the parks would become a benchmark for whom parks are managed today, and thus this long-term perspective can legitimately be inserted into debates over park management. Expertise and science remain necessary tools, however, in this debate. NPS could then present to its public(s) and other interests management decisions framed with a long-term perspective and designed to help those interests deliberate over choices NPS must make. This might, among other things, show those interested that managing our park system is not an easy task.

References

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