

*Karen P. Wade*

**Box 65:** Commentary from the GWS Office and Our Members

### **The USNPS Natural Resource Challenge: It's Not About Money, It's About Priorities**

The USNPS *Natural Resource Challenge*, announced by Director Bob Stanton in August 1999, is now off and running. We have high hopes of major budget increases to enhance natural resource management within the Service, perhaps as high as \$100 million over five years. We can wait for the new money and wait for top-down directives, but now is the opportunity to transform the way we manage the national parks and the way the public views its responsibility to them. It's not Washington's responsibility—it's ours.

That responsibility is twofold – stewardship and education.

There's no doubt that increased funding will allow us to add more natural resource specialists, acquire more data sets, contract for more research. But no amount of additional funding can make a manager *use* scientific information; that's something we need to believe in. Fortunately, there are many good examples of parks that have found creative ways to build scientifically sound natural resource management programs without huge base increases. Hats off to superintendents Alan O'Neill of Lake Mead, Jack Linahan of Buffalo River, and Roy Weaver of Bandelier, who made science-based resource management their priorities because they needed to have the facts on their side when they went out into the public arena to defend their parks from new threats. The best park

managers of the next generation will know what scientific questions to ask before their parks are on the brink of another threat – or, more likely, will have a trusted chief of resource management at their decision table who they turn to regularly and who is involved in all facets of park management.

The Organic Act requires the USNPS to *conserve ... unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations*. The Congress and the federal courts have consistently told us that our first priority must always be to conserve, and to provide for visitors within that context. The *Challenge* is about making the commitment to resource preservation *so that* parks will always have unimpaired resources for future visitors to enjoy. That commitment to preservation means that sometimes we'll need to prepare our publics for hard choices,

and that we'll have to face political pressure which wants more development or accommodation at the expense of a wetland, a few old growth trees, more fragmented habitat, or more air or water pollution. We'll have to be prepared to work with neighbors and partners to develop acceptable alternatives and come to the negotiating table with scientific information that backs up our position.

The American public loves its national park system. We have not done, however, a very good job of educating that same public about what it takes to keep park ecosystems functioning in an increasingly fragmented landscape. Rather than spell out forecasts of gloom and doom, parks can build understanding and support by inviting the public to participate actively in preservation. Resource seminar series at Acadia and Shenandoah, for example, have built committed park supporters, many of them neighbors, who now understand that parks are complex, functioning, and vulnerable biological systems providing beautiful scenery as well. The All Taxa Biological Inventory project at Great Smoky Mountains has generated tremendous excitement and support because it is a bold idea that welcomes participation, challenges people's assumptions about their park, and says, in effect, "together we can learn and by learning we can protect the place we love." The national parks are the best places for Americans to learn about our natural heritage and

the way nature functions, and yes, wonderful places where people from all parts of the world community enjoy themselves on vacation.

For the *Challenge* to be successful, we have to share our enthusiasm about park natural resources with the public, our partners, and government officials at all levels. We need to tell our stories widely, and invite our political delegations and the media into our parks so they better understand our issues. We need to talk in every park about the Service and the System, not just about our park, and share stories of where having access to professional resource expertise has made a positive difference. We need to create learning centers with our partners as places where scientists, educators, park staff, and the public of all ages exchange information and ideas. While the *Challenge* may specifically be about natural resources, in reality it encourages an environment where we emphasize resource stewardship regardless of discipline. The first steps have already begun on a parallel program for cultural resource stewardship. In fact, our commitment to natural and cultural resource inventory, monitoring, and the use of scientific/scholarly information to support management decisions is *required* by the 1998 Thomas Bill. It's also the only way to protect parks in the future and ultimately it is the public's responsibility to protect public parks.

The *Challenge* strongly supports park-based resource protection and interpretation, not just resource

management programs. It encourages an integrated vision of parks that collectively make up the fabric of America's natural and cultural heritage. We can and must consider the resources first in each and every decision we make as park managers. That doesn't require any more money or staff than we have now.

Ironically, however, if we make that commitment and demonstrate its wisdom through success in protecting parks and building park supporters, we will be that much more likely to see reliable, recurring base increases proposed in the *Natural Resource Challenge*. How's that for incentive?

*Ed. note: For more on the Thomas Bill, refer to David Harmon's article "The New Research Mandate for America's National Park System" in Vol. 16, No. 1.*

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*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.*

