

Box 65: Commentary from the GWS Office and Our Members

Reflections on Six Years with the GWS Board

In 1993, I joined the GWS board and now, passing the presidential scepter to the most worthy Dr. Dick Sellars, have the enviable bully pulpit of a past president to reflect on the last six years. The Society, to the credit of the executive office in Hancock, an active board, and an engaged membership, has matured into a professional organization that makes a difference in the uncrowded field of science-based management of protected areas. We have not changed the world, but we can take some credit for changing the way it is viewed. THE GEORGE WRIGHT FORUM has grown in stature as the place for the presentation of applied science, cogent reasoning of the implications, and thoughtful discourse by those who disagree. Passion can be found in the FORUM between charts and graphs, and that is, in part, what makes the publication different from other journals. We need both passion and science if we are to succeed in the noble goals of protecting natural and cultural resources.

Two years ago, I was contacted by a representative of the Natural Resources Defense Council, interested (finally) in learning more about the role of science in parks. My primary recommendation was to attend the GWS conference in New Mexico, listen in the hallways, and spend the week with the most active minds in the field. Nowhere else could one contact the full range of archeologists, biologists, rangers, historians, and managers engaged in such an exchange and grand debate. The importance of the Society's biennial conference cannot be overstated and it gets better every time.

The last six years have been a tumult of change: the establishment of

the Biological Resources Division (BRD) within the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), the reinvention of government, the reorganization of the National Park Service (NPS), and the application of GPRA (Government Performance and Results Act). They have all changed and complicated the way we do the business of understanding and protecting resources. I apologize to the membership that this reflection will have a clear NPS spin. The GWS membership has diversified (a board goal) and now is just over 50% NPS, but all can learn from NPS successes and foibles.

Secretary of Interior Bruce Babbitt established, by sheer will, the

National Biological Survey, which evolved to the BRD, gathering the scientists from the various bureaus of Interior so their combined efforts could, quote, "avoid the train wrecks." At first embattled by a Congress spurred by the property rights activists, the home for the BRD has finally been established on the quiet shore of the USGS. To abuse the train wreck metaphor, the NPS was pretty much the caboose of the science program anyway but has now been uncoupled from the train and is coasting. BRD is a noble concept, the cadre of scientists there are trying hard, and there are some potential increases in the next few fiscal years that will regain and even surpass the losses in funding suffered in their first few years. However, some park superintendents, feeling the void left by the transfer of the park-based scientist, have begun to hire "science advisors." These gray-haired veterans bring back to the NPS what it lost: a senior advocate for science, unburied in the organization, who can look the superintendent in the eye and say, without concern for reprisal, "that is the stupidest thing I have ever heard." We need these people.

Vice President Gore's reinvention of government led to the reorganization of the NPS, shifting power from the regional office to the superintendent. No longer can a support-office staffer invoke the authority of the regional director and dictate to the superintendent what he or she may

do. The superintendency is the last bastion of the feudal lord, and this new power shift works great if the superintendent is well trained, educated, understands the role of science in decision-making, and makes excellent use of the resources specialists on staff and in the support offices or at BRD. It does not work so well if the superintendent is Homer Simpson. D'oh! Never has been so much of the American trust been invested in so few who can still meet the job classification without a college degree. Having worked for nine different superintendents and been one for seven years, the autonomy is downright scary.

In 1996, GPRA became an acronym that still makes many of us shudder. Another congressional attempt to make government operate like a business, we now must measure our success in managing wildlife, wilderness, archeological sites, visitor experience, data, viewsheds, and natural processes the same way Detroit measures assembly-line speed, miles per gallon, and widgets per hour. It is frustrating as we pound the round peg of what a geologist or historian does into the square hole of outputs and outcomes.

There are good signs though. Dr. Sellars' seminal work *Preserving Nature in the National Parks* said authoritatively and in popular print what those of us in the trenches have known for years: we are really good at managing scenery, but don't look behind the façade. Spurred by this

critical assessment, the leadership of the NPS has begun a "Natural Resource Management Initiative" with its inherent steering committee and multiple task groups. The greatest hope for substantial changes to the way the NPS manages resources lies with its acceptance by the leadership, its continued nurturing by the director and the deputy director, and its budgetary endorsement by the Department. It has potential for a long-lasting effect and deserves close attention by all.

The NPS now has a science mandate, thanks to Title II of the National Parks Omnibus Management Act of 1998, sponsored by Senator Craig Thomas of Wyoming and signed into law by President Clinton in November. Tucked neatly within a bill that extends the fee authorization and modifies the park concessions program is language penned by NPS Associate Director Destry Jarvis (a GWS member and my big brother!):

Section 202: The Secretary [of the Interior] is authorized and directed to assure that management of units of the National Park System is enhanced by the availability and utilization of a broad program of the highest quality science and information.

As a reference, the complete text of the Title II mandate is in this FORUM issue, and a detailed, section-by-section analysis will appear in the next issue. But the key point is that for the first time, Congress has told us that science is part and parcel

of the NPS mission of protecting parks and that superintendents will be held accountable for the conditions of park resources and using science in decision-making. This legislation is resource-neutral: in other words, it supports both natural and cultural research and is carefully worded so that it in no way lessens the preservation-use mandate of the 1916 Organic Act. Neither does it lessen public participation in the planning and decision-making process. It simply says that from now on, it will be incumbent on the park superintendent to obtain, through base funding, agreements, and outside research, quantitative information upon which to shape park management decisions. For those would say we could have done that anyway, I say, read Dick Sellars' book or any of the other dozen reports written on the subject in the last 30 years. They all say the same thing: we could have, but didn't.

In 1994, I became superintendent of Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve, the largest unit of the NPS at 13.2 million acres. For a sense of scale, this is larger than West Virginia or Switzerland. My park budget is roughly 14 cents per acre and we have one employee for each 500,000 acres. We also have subsistence hunting and trapping, over 400 mining claims, 100 miles of state road, 1,400 miles of RS-2477s (right-of-way claims), and over 1 million acres of inholdings. This is a

park that gives meaning to the concept of managing at a landscape scale with very little information. Facing this daunting task, I rely on four basics: first, like the Hippocratic oath, “do no harm”; second, from the wisdom of Aldo Leopold, “save all the parts”; third, to use effectively what

science we have to shape decisions; and last but not least, to invest in building the knowledge of park resources so managers in the future will have greater insights than I.

I hope to see you all at the GWS conference in Asheville in March.

Jon Jarvis served on the GWS Board of Directors from 1993 through 1998, the last two years as president. He lives in Copper Center, Alaska.



Reminder: this column is open to all GWS members. We welcome lively, provocative, informed opinion on anything in the world of parks and protected areas. The submission guidelines are the same as for other GEORGE WRIGHT FORUM articles—please refer to the inside back cover of any issue. The views in “Box 65” are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official position of The George Wright Society.