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The Implications of Sponsorship for State Park Management

When a grizzly bear wanders toward the land surrounding the municipal dump in Dillingham, Alaska, people take notice. The attraction of bears on the prowl arose to the point earlier this year that a tour operator set up nightly trips to the landfill. For a fee, an interested tourist can watch the bears in less than natural habitat, 325 miles southwest of Anchorage.

The occasion of tours to the landfill raised some local controversy in Dillingham, not because a commercial operation might be borrowing the popularity of grizzly bears, but surrounding the image of Dillingham's prime attraction being a landfill. Meanwhile, the tour operator began to enjoy a new source of income thanks to the nocturnal habits of grizzly bears. While the Dillingham case study hardly represents the commercialism of parks, the parallel offers a valuable lesson. The tour operator would very likely pitch in to fund a cost associated with the maintaining the bear visits. If the town incurred crowd control or traffic management issues which could threaten the permit for the bear tours, a smart business operator would offer to help pay the costs, to become a partner, to actually "sponsor" the bear visits. Tourists would likely accept the notion with open arms even if they were told "this bear is brought to you by...."

The grizzly bear visits are not a sole example unique to Alaska. At Moosehead Lake in Maine, people visit with the expectation of seeing a large creature with spreading antlers. For a fee, a guide offers to show people the best viewing spots, and the visitors bring their cameras and binoculars. Did the visitors purchase the right to see the moose by virtue of the cost of their trip to Moosehead Lake and by hiring a guide? Might the guide be willing to sponsor the activity and share the costs with the town?

The implications for professional park managers lie in similar territory. The owners of businesses that spring up around great national and state parks certainly have a stake in the operation of the park. If a service of the park is threatened by budget stress, or some policy change may influence the attraction of visitors to the park, related private businesses may offer to help. At first glance it seems rather harmless to accept local partners as sponsors of an event or activity within the park. Most visitors will not even notice.

Those simple terms, "sponsored by" present no great threat to the listener. The same terms represent the great controversy of ownership in the realm of natural resource management and especially the profession of public park management. Professionals on one side of the debate accept the presence of sponsors as partners, if only as the silent financiers of park services. The alternative argument is offered by those who believe close involvement by private business eventually soils the image of pristine natural resources. The argument carries forward to a progression of business influence beyond acceptable limits. Imagine the vision of a wonderful, publicly owned national park that suddenly shares the name of a powerful corporate entity.

Each day the Statue of Liberty hosts thousands of people who travel from the New Jersey shoreline to Liberty Island via boat. Standing vigil over the waters of the New York harbor, the grand statue once welcomed millions of immigrants who passed though neighboring Ellis Island. In recent years, the National Park Service funded the complete renovation of the statue as well as an extensive renovation of the Ellis Island facility. Each day visitors leave the park with an appreciation for the attraction as well as the significance each site played in the history of our nation.

Many of the thousands of daily visitors also leave with souvenirs purchased at a concession. Some people leave with a foam replica of the statue's crown adorned to their heads. Others take a drinking cup formed in molded plastic with lady liberty holding the container. Postcards, models, and jewelry also serve to satisfy the urge to own a piece of the statue in a personal physical memorial. To the pure-minded park professional, the commercial exploitation of souvenir items may lessen the quality of the park. Other park professionals refer to such commercial activity as a creative funding. Often upon the wings of the financial bird rides the plague known as sponsorship.

For most professional park managers, the test of sponsorship arrives in the endorsement. A statement over the boat's intercom, as visitors approach Liberty Island, "The Statue of Liberty is brought to you by…" would go too far. Yet acceptance rides a solitary horse, away from the herd, carrying a grand denial of any membership in the group. Over the same intercom we hear a message regarding the location and hours of park concession stands, which is accepted in the realm of providing a service desired by the visitors, accepted as a traditional means of raising funds.

Agency managers, under the scrutinizing gaze of budget analysts, seek any lawful source of alternative funds. They must find another way to financially support their activities. Sometimes such creativity is necessitated by the addition of a new management area; or conversely, the bright new activity has the energy of a recent ribbon cutting, so the manager must fully fund the operation while an existing activity suffers the consequences. A corporation interested in Maine's moose population might seize the opportunity to fund either a hunt or the wildlife viewing activity. The influx of corporate dollars enables public budget managers to direct tax revenues elsewhere. In their view, it is acceptable that the moose is "brought to you by...."

Considering wildlife management elsewhere, black bear continue to increase in areas that cannot support the creatures. Bears moved into central New Jersey several years ago, roving from the wild lands of northeastern Pennsylvania. When bears forage amid human civilization, they first seek livestock and crops. As bears moved further into the human habitat of central New Jersey, they discovered new food sources, including trash receptacles, gardens, and perhaps even domestic pets. The bears found shelter in garages and under porches. At first, people enjoyed the novelty of the furry visitors, but the wildlife guests soon wore out their welcome. A bear hunt, managed by the New Jersey state government, will occur soon.

By comparison, the westernmost part of Maryland serves as the home range for approximately 400 black bears. The result is similar to the experience in New Jersey, leaving residents tired of bear intrusions into their lives. Citizens in western Maryland demanded a bear hunt but the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) sought alternative ideas. The MDNR began a creative program selling a bear stamp and directed the proceeds to help citizens offset their bear-induced losses.

So far, corporate sponsors have avoided the bear management controversy even though wildlife issues offer plenty of opportunity for public advertising exposure. From the perspective of the corporate executive, sponsoring the hunting of bears, or even the alternative to hunting, creates at least as many enemies as friends. Such executives would love to attach their product to the great world of nature, but they seek a more universally positive relationship, something that everyone appreciates. One such theme is the notion of people having fun in the outdoors. An advertising executive may find no more positive message than attaching his or her product to the realm of parks.

Adventure activities represent the greatest trend in outdoor recreation. More people are hiking, climbing, cycling, rafting, and exploring backcountry wilderness than ever. Off-road bicycles have taken over trails in several parts of the United States. Companies that sell products related to recreation activities traditionally seek that market to advertise their products. Companies that sell hunting, fishing, camping, hiking, and other outdoor gear products always supplied the segment of the population that pursued outdoor adventure. Today, companies that produce a wide array of goods and services advertise the attachment of their product to the notion of outdoor adventure. Buy their product, and you will have a fun adventure. Any general-interest magazine provides examples of automobile, beverage, and food products attached to outdoor adventure, and ultimately attached to the parks where the adventure takes place.

That set of circumstances, along with increasing demands upon public funds available for parks, created an environment for corporate sponsorship. This environment began simply and quietly, but now presents perhaps the greatest single potential for change in park management philosophy of the new century. At the heart of this issue rests the primary question of ownership of the parks.

When the first great parks were established during the late 19th century, public ownership served as the basis for the movement. The theory of setting such wonderful resources aside for the pleasure of future generations served as the motivation for the creation of every park for the following century. Every time a great opportunity for new public land arises, the support for action rests in the notion of preserving the resources for future generations. Today, private corporate ownership may sneak in through the back door, offering to provide a support mechanism for public ownership, financing the stewardship of the land if not the original purchase.

During the 1990s, it became good management for government agencies to seek partners with other levels of public service and, eventually, with corporate interests. The recession of the early 1990s fueled much of this course of action as a means to make dollars stretch further. As a result, park agencies sought sponsors for small events and activities. Local businesses eagerly stepped forward to pitch in as sponsors of nature programs or to help pay for the printing of brochures. In return, the businesses merely asked for a simple mention of their name or the inclusion of their company logo in a discrete location on the publication. At the time, this seemed like a reasonable way to stretch government agency dollars.

Maryland State Parks, faced with no funding for its statewide brochure, sought a corporate partner. They looked no further than Gore Industries, the manufacturer of Goretex and a company that could benefit by advertising its product to park visitors. For its contribution, Gore was presented with a quarter-panel of the brochure upon which it placed a description of how a person might best prepare for a visit to the outdoors, featuring the type of equipment and clothing to bring along for the trip. While the brochure panel certainly might encourage a person to buy Goretex products, the presentation was much more of a service to the prospective visitor. Once the well of corporate sponsorship was tapped, the funds began to flow steadily. There are numerous other examples of both tasteful and rather overdone advertising by park corporate partners.

New Hampshire State Parks came under great pressure in the early 1990s to become "self-funded." New Hampshire's leadership dictated that the park system should generate sufficient funds and function efficiently enough to be self-supporting. Under the leadership of now-retired director Wilbur LaPage, New Hampshire State Parks achieved the mandate. Along the way, they set a new tone for corporate partners.

New Hampshire became the first state park system in the United States to accept a single beverage provider as the "official soft drink" of the state parks and the sole provider of resale soft drinks at all park concessions. The parks received assorted benefits, including a large cash payment. There were no neon signs or billboards installed, no park names were changed, and the park employees wore the same traditional uniform. In other words, New Hampshire State Parks had not sold out their principles; they had merely offered the advertising rights and resale market.

Since that initial action, several other state park systems have followed New Hampshire's beverage sponsor example, gaining even greater rewards and in some cases offering larger exposure for the soft drink company. Washington State Parks is the most recent example, having awarded a contract which gives exclusive vending rights in return for a cash payment of $60,000 and other benefits estimated at $2.1 million over the five-year life of the agreement.

Elsewhere, corporations have co-sponsored countless events, supplied computers, printed materials, provided free vehicles leasing or outright donations of cars, given free labor, and even provided uniform clothing to park agencies. In each case, the park agency has offered relatively little in return other than some recognition and logo placement.

This all seems so harmless that no one should even take notice. After all, advertising and corporate support are a typical everyday part of modern life. Great modern sporting events feature numerous sponsors who seemingly own some portion of the event. "This kickoff is brought to you by…" are words which now exist as an accepted part of football game broadcasts in the United States. Little League teams all seem to be sponsored by an auto parts store, construction company, car dealer, or some other business. People who watch the annual championship game of the National Football League, the Super Bowl, have great expectations of the advertisements. It may be argued that part of the entertainment value of the game lies between the action, during the commercial breaks. Advertisers certainly own an interest in each of those sporting activities, but no one has yet proven that the corporation even slightly influences the outcome of the event.

The obvious corporate presence in the sporting world generates fear regarding similar involvement in public parks. The title of sporting events, such as the college football bowl games, which occur at the end of each football season, carry the mark of company names. We can easily imagine the logical progression of such names to other events such as the Westinghouse Wimbledon, or the Wendy's World Series. New stadium names, such as Pac Bell Park in San Francisco, remind the visitors that their beloved team shares ownership with a corporation. The fact that these places are called "parks" produces a clear message for all supporters of our great national and state parks.

The notion of influence must remain the guiding force of corporate sponsorship in parks. The park system, or individual parks, must not alter properly established public policy in order to satisfy a corporate partner. The government agency must not implement, or delay, a bear hunt in New Jersey or bear viewing in Alaska in order to appease its corporate benefactor. Such choices remain easy in the realm of controversies such as hunting, but the decisions become cloudy when dealing with less-controversial issues.

The corporate threat to parks magnifies when partners own an interest in an increasing amount of park activities. If an individual corporation contributes a great amount, then the threat intensifies. There is no specific formula for trouble, much as there is no single selling price for any service. There remains no certainty at which point or what amount of sponsoring results in buying influence. Imagine the pressure upon park officials if a single corporation contributed twenty or thirty percent of a park's operating budget or funded twenty or thirty percent of its activities.

Imagine the potential implications of corporate sponsorship upon the decision by the National Park Service to limit vehicle access into the Grand Canyon area. Consider how a corporate sponsor might influence such an aggressive management action. If a corporation's financial support reaches deep into the operation of the park system, then its influence must follow. Local businesses and corporations that are affected by park decisions already exert influence; the situation multiplies greatly if the corporation also holds the added power as financier of the park.

Regardless of the acceptance of corporate support, parks are under the great influence of corporate interests, especially in the United States. As part of a government entity, park policies and budgets are subject to considerable influence from people who hold elected office. Those elected officials must run for office and often receive financial assistance from various sources, including corporate executives. The influence of those contributing corporations likely varies depending upon the individuals, the issues, and the overall set of circumstances. At the very least, an elected representative often acts in the best interest of corporations that operate within the voting district. Therefore, the realm of corporate donations remains significant even if parks do not directly receive the benefits.

The argument against significant corporate funding of parks remains a practical matter more than a moral statement about the purpose of parks as a public entity. While corporations may influence park management indirectly through political pressure, such control remains secondary. A corporation that owns a part of the park's budget or activities must evolve into a controlling mechanism. The partner becomes a supporter, and the financier eventually generates policy decisions. In such a scenario, the partner no longer shares, it owns.

George Orwell might agree that a corporate influence on parks could evolve to ownership. Such a reaction likely represents an overstatement. The danger remains as a guidepost to park managers to beware of the risks, walk lightly amid the hazards, and take only a step at a time. As a sort of motto, park managers may recognize that partners are wonderful, while co-owners are dangerous.

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