

## The Business Connection: An Introduction

**O**ur times are a repeat of times past, times when the virtues of commercial business were held by many leaders and followers to be the highest of virtues. Commercial thinking is increasingly reaching the parks in old and new ways. The connection is tightening. Great issues are at stake. The issues deserve a great deal more vigorous and more widespread examination and illumination. Commercialism at the end of this century is once again becoming the dominant force in our society that it was at the end of the previous century. Until the next Theodore Roosevelt arrives, we must marshal our thinking and planning to protect the parks from a new and more pernicious level of threat. As Bill Brown reminded us in his "Letter from Gustavus" of April 3, 1995 (THE GEORGE WRIGHT FORUM, Vol. 12, No. 2), Adam Smith prescribed the preservation of national monuments as one of the three principal functions of national governments.

While the National Park Service observes many of the best modern business principles and processes, no doubt it could observe more with benefit. Alternatively, a great many business organizations would benefit were they to apply some of the Park Service's principles and processes. An example is the superior service manner of park rangers who regularly come in close contact with visitors.

Given room for improvement by the National Park Service based on business models, the questions become which and how much. Both business and the Park Service observe limits to the best of principles. A prime example on the business side is the limit that a business places on catering to a customer. If a customer approaches an automobile dealer seeking to buy a camping tent to place in the trunk of his new car, the dealer

has to decline because selling tents is no part of her business. On the Park Service side, no national park will permit its otherwise proper visitors to drive off-road vehicles wherever they choose. Limits are necessary. The business customer and the park visitor can both be wrong. "The customer is always right" is a fine guiding principle—no less always subject to limits.

The six articles in this series begin above and then sweep across the spectrum of the business connection. The first of the six is a broad-gauged philosophical review of the roots and growth of the parks so as to place the business connection in perspective. The second considers "the business of the parks" from the point of view of their economic consequences, a vital, very broad, multi-faceted partition of the business connection. It provides

another perspective on the business connection.

Al Runte is the author of several significant books on the parks, notably his *National Parks: The American Experience*. He is a frequent spokesperson on major national park issues. He has ably concentrated 25-plus years of studying, thinking, and writing about the national parks in his article "The Foundations of the National Parks: Ideals and Realities," written expressly for the FORUM. His purpose is to review the conceptual foundations of the birth and evolution of the parks. He provides a philosophical overview that sets the stage for our discussions on the business connection. One of the very relevant specifics of his article is his statement that "once again, the more that any national park is turned into a business, the more its environmental base erodes."

Tom Power enriches our understanding of the economic role of America's national parks by taking us well past the generally accepted, but narrowly defined, central role of the effect of tourist expenditures on a park's local economy. He combines an unusually pragmatic knowledge of the parks—as individual entities and as members of a complex system with many subsystems—with equally pragmatic economic analysis. His article deals with the business connection from the point of view of the broad sweep of economic impacts of the parks, very importantly upon business as well as upon people and

their communities. His view of the explicit business connection concentrates on impacts on business rather than on business practices within the parks—a very different but no less meaningful partition of the business connection than that examined by the remaining four articles.

Given the two foundation articles, those four articles then deal in increasingly specific fashion with the challenge of "running them like a business." Destry Jarvis, now a senior officer of the National Park Service after varied executive experiences in environmental organizations, makes no bones in denying the meaningfulness of "running them like a business." Running them better by adopting selected business practices is quite legitimate. But "law and policy, as well as the inherent separation of powers in the U.S. Constitution between the agencies of the administration and the committees of Congress, make it impossible for the Park Service to act like a business in many important regards." Moreover, budgetary practices, decision-making, and policies and regulations that govern routine operations are simply vastly different. His conclusion is:

The next time someone tells those of us in the Park Service that 'You should run the parks more like a business,' we should just tell them that we would be happy to be more business-like: give us a multi-year budget, a far shorter planning process, diminish the influence of politics on decision-

making, remove burdensome but mandated regulatory red tape, etc., etc. It might be nice to try, but it isn't going to happen.

Rick Barton also considers "macro" issues of the business connection, except from a state park vantage point. Reading his critique of the business connection, we have no difficulty in bridging from the state park experience to the national park experience. In comparing the reality of revenue-driven state park management with resource-protection-driven state park management, he finds that the mercenary influence of the revenue driver severely diminishes the influence of the resource management driver: "[A]s profit speaks the loudest in state capitols, park agencies have become increasingly revenue-driven." Alternatively:

Development should support the primary purpose of state parks: to bring resource values to the public through education and passive recreation. In that manner, minimal negative intrusion is brought upon the natural, cultural, and historic resources that were set aside in the first place. Resource management then becomes dominant, with facilities designed to enable people to visit and appreciate the qualities of what lies upon those properties. In our present-day mercenary management culture, resource management flounders....

Shane Miller heads a team of younger people from the recently established not-for-profit organization Free Our Parks and Forests in scanning the horizon of whether or not to charge fees and, if so, how much. They have not attempted to invent new aspects of the manifold issue of fees; rather, they have succeeded in summarizing in a few words the cases for and against fees for various purposes in national parks. We all need to step back once in awhile and look very hard at familiar concepts in order to ensure that we have not lost touch. They have facilitating our doing that. Because the devil is in the details, the Miller article is appropriately more nearly "micro" in comparison with the "macro" character of the preceding articles. Given their commitment to free parks, we must admire the objectivity the author and his team have achieved in their article prepared for the FORUM.

Philip Voorhees and Eileen Woodford close this series with an analysis of a special linkage to business practices and business decisions for the National Park Service to consider closely. In setting forth the issues of the expensive privies at Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area and Glacier National Park, they point out how inadequate treatment of a rather narrow class of business decision-making and business communicating generates a huge impact. In tracing the public impacts of those recent embarrassing experiences, they point up a lesson

for future business management efforts in the NPS.

Their considerations range from the need at the level of individual parks for line managers to include in their project management responsibilities communications with the

public on unusual issues, to the sweeping idea of the Park Service as a whole focusing on “changing the culture of line management to include a new, subjective management tool: public perception.”

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