

2000, The Year of the Parks: An Open Letter to President Clinton

Dear Mr. President:

This is to propose that you proclaim in your State of the Union Address this January that you intend to issue an executive order in the very near future that declares the year 2000 The Year of the Parks and that directs the marshalling of the resources for planning and activating implementation so that visible progress will be underway by the first day of the year 2000. Your Parks for Tomorrow initiative, dated April 22, 1996, was a great step in the right direction. It set the stage for the bold, comprehensive action that we must now undertake.

Now is the time, Mr. President, for you to rekindle the spirit and purposes of Theodore Roosevelt of a century ago.

The problem and the opportunity it presents:

We are the stewards as well as the beneficiaries of a remarkable system of parks. The federal government, and many state governments, however, have fallen behind in their stewardship responsibilities.

Our federal responsibility is the national parks. We must not forget that the national parks are frequently referred to as "America's Best Idea," that the natural parks are characterized as "America's Crown Jewels," that the cultural parks breathe continuous life into America's heritages, that the National Park Service is rated the highest by our citizens, and that the National Park ranger is the most appreciated of all government servants. In short, Mr. President, the National Park System is a primary, distinctive characteristic of our nation and its people. The national parks are a primary foundation of what makes America America.

Yet in a report dated August 30, 1995, in response to a congressional request that they review the current condition of the national parks, the Government Accounting Office found a painfully wide range of problems, including problems with:

- Both visitor services and resource management;
- The overall level of visitor services at most parks;
- The condition of many trails, campgrounds, and other facilities;
- The adequacy of the data available to most park managers to determine the overall condition of their parks' natural and cultural resources;

- Meeting many operating requirements and accomodating increased visitation.

Beyond the great rec-reation and re-creation, educational, family bonding, ecosystem protection, and scientific benefits of the parks, the positive economic impacts of the National Park System are of national significance. Americans, and foreigners, pump a huge flow of job- and income-generating expenditures for travel and other tourism services in visiting the national parks. It is patently ridiculous for the parks to be starved for resources in the face of tremendous public demands for enjoying their benefits.

The purposes of the proposed proclamation are to:

- Alert the American people to the extent to which the nation's parks have been deteriorating.
- Announce to the American people that the time has come for all of us to reinvent our appreciation for and our support of—in pride and in purse—the magnificent system of national, state, regional, county, and municipal parks that we have inherited from centuries of solid growth, bold experimentation, and generously funded improvements.
- Advise the American people that you intend to initiate the reinvention process in the very near future.
- More specifically, advise the American people that you plan to issue an executive order for the federal government to set the national example by restoring the national parks and providing for strengthened protection in the future.
- Advise that your executive order will direct the establishment of a carefully selected commission of appropriate people whom you shall charge to determine the facts and needs and to advise on optional objectives and strategies for setting the national example by restoring and improving America's national parks.
- State that you are determined to challenge the Congress to join you in seeing to it that by January 1, 2000, substantial implementation steps are underway so that The Year of the Parks will have real impacts.
- Note that you are confident that state and local governments will do their share with their parks.
- Enthuse the American people to support your administration in its leadership of the reinvention process.
- Build on the concept of The Year of the Parks to create a rallying cry that will fire up the American people to press on their legislators the need to work closely and positively with your administration on this singularly national cause.

The purposes of the Executive Order are to:

- Precipitate the reinvention of the magnificent system of national, state, regional, county, and municipal parks that we have inherited from centuries of solid growth, bold experimentation, and generously funded improvements.
- Institute Federal action on behalf of the national parks, which, I beg to repeat, Mr. President, are regularly cited as "America's Best Idea."
- Create a ground-swell that will gradually extend the process to all of the state, regional, county, and municipal Parks, step by step, each step being taken by the appropriate level of state and local government.
- Strengthen the role of science in the parks.
- Provide the rangers living in the parks, and their families, more reasonably modern housing.
- Charge fair fees for access to the parks and for the use of special visitor facilities sufficient so that immediate beneficiaries bear the costs of accomodating them.
- Adopt concessionaire policies that return to the Treasury a fairer share of the monies spent by visitors.
- Activate a commission of distinguished citizens to determine the facts and needs and to advise on optional objectives and strategies.

I conclude this letter with a personal touch. The idea of The Year of the Parks came to my attention while reading the wonderful sequence of articles about the parks and other protected places in the quarterly journal of the George Wright Society, a nonprofit association of protected area professionals dedicated to the protection, preservation, and management of cultural and natural parks and reserves through research and education. I cannot speak officially for the Society, but I am confident that its officers, its staff, and its members will welcome the opportunity to assist your administration in planning, activating, and managing The Year of the Parks.

Sincerely,

Maurice H. Schwartz

Member of the Board of the Friends of Maryland State Forests and Parks, former two-term member of the Board of the National Parks and Conservation Association, and life member of the George Wright Society and the Wilderness Society.