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The Significance of George Wright

George Melendez Wright was born into a well-to-do San Francisco family in 1904. Even as a boy, he showed an unusually strong interest in the natural history of the San Francisco Bay Area and northern California. At the University of California in Berkeley, he studied zoology and forestry under the highly respected biologist, Joseph Grinnell, head of the university's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology.

Wright's career with the National Park Service began in 1927 in Yosemite National Park, where he served as assistant park naturalist. In 1929, concerned about an almost complete absence of scientific data to inform park management, Wright initiated a scientific wildlife management program for the National Park System, beginning with a survey of wildlife populations in the parks. Thereafter, he succeeded in building and strengthening the wildlife program to the extent that it began to influence management practices in the large natural parks. But in February 1936, during a reconnaissance of prospective international parks and wildlife refuges along the Mexican border, Wright died in a head-on collision on U.S. Highway 80, about seven miles east of Deming, New Mexico. At his death, Wright was only 31 years of age; his worthy efforts to improve wildlife management had been tragically cut short.

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George Wright's most significant contributions began with his national

park wildlife survey. Wright not only initiated the survey, but also funded it from his personal fortune (in 1933, the Park Service began to pay all costs). The survey marked the National Park Service's first sustained scientific research in support of natural resource management. And Wright's efforts motivated the Park Service to establish a "wildlife division," thereby beginning a period of substantial scientific activity within the national parks.

The wildlife survey team under Wright produced a landmark report, *Fauna of the National Parks of the United States* (referred to as Fauna No. 1). Published in 1933, this report on natural resource management was the very first of its kind in NPS history. Moreover, it made recommendations that went beyond the preservation of existing conditions: the report advocated not only the preservation, but also, where feasible, the *restoration* of natural conditions in the parks.

In 1934, Park Service Director Arno Cammerer declared the Fauna

No. 1 recommendations to be official policy. As official management policy aimed at the preservation and restoration of natural resources by a government bureau, and applicable to an entire system of public lands, Fauna No. 1's recommendations were unprecedented in the history of national parks—and, indeed, in the history of American public land management.

The Fauna No. 1 policies differed considerably from previous NPS policies. Wright had begun his career during the era of Stephen T. Mather, the first Park Service director (1916-1929), a time when national park management policies required no scientific understanding. Instead, policies focused on extensive manipulation of natural resources such as bison, bear, fish, and forests—manipulation that was aimed not at preserving natural conditions, but rather at presenting the touring public with idealized versions of scenic nature. National park management under Mather was typified by the major policy statement of the era, the 1918 “Lane Letter,” a development-oriented document that placed heavy emphasis on accommodating the public and ensuring their enjoyment of the parks’ majestic scenery.

In truth, the biological science program that Wright initiated (and that NPS would build up during the first half of the 1930s) did not result from any well-considered prior determination by the Park Service that scientifically based preservation of the national parks’ natural resources

needed to get under way. On the contrary, it occurred through a fortunate happenstance—the presence in the Park Service of George Wright, who not only recognized the need for such a program, but was also willing to start it with his own money. Had Wright not proposed the survey and offered to fund it, the Park Service may have waited for years before initiating its own biological science program. There is no evidence to the contrary.

George Wright’s efforts thus began a new era in National Park Service history. In effect, the wildlife biologists under Wright’s leadership reinterpreted the 1916 congressional mandate that the Park Service must leave the parks “unimpaired.” In their view, the Park Service’s mandate required not only preserving scenery and ensuring public enjoyment, but also applying scientific research to ensure that the parks were left as ecologically intact as possible, given public use of the areas. From Wright’s time on, the persistent tension between management for aesthetic purposes and management for ecological purposes has been a dominant factor in national park history.

The biologists’ new perspectives on natural resources provided new options for park management that challenged traditional assumptions and practices. Becoming a kind of “minority opposition party” within the Park Service, the wildlife biologists under Wright raised serious

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questions about the NPS's utilitarian, recreational emphasis in park management. Specific to the biologists' concerns for ecological preservation and restoration in the parks were recommendations for scientific research, protection of predators and endangered species, reduction or eradication of non-native species, and acquisition of more ecologically complete wildlife habitats.

Wright, and the biologists brought into the Park Service during his time, especially feared the ecological consequences of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs, with their varied and well-funded national park development projects that emphasized intensive recreational use. At times, the biologists harshly criticized the Park Service. They asserted, for instance, that, although NPS ought to be the leader in nature preservation, through extensive park development it had been "more at fault than many other agencies" in destroying natural values. Improved park roads they described as "infections" that stimulated incremental development along road corridors, such as campgrounds, restaurants, parking lots, maintenance yards, ranger stations, and other administrative facilities. The biologists warned against exceeding the "recreational saturation point" in parks by building more roads and trails and facilities for winter sports and other activities. And, in what seemed like a particularly alarming policy to traditional

Park Service managers and foresters, the biologists accepted forest fire as a natural ecological element. They even argued that, in a park maintained in a natural condition, a forest blackened by a naturally caused fire is just as valuable as a green forest. Inspired by Wright, the biologists brought these and other radical new perspectives into the Park Service.

Yet the National Park Service failed to live up to the Fauna No. 1 policies that Director Cammerer had proclaimed official in 1934. During the New Deal, the Park Service aggressively sought national park development for public use, along with the growth and diversification of NPS responsibilities in national recreation programs. Thus, the emergence of ecological attitudes that Wright promoted was overwhelmed by the New Deal's emphasis on recreational tourism and park development. For example, at the time of Wright's death in 1936, the Park Service employed approximately 27 wildlife biologists. But by the late 1930s, and without Wright's leadership, the number of biological positions had dwindled to nine. At that time, in contrast to the biologists' situation, the Park Service employed approximately 400 landscape architects to help undertake New Deal development activity. Moreover, in 1940, through a bureaucratic reorganization by President Roosevelt and Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, the wildlife biologists were transferred to another Interior bu-

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reau, the Biological Survey—an administrative separation from the Park Service that symbolized the diminished influence of biological science in national park management. The biologists were returned to the Park Service after World War II—but only about six of them were left by that time.

The automobile accident that took Wright's life truly marked a turning point in National Park Service history. Under his leadership, the biologists had gained strength and influence in national park management. In 1935, they had been moved from their offices on the University of California campus in Berkeley to National Park Service headquarters in Washington, D.C.—an indication of the increasing prominence in national park affairs of both George Wright and the biology program he had initiated. Beyond Wright's administrative skills and his founding of an important national park program (the only major management program in Park Service history to be established with private funds), it is very likely that his personal fortune gave him direct access to the highest levels of NPS management. Had this accident not claimed his life, his influence would surely have continued to increase—indeed, it is possible that Wright may have risen to the very pinnacle of National Park Service leadership. In any event, Wright's presence within the highest ranks of the Park Service would have continued to bolster the biologists' influ-

ence in national park management, averting the drastic decline that the program underwent without his leadership.

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George Wright was a visionary—a biologist whose concepts of scientifically based natural resource management in the National Park System were far ahead of their time. His ideas had flourished briefly in the 1930s, but were soon shoved aside to accommodate other priorities. Yet, as the environmental era began to impact NPS thinking in the 1960s, Wright's ideas (modified in accord with contemporary ecological knowledge) experienced a resurgence, and they have since gained an increasingly greater influence in national park management.

Today, Wright is widely recognized as the founder of scientific natural resource management in the National Park System. He had provided the vision, inspiration, funding, and leadership. His untimely death—as well as Park Service reluctance to alter its traditional management practices—brought about the decline of the biologists' influence. Still, for the few biologists remaining in the Park Service during the post-World War II years and up to the 1960s, Fauna No. 1—the initial product of Wright's wildlife management program—remained, as one biologist recalled, the “bible” for wildlife management, giving the biologists guidance and inspiration at a

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time when their programs had been eclipsed. Moreover, Fauna No. 1 was clearly the philosophical and policy forerunner to the 1963 reports on national park management and science by the Leopold Committee and the National Academy of Sciences—reports that sparked the Park Service's contemporary move toward more ecologically attuned park management.

Due to the dominance of traditional management attitudes, the Park Service's move toward ecologically based management has been exceptionally sporadic. Yet it is still ongoing and is currently being strengthened by the NPS initiative known as the Natural Resource Challenge. In many ways, the Challenge represents a contemporary updating and expansion of the ideas

expressed by George Wright and the Park Service biologists of the 1930s.

As the Park Service's scientific natural resource management programs re-emerged, Wright's vision and contributions became increasingly recognized, and his reputation has rapidly ascended. The George Wright Society, founded in Wright's honor in 1980 and dedicated to the preservation and protection of national parks and equivalent preserves around the world, has become a major influence in efforts to attain ecologically attuned national park management. The Society enjoys strong support from National Park Service leadership, scientists, and other professionals, thereby ensuring the perpetuation of George Wright's early visionary aspirations for national park management.

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