

Richard West Sellars

Box 65: Commentary from the GWS Office and our members

The Path Not Taken: National Park Service Wilderness Management

Within the realm of National Park Service natural resource concerns, wilderness management represents a supreme opportunity—and challenge. Yet today, despite the National Wilderness Steering Committee's having provided to the Park Service some basic managerial tools, such as policies and director's orders, NPS's wilderness program remains erratic, poorly defined, and vaguely implemented in most parks within the system. Despite the dedication of many individuals at different levels of the Park Service, and strong wilderness programs in certain parks, the wilderness program still suffers, overall, from the lack of a truly institutionalized, systemwide commitment to excellence in wilderness management.

By way of some background to the current situation, it is worth noting that the 1964 Wilderness Act was the first statutory restraint of any consequence placed on Park Service management of "backcountry" since the 1916 Act establishing the National Park Service. Long accustomed to wide latitude in managing national parks, NPS was unenthusiastic about the passage of the 1964 Wilderness Act, claiming that the act was not necessary, and that national park backcountry was already adequately protected.

This attitude remains strong today. In my opinion, it is the chief underlying factor for the indifference that the Park Service has demonstrated since 1964 toward establish-

ing a sound, systemwide wilderness management program. When NPS does not—in policy and practice—clearly recognize the managerial differences between wilderness and backcountry, it is, in effect, managing by the far more permissive National Park Service Act of 1916, and avoiding compliance with the much more restrictive Wilderness Act.

One of the most fundamental factors contributing to the current state of wilderness management is the program's organizational invisibility. For instance, although the wilderness resource affects approximately 84% of all National Park System lands, wilderness management in the Washington office merits only one collateral-duty position, with, until

very recently, more than one-half of that position's duties devoted to other matters. This collateral-duty arrangement is reflected in all regions except the Intermountain Region, which has a full-time wilderness coordinator. And throughout the National Park System, the wilderness program is buried within park organizational arrangements, chiefly in ranger activities or natural resource management.

In 1998, when I first became a member of the National Wilderness Steering Committee, I believed that wilderness management should be administered under natural resource management, rather than under ranger activities. Now I am not so sure. To me, a very important factor is that there is currently no true organizational "home" for wilderness management within the National Park System—no cohesive, identifiable organization within the Park Service that is eagerly seeking to promote wilderness management to a level commensurate with the great significance of this natural resource. Since the program's inception in the years after the 1964 act, National Park Service wilderness oversight has mainly been under park ranger activities—and the problem is that now, nearly 36 years after the act, we still have a weak and heavily criticized wilderness program.

On the other hand, I have not heard a drumbeat from the natural resource management ranks expressing a desire to take charge of the wilderness program and manage wil-

derness in strict accordance with the law, and with Park Service policies and directives. Among other things, it appears that many natural resource managers are not very interested in the restrictive, "minimum-requirement" aspects of wilderness management.

In sum, it seems that no single organizational unit within the Park Service is earnestly dedicated to excellence in wilderness management, according to existing law and policy. Thus, as recently as 1998, *The Wilderness Act Handbook* (published by the Wilderness Society, whose standards and goals for national park wilderness management approximate the publicly declared commitments of the Park Service) stated that NPS has "no discernible wilderness management program and makes no real distinction between park wilderness and general park lands."

I recognize that wilderness management is multidisciplinary and requires the involvement of several of NPS's (and each park's) key organizational divisions. I further recognize that each park has special organizational needs that must be taken into consideration in wilderness management planning and implementation. Add to this the great range of environmental and ecological conditions in park wildernesses—from, say, Isle Royale to Joshua Tree to Everglades to Shenandoah to Wrangell-St. Elias—and it becomes apparent that, by necessity, there will be some variability within wilderness management across the system. Cer-

tainly, some parks have well-run wilderness programs. Yet, overall, where is hard-core wilderness leadership in the Park Service? And why is the National Park Service unwilling to push wilderness management to its full and highest potential throughout the system?

* * *

The National Wilderness Steering Committee was created in the mid-1990s, following a highly critical report by the Ranger Activities Division's Wilderness Task Force. At its first meeting, in 1996, the steering committee identified three primary deficiencies within the Park Service's wilderness program: a lack of accountability, a lack of consistency, and a lack of continuity. To me, the most fundamental of these problems is the issue of strict accountability in wilderness management. And I believe that wilderness management plans provide the most substantive and quantifiable basis for accountability. Indeed, in addition to the steering committee's expressed concern, a key requirement in the Park Service's management policies is for approved wilderness management plans in all parks having wilderness resources. Yet, more than three decades after passage of the 1964 act, wilderness management plans have not been completed in most wilderness parks: approximately 12 out of 75 parks containing wilderness resources have approved plans.

Thus, since the wilderness program's inception in the 1960s, the

Park Service has had no tangible way to effectively monitor its wilderness management program systemwide. Without wilderness plans, NPS is left with having to resort to using indicators such as position descriptions and performance standards to establish wilderness accountability. By themselves, such indicators are a woefully ineffective means of achieving high-quality wilderness management that addresses the congressional intent for wilderness.

It appears that a number of leaders within the National Park Service believe that wilderness management plans are not necessary. Yet, I feel strongly that the plans form a kind of contract with the public, with the National Park Service itself, and with a park's future personnel, by stating the methods and means by which wilderness will be managed. Among other things, park wilderness management plans require: an organizational profile that specifically identifies those positions that are accountable for wilderness management and preservation; clearly established minimum-requirement protocols; clearly established protocols for scientific research and monitoring activities in wilderness areas; assurance of the full integration of wilderness preservation into both long-term and day-to-day park operations; and clear identification of legal boundaries for wilderness. The plans thus provide a detailed blueprint against which responsible parties can be held accountable. In my opinion, without adequate wilderness management

plans, there can be no real accountability. And without accountability, we have an vague, amorphous wilderness program.

In order to attain excellence in wilderness management, the National Wilderness Steering Committee and National Park Service leadership should look very closely at—and ask very hard questions about—the long-term indifference that the Park Service has shown toward completing wilderness management plans (while at the same time it has been forcefully proclaiming the need for accountability). What activity other than wilderness management planning is more fundamental to identifying elements by which the National Park Service can truly establish accountability in its wilderness program?

By themselves, the plans cannot accomplish excellence in wilderness management—but they can form the foundation for excellence. Full-faith implementation of the plans is essential.

* * *

In many ways, the passage of the 1964 Wilderness Act reflected a public distrust of the federal land-managing agencies' inclination toward excessive development and use of the more pristine areas of America's public lands. Yet, ironically, the very agencies (including the National Park Service) whose management had brought on the distrust were themselves entrusted to manage the wilderness that the public and Con-

gress sought to protect. Thus, it should be no surprise that these agencies have been ambivalent about changing their traditional management practices once designated or potential wilderness areas became a reality. For the National Park System, the National Wilderness Steering Committee and the Park Service's leadership and rank and file should work to effect a decisive turnaround to bring the Service at long last into full-faith compliance with this exceptionally important preservation act.

Perhaps more than any other natural-area program, the Park Service's wilderness management puts to the test NPS's belief in itself as a preservation agency. This belief is in everyone's heart, but is still not reflected in everyone's action. As we know, wilderness is statutorily different from typical backcountry, and the law requires very special treatment of wilderness. National Park Service compliance with the law should recognize the tremendous significance of wilderness as outstanding examples of America's most pristine landscapes—areas of great ecological, spiritual, and recreational value.

Let the Park Service now live up to its belief in its preservation mission, and match the nobility of national park wilderness—and of the Wilderness Act itself—with a strong and decisive wilderness management program that is institutionalized throughout the National Park System.

Editor's Note: This Box 65 comment on wilderness management is taken from a May 5, 2000, statement from National Park Service historian Richard Sellars to the Park Service's National Wilderness Steering Committee, of which he is a member. It is published here as a resource preservation concern of the outgoing president of the Society—and in the belief that attitudes toward wilderness similar to those discussed above exist in other federal wilderness-management agencies.



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.