

**William E. Brown**

**Box 65 :** Commentary from the GWS Office and our members

## The Great Transition

*Ed. note: This article originated as an exchange between the author and former NPS director George B. Hartzog, Jr., in response to the latter's request for an assessment of the challenges facing the U.S. National Park System in the 21st century. It is used here by permission.*

Dear George:

**Y**our question about the role of the National Park Service and the form and function of the National Park System in the next millennium pressed a lot of my red buttons. To have any notion at all of Service and System in the next millennium, we must have some idea of the national and world context in which the inseparable institution/landbase will exist. Some contextual premises:

1. For at least a couple of centuries, fighting our way out of the traps that we have fashioned for ourselves through our illusory biological and technological dominance as a species (especially since the Industrial Revolution) must be the main business of governance. Our numbers and our remorseless and insatiable sacking of the Earth to feed and empower human enterprises (the most significant in modern times being constant, wasting warfare or preparations for threatened warfare) have placed all nations in a scramble to control remaining basic resources—such as water, oil and gas, minerals, arable soils, fisheries, and fiber.
2. Through rational design, and through the workings of the Four Horsemen—now shifting from canter to gallop across the globe—the momentum of population increase will peak (at 10-11 billion people) and begin to decline toward the end of the 21st century.
3. The diminishing resource base (absolutely and vis-à-vis increasing population) will become ever more valuable (especially the nonrenewable resource remainder) for making the transition to a sane (renewable resource-based) balance between human beings and the hosting biological and geophysical Earth. But will we use our remaining nonrenewables and still-functioning renewables for that transition?
4. Or, will we bash on within the current system, in a might-makes-right mode that will tear

the world asunder in wars between haves and have-nots over the dwindling scraps?

5. In either event, with the have-nots in turmoil under the social and survival stresses as exemplified in Africa today, and the haves exerting their presently dominant (though increasingly irrelevant) power to keep the dynamics running as in today's Persian Gulf, the world will not be a stable place.
6. Stable governance over expansive reaches of the world, in the best of times, has only rarely succeeded. Not since the Roman hegemony has a vast empire spreading over multiple sophisticated countries and many centuries deserved the title "Pax." By comparison, even the Pax Britannica was a brief interlude, and ours has been only momentary.
7. In the worst of times, which will surely reign over most of the people and the greater part of the world in the early centuries of the next millennium, retribalization—as is now happening in Africa and the Islamic tier of the former Soviet Union (and such hotspots as the Balkans)—will challenge nation-state dominance. This will force have-nations to create extraterritorial, guarded extraction compounds and distribution corridors for critical resources. (See the writings of Robert Kaplan for illumination on this issue.)
8. In more advanced countries, major national or European Union-type entities will require an approximation of martial law—because rationing of ever-scarcer resources (among other things) will force governmental controls over national production and consumption priorities, as in World War II.
9. Even in the advanced countries, factions and resistance to stringent controls may take frontier regions back to Medieval feudalism. Russia, until yesterday a superpower, approaches this condition.
10. In such turbulent and straitened circumstances, national parks (a product of earlier social surplus that could afford altruism) would be as vulnerable as a waif mother with hungry children in a Dickens novel—even in the most relatively stable and wealthy countries. Even in the best of times in the USA, the national parks have been subjected to constant political and economic assault and surrounding-ecosystem damage or devastation. A worldwide trend toward cultures of poverty and political demagoguery—already well-advanced in most of the world and beyond nascency in our own country—will breed short-term solutions (read: stop-gaps) to increasingly urgent resource and political stability demands. China's Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze offers a tragic case in point: Chinese and

other scientists around the world forecast disaster, but the political establishment fears imminent political instability more than long-term ecosystem destruction.

However grim this assessment, I believe it is a fair statement of what lies ahead. All the forces described above work ineluctably twenty-four hours a day around the world toward an approximation of these results and trials over the next 200 years or so. Even if we as a species succeed in the great transition, we will still see human tragedies on a scale unimaginable, continued ecosystem destructions, and a long, wrenching pull to restore the balances broken by Promethean man.

So how does NPS—this civil artifact of social surplus and altruism—negotiate the tortuous course through the disasters and the stressful changes of values and lifeways that transition demands? Without losing the essential integrity of the national parks? Without selling them off as props for industrial-scale tourism in the near term and last-chance resource reservoirs in the long term?

New chapters of civilized human adventure in our cosmos (with or without reference to national parks) depend utterly on making the transition from today's world of biospheric waste and destruction to one of sustainable human ecology within the larger biophysical ecosystem. There will be a transition in any case—we can hear the hoof beats approaching. But the one we want shall happen

only if it becomes the central theme of a coalition of governance guided by enlightened human endeavor. Likewise and as a complementing element, national parks and equivalent reserves shall survive only to the extent that they demonstrate the virtues and necessities of and help show us the way to that transition.

Otherwise, in the stress-times to come, desperate politicians and utilitarian bureaucrats will sacrifice these parks and reserves to fuel the last spasms of trapped and dying societies. This would be a tragic waste of the larger social utility of the national parks: as reservoirs of biological diversity, as scientific baselines and ecosystem laboratories (linked with others around the world), as general-education universities (nearly 400 campuses in this nation alone) demonstrating natural and cultural history—including what worked and what didn't.

In these three fields—preservation of functioning natural systems, derivation of scientific data to guide reform and recovery efforts, and general-public exposure to the web of life—the national parks and similar reserves evolve from the pleasuring grounds of a more innocent age to become the lifelines back to our sustaining roots.

How fortunate that our ancestors saw public purpose in preserving beautiful natural areas. That first generous impulse has given us and our descendants a heritage not only pleasant to behold, but also to be used as an archive and tool kit to

help us out of the current mess. Moreover, the national parks of the USA spurred more than a hundred other nations to create their own parks and reserves. So there is a worldwide system of reserves, each a time capsule that can help us get through the big knothole ahead. That's serendipity on a grand scale.

Philosophers have tried from earliest days to find some bigger, unifying idea that transcends human folly, pride, and intransigence. None describes better the present imperative than these words from Deuteronomy:

I have set before you life and death,  
blessing and curse; therefore choose  
life that you and your descendants may  
live.

On the other hand, in "The Answer"  
Robinson Jeffers cautions us

Not to be deluded by dreams ... and not  
be duped  
By dreams of universal justice or  
happiness...  
or else you will share man's pitiful  
confusions,  
or drown in despair when his days  
darken.

Somewhere between choosing life and drowning in the despair of unfulfilled dreams is the greater reality of this small blue planet—this lonesome orb of life. The home of ourselves and other living things, probably the only living things we will ever know. And all we need to know to keep on living. Can we not accept human foibles and certain injustice, yet agree to contain and constrain them at the point where they would destroy the possibilities of a living future for ourselves and our partners

on Earth? For only with partners aboard can we live here. And there is no place else to go. Certainly not over the next couple of decisive centuries, and never for all but a handful of us even if we do, in some Star Trek future, time-warp ourselves to another living planet. But we will not have that chance either, if first we render our home planet uninhabitable except at the most primitive levels of regression.

It's certainly a long shot, given the track record of our kind, that we will propel ourselves along rational, enlightened tracks all of a sudden. But the alternative, doing nothing, closes and locks the door.

Despite its own foibles, if there is any public institution more capable, more generally enlightened about these matters, more strongly mandated by law and tradition, more experienced in environmental education, and better endowed than the National Park Service (by the System it administers), I'd like to know.

Under your regime the Service launched many initiatives in the 1960s and early 1970s that used the parks as case studies for environmental education. Much of the infrastructure, both intellectual and physical (publications, environmental study areas, school programs, etc.), has survived and indeed flourished in the parks, despite the generally desertified political climate and discourse of intervening years.

Then we were pioneers, reaching out to a public only vaguely aware of environmental concerns. But now,

with the rise of public health issues that invade families and communities across the land, plus dramatic geophysical alterations in Earth's regimes, the public is ripe for the kinds of knowledge the parks can offer. Eternal vigilance is now the watchword for environmental health as well as for democratic government.

I will not list a series of projects or objectives in this essay. The Service now has an explicit legal mandate (only implied before) to conduct and encourage scientific studies in the parks—both for the management of the parks themselves, and to convey natural and cultural history and knowledge to the public. I believe it is imperative that a blue-ribbon panel be convened, constituted of leading scientific and educational institutions and individuals, to assist the National Park Service in developing a full-panoply program to meet the new legal mandate.

If this country—the most powerful, wealthiest (despite our fraying sleeves and cuffs), and most mission-

ary in its national ideals—can't tackle the issues set forth above, then it's not going to happen. Well, it's got to start somewhere, and then spread and mobilize our better impulses as a nation, as a world of nations.

The National Park Service, by transforming the National Park System into a great scientific and educational base for a better world, could be a catalyst, a shot in the arm, a beacon of aspiration and accomplishment in this great aim. Don't you think the country would like a change of subject matter, a purpose that would requite our history, our rhetoric, our basic ideals? A moral resurgence of our nation commensurate with those ideals and with the needs of higher human endeavors that now tremble on the brink of oblivion?

The national parks could light the fuse, send up the flare that could get us together on a cause that overrides all others: the choice for continuing life of Earth. Lacking that basic choice we forfeit all others.

**Bill Brown** is retired from the National Park Service and lives in Gustavus, Alaska. His column "Letter from Gustavus" appeared in THE GEORGE WRIGHT FORUM from 1992 to 1997.

*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.*

