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## From Management to Stewardship: The Making and Remaking of the U.S. National Park System

The establishment of Shenandoah National Park in the Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains sparked a spirited debate among friends of the fledgling U.S. National Park Service in the early 1920s over whether eastern parks would spoil the integrity of a what was then primarily a system based in the western states. Robert Sterling Yard, a former national park publicist and subsequent founder of the National Park Association, warned against "the fatal belief that different standards can be maintained in the same system without the destruction of all standards" (Runte 1997). In Yard's opinion, the glaciated Blue Ridge Mountains did not measure up to splendor of the Teton Range, and the second-growth eastern woodlands were not comparable to the primeval forests of King's Canyon.

Today no one would give Yard's argument about eastern national parks a second thought. Parks such as Shenandoah, Great Smokies, and Acadia are considered among the *grand dames* of the system, which has grown to nearly 400 units. The context and criteria for park making may have changed with the times, but the larger debate on what should or should not be part of our system of national parks continues unabated. National parks, by definition, are created as an expression of national values and aspirations. Setting aside any land for perpetual preservation or protection

reflects a fundamental judgment at the highest levels in the land.



Figure 1. Shenandoah National Park. NPS photo.

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The National Park System serves nearly 300 million people a year, with millions more benefiting from National Register of Historic Places properties, national natural landmarks, and national historic landmarks, as well as through tax credits and financial and technical assistance (NPS 2000b). The economic activity associated with park development and tourism is huge; however, the power and significance of a park are measured in more ways than statistics and dollars. Most national parks become symbols and icons of the country at large. The special places that are designated national parks, and the ways these parks are interpreted, shape public history and public memory. National park designation is perhaps the ultimate articulation of recognition and respect for a place and its associated story, each new park forever enshrining a "sense of place" in the country's collective consciousness. It is therefore no surprise that park-making has been a controversial business from the very start, requiring a continuous process of defining and re-defining

national cultural and civic values—contentious ground in almost every instance.

### Nature's Cathedrals

It would be too ambitious to try to describe in great detail the various forces and influences that shaped the creation of America's first generation of national parks in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This early period of park-making reflected a growing sense of national pride and identity associated with monuments of nature. America did not have the great cathedrals of the Old World, but it did have the Cathedral Rocks of Yosemite Valley, majestically photographed by Carlton Watkins and painted in celestial light by the artist Albert Bierstadt.

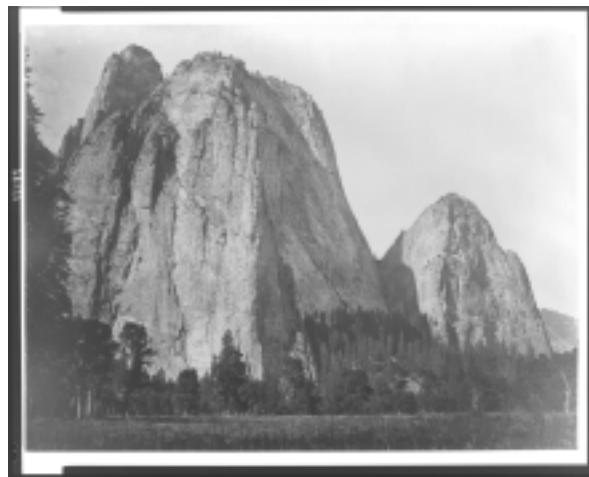


Figure 2. Cathedral Rocks, Yosemite. Photo by Carlton Watkins, American Memory Project, Library of Congress.

The American parks movement, inspired by New York City's Central Park and one of its chief architects, Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., was another important influence. In his 1865 report to the Commissioners of Yosemite, Olmsted laid the civic foundation for a future system of national parks by observing that the "the main

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duty of government" was to set aside such places of great national scenery as Yosemite to forever guarantee its citizens "the pursuit of happiness" (Carr 1998, 28). A wide variety of conservation and civic-minded organizations, including John Muir and his Sierra Club, Horace McFarland and his American Civic Association, and Mary Belle King Sherman and her General Federation of Women's Clubs (Kaufman 1996, 32) championed the first generation of national parks.

With the powerful political support of western railroads, and anticipating an economic windfall linked to park tourism, Congress was persuaded to begin establishing the first national parks, including Yellowstone, Sequoia, Mount Rainier, and Crater Lake. In 1916 it finally created a unified system of national parks and a centralized professional bureau to manage them (Runte 1997). When the National Park Service began business in President Wilson's Interior Department, nearly all of the country's existing national park areas (with the notable exception of a few archaeo-

logical sites such as Mesa Verde, which had been established under the Antiquities Act of 1906) took in unique landforms and geologic wonders located in the rugged high country of the American West. In his *Book of the National Parks*, Robert Sterling Yard described the parks as "areas of the noblest and most diversified scenic sublimity easily accessible in the world; nevertheless it is their chiefest glory that they are among the completest expressions of the Earth's history" (Yard 1928, 3). He recalled a woman who, upon seeing Yosemite Falls, declared that she had "seen the tallest building in the world and the longest railroad, and the largest lake, and the biggest department store, and now I see the highest waterfall. Just think of it!" (Yard 1928, 4).



Figure 3. Horace Albright (left), Mary Belle King Sherman (right), Rocky Mountain National Park, 1915. NPS Historic Photograph Collection.

But even as Yard was writing his book, the legendary Park Service management team of Stephen Mather and Horace Albright were hard

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at work expanding the park system in new thematic and geographic directions. Convinced that ease of accessibility was critical to popularizing the fledgling park system, both with the public and with Congress, Mather and Albright championed the expansion of the system east of Mississippi to include Acadia National Park in Maine, Shenandoah National Park in Virginia, and a Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Tennessee and North Carolina. While these eastern areas included some of the rugged topography of their western cousins, their eventual inclusion in the national system was justified on the basis of preserving a much broader range of natural and scenic resources.

#### “Limitless Potential”

Mather and Albright, however, were playing for even larger stakes. Determined to consolidate the new agency's position and budget in Congress, and always uneasy about being swallowed whole by the older and more powerful U.S. Forest Service, Mather and Albright knew that they could not afford to rest on their laurels. Having expanded

their vision eastward, they were now prepared to expand the system beyond a handful of archeological sites to include parks associated with American history. As NPS Historian Barry Mackintosh observes, “The Service's major involvement with historic sites held limitless potential for the system's further growth” (Mackintosh 1991, 24).



Figure 4. Mather (left) at Acadia, 1923. NPS Historic Photograph Collection.

Horace Albright's great opportunity came with the election of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932. Riding in the jump seat of a touring car carrying the newly elected president on a ride through the Shenandoah Valley, Albright, now NPS director, brought up the status of the Saratoga battlefield site in Roosevelt's home state of New York. In his book, *The Birth of the National Park Service*, Albright recalls the conversation with Roosevelt:

'It ought to be a national military park or historical park,' I said.

'I know,' the President shot back. 'When I was governor I pestered them to death to make a state park out of the Saratoga battlefield, but they didn't

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do it.' Then he told me—ordered me, really—to 'get busy' and have Saratoga battlefield made a national park or monument. Just a moment or two later, he turned his head, and with that famous grin, said 'Suppose you do something tomorrow about this. We'll help you from the White House. And if you get one battlefield, why shouldn't you get the others' (Albright 1985, 296).

The 1933 reorganization of NPS that followed this brief but portentous conversation, and the associated programs of the New Deal, shook the organization from head to toe. Almost overnight the park system was expanded to include 12 natural areas (many transferred from the U.S. Forest Service) and 44 historic areas (mostly battlefields transferred from the War Department), as well as parks and monuments in the nation's capital city. "Taking their place beside the ancient Indian ruins of the Southwest, the historic houses already Federal property, the national memorials, and the vignettes of primitive America conserved in the national parks, these historic battlefields," wrote NPS Historian Ronald F. Lee,

"representing successive phases of American history and situated in diverse regions of the Nation, made a major contribution to the growing national heritage preserved in the National Park System for the benefit and inspiration of all the people of the United States" (Lee 1973).



Figure 5. Antietam, 1934. NPS Photograph Collection.

The subsequent Historic Sites Act of 1935 further codified this fundamental ground shift for the NPS by establishing a national policy "to preserve for public use historic sites, buildings and objects of national significance" and "to restore, preserve and maintain historic properties directly or through cooperative agreements with other parties...." The act established a clear mandate for NPS to reach out beyond the boundaries of the park system and assume responsibility as the nation's principal agency for historic and cultural preservation.

The Roosevelt Administration and the Great Depression proved to be a watershed for NPS. Programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps

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(CCC) transformed the Park Service into an instrument for social change. The parks received an enormous shot in the arm, particularly from the CCC, which established camps in 63 national parks. The NPS proved itself adaptable and resourceful in implementing programs such as the CCC, the National Recovery Act, the Park, Parkway and Recreation Study Act, and the activation of recreation demonstration areas in 24 states. Congress took note.

While NPS's internal culture still remained largely rooted in the traditions and responsibilities of managing its natural parks, the agency's social agenda, though it would experience occasional peaks and valleys, would inexorably grow more extensive and complex over the next half-century. "The images of the [National] Park System are of remote places and past times," noted Ronald A. Foresta in the introduction to his book *America's National Parks and Their Keepers*. "They are tied up with American memory and mythology," Foresta continued. "However, things are not what they appear to be. The reality

beneath the image is that neither the national parks nor their keepers stand apart from our times; they are very much subject to the problems and dilemmas of modern American life (Foresta 1985, 1).



Figure 6. Franklin Delano Roosevelt (head of table) at Shenandoah National Park CCC Camp, 1933. NPS Historic Photograph Collection.

### **Parks to the People, People to the Polls**

In shaping an expansive post-war park system, a more urban-based Congress put the National Park Service to work assessing potential recreational opportunities closer to the metropolitan areas where most people lived. By the mid-1960s these studies had culminated in the addition to the park system of no fewer than eight national seashores and four national lakeshores. These included Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore outside of Chicago, Fire Island National Seashore outside of New York City, and Cape Cod National Seashore near Boston.

Secretary of the Interior Stewart L. Udall further accelerated this trend. In his book *The Quiet Crisis*, Udall viewed the nation's growing urban crisis as integrally connected to a larger environmental crisis (Udall 1963). "By making a conceptual link between the two areas,"

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Foresta writes, "Udall was also staking a bold claim for an expanded role for Interior, one which would move the Department far beyond its traditional concern for natural resources and into an active role in achieving social equality and, in general, improving the quality of American urban life" (Foresta 1985, 67).

George Hartzog, appointed director of NPS by Udall in 1962, astutely appreciated that urban parks of the 1970s, like the historic areas of the 1930s, might be the key to realizing his own expansionist vision of the National Park System. Like Mather and Albright, Hartzog was ever alert to opportunities to extend NPS's base of support in Congress, particularly among members from eastern urban areas. This support was particularly critical for enacting the legislation for the National Wilderness System in 1964, the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System in 1968, and ultimately the addition of 47 million acres of Alaskan parkland in 1980. Hartzog championed a "parks to the people" concept of creating park units directly in or near urban areas.

When the Nixon Administration came into office in the late 1960s, there was little enthusiasm for this potentially costly urban initiative and at first the new administration stonewalled congressional action on urban parks. The White House, however, had a sudden change of heart as it went into the 1972 presidential campaign, sweeping into the system the most ambitious of all urban parks, Gateway National Recreation Area near New York City and Golden Gate National Recreation Area in San Francisco. With the 1972 election behind it, the administration attempted to reverse gears once again, but by this time the political momentum in Congress for additional urban recreation areas modeled after Gateway and Golden Gate was not easily thwarted. By 1978, the park system had expanded to include Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area between Cleveland and Akron, Ohio, and Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area near Los Angeles.

It would take several decades of planning, civic debate, and substantial public and private investments to begin to fully realize the potential of these huge park complexes to deliver educational and recreational opportunities to their diverse urban communities. These parks would make a significant contribution to the culture of the NPS, accelerating the recruitment and promotion of minorities and women and significantly broadening the experience of NPS employees. And the impact of these parks would be felt in other ways. Golden Gate (later expanded with the Presidio, and ably assisted by the forward-thinking Golden Gate National Parks Association), would serve the entire National Park System as an incubator for fresh ideas and approaches to partnerships and co-management of facilities.

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### **New Voices;**

#### **New Kinds of Parks**

The late 1970s saw one last spectacular burst of park-making unlike anything that came before or after. The House Interior Committee Chairman, Representative Philip Burton, included no fewer than 15 additions to the National Park System in his famous National Park and Recreation Act of 1978. This omnibus legislation also marked a watershed for Congress. The drive for expensive new urban additions to the National Park System had run its course. Support now grew in the Congress to pursue parks based on partnership arrangements where investment and management would be shared with other public and private parties. The creation of Lowell National Historical Park in 1978, with its successful formula of mixing public and private investments in downtown heritage preservation with NPS expertise in visitor services and interpretive facilities, inspired the first generation of national heritage areas.

In the heritage areas, partnering federal, state, and

local governments and private interests join together to provide for preservation, interpretation, and other activities. Each national heritage area tells the story of its residents, celebrating cultural heritage and preserving special landscapes. The National Park Service functions as a catalyst among the partners, providing technical assistance as well as financial assistance for a limited number of years following designation.

Heritage areas, such as the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor (Massachusetts and Rhode Island), Illinois & Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor (Illinois), and the Delaware–Lehigh Navigation Canal National Heritage Corridor (Pennsylvania), were initially located along historic transportation corridors linking a variety of historic properties. A second generation of heritage areas, including larger thematically linked areas, were added in the mid-1990s, including the Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area (New York), National Coal Heritage Area (West Virginia), Steel Industry American Heritage Area, a.k.a. “Rivers of Steel” (Pennsylvania), and the Automobile National Heritage Area (Michigan). By 1996, there were 18 national heritage areas.

Some people view heritage areas as a far less expensive alternative to more traditional national parks, a safety valve of sorts for Congress eager as always to quench the public thirst for new additions to the system. Others see these hybrid areas as an innovative way of realizing the broader mandate of the agency to provide national leadership in conservation and historic preservation. It is too early to tell when we will see another pulse of heritage area designations. Congressional interest in heritage areas appears to wax and wane, though there are always new



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proposals waiting for the right opportunity.

Congress applied these same partnership principles using somewhat different formulas to establish two national reserves in the late 1970s, Ebey's Landing National Historical Reserve on Whidbey Island in Washington's Puget Sound, and Timucuan Ecological and Historical Reserve in northern Florida. Ebey's Landing preserves a rural community with an unbroken record of settlement and a distinctive cultural landscape. The NPS purchased key parcels of farmland threatened by development and sold them back to farmers with attached scenic easements. Administrative responsibilities were delegated to a trust board at the county level of government with NPS providing technical assistance in planning, interpretation, and scenic easement administration.

For a period of years during the early Reagan Administration, NPS was directed to stop the study of new areas entirely and testify against nearly all new park proposals before Congress. Unlike previous periods where the National Park

Service provided leadership in the future direction of the park system, in the 1980s, with the new era of partnership parks already well underway, all initiative had passed largely to Congress. Not until a 1991 Symposium on National Parks for the 21st Century, the report from which is known as the *Vail Agenda* (NPS 1992), did NPS seek once again to assert a more proactive role.



Figure 7. Ebey's Landing. Photograph by Rolf Diamant.

A new thematic framework for the National Park System, adopted in 1994, made it easier for the NPS to consider social and cultural history and identify places which best tell stories of broad social trends and ordinary people. The thematic framework still incorporates places associated with unique and notable events, but they are more likely to be considered within the broader contexts of their time (NPS 2000c).

As always, Congress and the political process continue to be powerful and essential forces in the final process of park-making. While some may argue that the influence of constituency politics has grown too large in recent years, parks

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have always been, when all is said and done, political creations of a democratic government. Mistakes are made, though there are fewer than one might expect. There may be disagreement over whether a particular place being considered as a future national park unit is the best possible example of a theme or the ideal location for a park. Opportunity and political support undeniably play a big part in any final designation.

Over the past twenty years, increasing attention has been given to social history, and this is reflected in the development of new parks, heritage areas, and the revised thematic framework. Recent additions to the National Park System include sites associated with literature, music, and the arts, such as Eugene O'Neill National Historic Site (California) and Weir Farm National Historic Site (Connecticut) and the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park (Louisiana). More parks are also being created that not only preserve history but also speak to powerfully transcendent ideas that resonate throughout contemporary society. At places such as Women's Rights National

Historical Park (New York) and Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park (Vermont), for example, the universal messages of gender equity and conservation stewardship, respectively, reach far beyond the park boundaries.

Incorporating such places as the prisons of Alcatraz and Andersonville, the immigration station at Ellis Island, the Japanese-American detention camp at Manzanar, the Hawaiian leper colony of Kalaupapa, and, most recently, missile silos in North Dakota, national parks are also shedding light on institutions and untold stories that are an essential, if often forgotten, part of the American experience.



**Figure 8. Manzanar Camp, 1940s. NPS photo.**

“Our goal,” writes Dwight T. Pitcaithley, chief historian of the National Park Service, “is to offer a window into the historical richness of the National Park System and the opportunities it presents for understanding who we are, where we have been, and how we as a society might approach the future. This collection of special places also allows us to examine our past—the contested along with the comfortable, the complex along with the simple, the controversial

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along with the inspirational” (Pitcaithley 2000). The system has come a long way from War Department battlefields and cemeteries. Parks such as the Boston African American National Historic Site (Massachusetts), Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site (Georgia), Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site (Kansas), and the Central High School National Historic Site (Arkansas) speak to the most fundamental democratic principles of human and civil rights. The national parks have become, in effect, a living part of our democracy contributing in many ways to the stability and continuity of civil society.

As parks have tackled new and challenging themes, they have also evolved into a variety of non-traditional forms:

- New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park is dedicated to the preservation and celebration of jazz, our nation’s best-known indigenous art form. Structured around a cooperative agreement between the National Park Service and the City of New Orleans, and advised by a 17-member New Orleans Jazz Commission representing the jazz community, the park provides visitors with the opportunity to experience the sights, sounds, and places where jazz evolved.
- Little Rock High School, now Central High School National Historic Site, is a national emblem of the often-violent struggle over school desegregation. The recently enacted legislation may provide the National Park Service with some unusual management challenges, as the site will still operate as a high school. This dual mission has led one observer to comment wryly that this may be the first national park site with two superintendents: one for the park and one for the school.
- New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park (Massachusetts), established in 1996 also recognizes the contributions of Alaska Natives to the history of whaling in the United States. During the 19th century, more than 2000 whaling voyages sailed out of New Bedford to the Arctic region of Alaska, and joined Alaska natives from Barrow and other regions in whaling activities. The Inupiat Heritage Center has been designated in Barrow, making New Bedford Whaling the first coast-to-coast unit of the National Park System. The heritage center preserves the language and knowledge of the Inupiat people and collaborates with NPS in the social, historical, and scientific interpretation of whaling.
- Within the boundaries of Kalaupapa National Historical Park, on the rugged north shore of the island of Molokai, are the historic Hansen’s Disease settlements of Kalaupapa and Kalawao. Kalaupapa, once

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a community in isolation, now serves as a place for education and contemplation, a place for visitors to reconsider their emotional and physical responses to people with disfiguring disabilities or illnesses. The community of Kalaupapa is still home for many surviving Hansen's Disease patients, whose memories and experiences are cherished values.

These examples illustrate how the definition of parks is evolving. People are raising their field of vision beyond the often fragmented preservation of individual areas, structures, and critical habitats to focus on how the benefits of parks and responsible stewardship can be integrated into the connecting fabric of people's everyday lives.

### From Management to Stewardship

Periodically, through the years there have been official pronouncements that the National Park System is complete or nearly complete. "Rounded out" was an expression used in the past. However, a senior NPS official recently conceded that virtually no one takes this

thinking seriously anymore. The facts speak clearly for themselves:



Figure 9. Central High School, Little Rock, Arkansas. NPS photo.

in the last 20 years more than 100 new parks have been added to the system. Attempts to divest parks or to severely restrict the system's growth, such as the so-called park closure bill offered in 1995, have found limited support.



Figure 10. Brother Dutton and his patients, Kalaupapa, 19th century. NPS photo.

The diversity represented by today's system is often unsettling to people who still hold some attachment to Robert Sterling Yard's pre-

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dominately western vision of the National Park Service. Several years ago a principal advisor to the *Vail Agenda*, a professor from Harvard's Kennedy School, argued that NPS shouldn't try to be "all things to all people," expressing his belief that "just as the Ford Motor Company should stick to what it does best, making cars, the National Park Service should return to what it does best, managing its large parks" (Zimmerman 1991). This thinking is wishful at best, overlooking the broad legislative mandate that drives the agency's diverse roles and responsibilities. Perhaps more importantly, it also disregards the political necessity of constant engagement and outreach. More than ever, national parks are forging new relationships and partnerships transcending traditional concepts of "park management" to participate in the stewardship and sustainability of watersheds, ecosystems, and the larger landscapes which they are a part of. The National Park Service is constantly interacting with the world around it, responding to the best scholarship in the sciences

and humanities and discovering new ways to strengthen the potent ties that bind the American people to places and stories of their natural and cultural heritage. As NPS Deputy Director Denis Galvin succinctly observes, "We need to be recognized as the stewards of our heritage, rather than managers of parks" (Galvin 2000).

New areas have also been perceived as a threat to existing ones. A former NPS director, Jim Ridenour, worried about the growth of the system and the changing nature of parks, often warning against the "thinning of the blood," i.e., an influx of supposedly less-worthy parks diluting the purity of the system as well as siphoning off critical resources necessary to sustain it. However, a reading of NPS's brief history repeatedly suggests the continuing evolution and growth of the system has not "thinned the blood," but instead has in many ways substantially strengthened the overall health of the organization.

The period of the 1933 re-organization and extensive NPS involvement in New Deal programs also saw the establishment of Everglades and Olympic national parks. The "parks to the people" decade of the 1970s culminated with the vast addition of the Alaskan parks—17 new areas and 47 million acres of land, the most spectacular expansion of natural areas in NPS history, more than doubling the size of the entire system. In the 1980s, Phil Burton's famous omnibus bills, dubbed "park barrel" by critics, in addition to authorizing new parks, historic sites, national historic trails, and wild and scenic rivers, also included in its provisions much-sought-after boundary changes, new land acquisition and development ceilings, and new wilderness designations for scores of existing parks (Runte 1997, 234).

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The argument about the competition for financial resources is more difficult to resolve. While expansion and mission diversification has certainly not been a zero-sum game for the National Park Service—there has been substantial growth in the agency's annual budgets—these increases have not kept up with total needs. Ultimately, today's park advocates are gambling, as Mather and Albright did before them, that funding will eventually catch up with expanded political support and public interest.

Are there limits to expansion? If national parks, as Wallace Stegner has said, are one of the best expressions of our democracy (NPS 2000a), then as long as our democracy has vitality and strength, our park system will very likely continue to grow. Gatekeepers are needed, but gatekeepers who are also visionaries not afraid to lead and take risks. Standards are needed, but with the understanding that standards need frequent reassessment. The challenge now, as it always has been, is to take the National Park System in new directions that are relevant and responsive to our social

and environmental condition and, in doing so, build ever-greater support and appreciation for the system as a whole. Echoing Olmsted's observations about "the pursuit of happiness," NPS Director Newton B. Drury once wrote:

There are certain values in our landscape that ought to be sustained against destruction or impairment, though their worth cannot be expressed in money terms. They are essential to our 'life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness'; this nation of ours is not so rich it can afford to lose them; it is still rich enough to afford to preserve them.

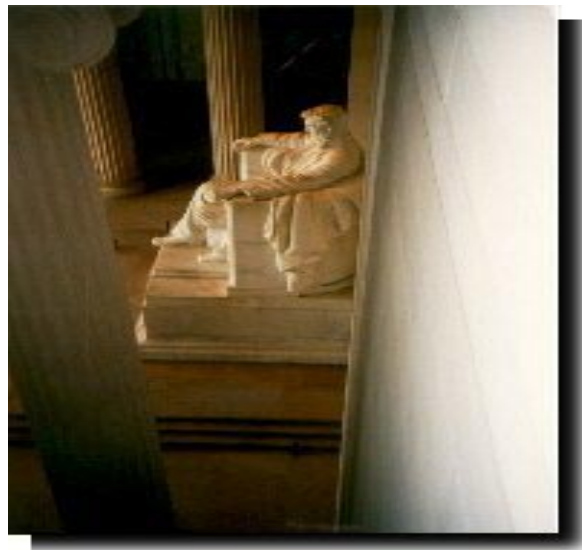


Figure 11. Lincoln Memorial. NPS photo.

Our National Park System, as the sum of its many parts, ensures that the places and values associated with our "life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness" are not diminished or forever lost. In many tangible and intangible ways, parks endow our rich natural and cultural heritage, our sense of place, our recreation and general well-being—ingredients essential to the quality and sustainability of *life*. Parks are also the places where we learn about democratic institutions

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and the fundamental values *pursuit of happiness* we do not burn out like a vital to any meaningful shooting star, but rather pass on to each exercise of *liberty*. Responsible stewardship of our successive generation the special places and National Park System may be experiences that have shaped our character and our only guarantee that in the nurtured our souls.

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