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The Many Values of Public Parks

Like most of us, I took the national and state parks and forests for granted—until the shock struck. That they were “public” simply had not really entered my consciousness. High-level talk about privatizing the national parks in the early 1980s, however, sent an imperative signal. Though early, the time had come to recognize the long-term threat of the parks’ being converted into yet another money-making machine. This issue of THE GEORGE WRIGHT FORUM is intended to remind us, and to extend our understanding, of the foundations of America’s remarkable system of national, state, county, and municipal public parks.

Normally, I like to have my say. However, the authors of the papers written for this issue of the FORUM responded so powerfully to the challenge “Once Again; Why Public Parks?” that I have decided to use two sets of their words to introduce my editor’s summary.

In “Recreational Values of Public Parks,” Bob Manning and Tom More write: “The spectrum of values [of parks] reflects the various purposes or functions that parks can serve within our society. A further qualification must be applied, however: What does it mean for something to be a ‘public’ park? There are, after all, private parks and reserves that can provide many of the same values. What differentiates public parks and makes them necessary? In a society that prides itself on market-based solutions to problems, we need to be clear about which of these values are publicly important and why.” They continue:

John Dewey argued that the public interest arises from the consequences of actions. When the consequences of an action or transaction are confined to the individual(s) direct-

ly engaged in it, the action/transaction is essentially private. So, if two people have a discussion or make an exchange, their action is private if nobody else is affected. However, most transactions have consequences that extend beyond the individual participants to affect others, often in non-obvious ways. For example, we have a better breakfast because of the principally private transactions of farmers, grocers, and butchers all acting in their own interests than we would if we were served in a philanthropic spirit. Such transactions are social because they affect others beyond the immediate participants. But Dewey is careful not to conflate the social with the public: ‘Many private acts are social, their consequences contribute to the welfare of the community or affect its status and prospects.’ Rather, the dividing line between public and private comes when the indirect consequences of actions are recognized as being so important as to require systematic regulation to either enhance positive consequences or control negative ones. Thus, the public sector is justified in acting when the market fails to produce sufficient quantities of something positive or when the negative effects of market transactions must be mitigated. The public provision of parks is clearly an instance of the former.

So the reason that the public sector inter-

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venes is because private markets sometimes fail to produce enough of something that we consider valuable. We have public schools, public libraries, and public health clinics because we believe that all children should receive at least some education, that it is desirable to encourage the distribution of books and other educational material, and that low-income people should have access to at least a minimal level of healthcare. Almost certainly these goals would not be accomplished if we relied solely on private markets. In the past, public parks and recreation have been cast in the same mold. For example, we have public playgrounds because the mothers of the playground movement wanted safe, stimulating, educational spaces that would keep children off the streets and they recognized that public action was required to achieve these goals. Or we established public campgrounds because we believed it was desirable to encourage citizens to explore America and its natural and cultural history.

This view of parks as public goods has sometimes come under attack by those who challenge the idea that recreation is socially necessary and who argue that the private sector could do a better, more efficient job of fulfilling public recreation demand if it did not face public-sector 'competition.' This argument is bolstered by the many changes that have occurred since the great eras of park construction in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. For example, cities now have many private play spaces, reducing the need for public playgrounds, and the private campground industry is now a very effective supplier of camping experiences. It becomes imperative, then, that we ask what today's public parks do that is different from what the private sector does. In other words, why, and for whom, do markets fail so that the public sector needs to step in to provide systematic enhancement?

Perhaps the most obvious example of

market failure is with unique resources—there is only one Yellowstone, only one Liberty Bell. If we concede that such resources are central to our national heritage such that it is desirable for all Americans to see them, then it would be inappropriate to have them in the private sector. If they were operated privately (or quasi-privately according to market principles), their rarity would drive up the price, excluding low-income people—as may be happening with the current fee demonstration program in the national parks. In standard economics, when the supply of something is scarce and the demand is high, the market will signal producers to expand production, and demand and supply would eventually reach equilibrium. But Yellowstone and the Liberty Bell are not widgets—their supply is fixed at one, and it is impossible to expand production in any meaningful sense. Consequently we ask the public sector to oversee their allocation, not to allocate them efficiently to the highest bidders (those most willing to pay), but fairly, so that everyone has an opportunity to visit. Private markets are efficient, but they may not treat people equally.

The second set of words is from the closing paragraph of Tom Power's "The Economic Foundations of Public Parks":

From the very beginning of Western European urban settlement, open spaces to which all citizens had a right of access were central to urban political and social life. With industrialization and the growth of very densely settled urban areas, public health considerations led to an expansion of that urban open space ideal: Citizens needed access to some bit of the natural world or our urban areas would become increasingly unlivable. Public parks could provide that. Public parks helped maintain crucial connections between citizens and the natural world and among fellow citizens by providing a shared

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common area. Our state and national parks simply extended those concepts as we became an increasingly mobile population. Community and citizenship centers on the sharing of a broad range of values and commitments. Public parks have played an important role in that civic sharing. That role has not diminished in this 21st century. The 'new' urbanism that seeks to revitalize our cities has come full circle to see the importance of shared, open, common spaces in making our cities attractive, livable places where economic vitality can blossom.

Surely one of the distinguishing values of modern democratic societies is their public parks. The roots of those parks extend back to the earliest of ancient civilizations. In our opening essay, "Origins of Fully Funded Public Parks," John Henneberger tells us that "parks were part of the ambience and public activity" of the ancient cities in which civilizations were born. Henneberger, who was with the National Park Service (NPS) for thirty-three years as a ranger, superintendent, planner, and manager in a number of parks and central offices, is currently writing a history of parks from Paleolithic times to the present. He points out that the early parks were not dedicated to "the specific purpose of affording an amenity site for leisure and recreational activity for use by all the people of the community." That purpose emerged only very recently. The early parks mainly served the royal and religious purposes of ruling elites.

With the passage of time, the private parks increasingly admitted more and more of the general population, initially only for festive occasions. We can think of them as private parks

open to the public. The first fully funded public park dedicated at the outset as a commons financially supported by taxes was Birkenhead Park on the outskirts of Liverpool, England, upon which work began in 1841. "Public parks in early nineteenth-century England made the transition from those created under royal and private initiative to those that were fully publicly funded," Henneberger notes. "The transition occurred within the context of a public park movement that sought to meet recreational needs and deal with the social problems of poverty, disease, and wretched living conditions of the lower classes caught up in the excesses of the Industrial Age." At Birkenhead, the establishment of a fully funded public park was socially and physically based upon opposite directions. Socially, it was a top-down process, from royalty to commoner. Physically, it was a bottom-up process of transforming an "unattractive, swampy, low-lying tract" to the exciting landscape of the park built on its foundation.

The early royal and private parks of antiquity served primarily for recreation, including sport hunting, which is no longer an acceptable form of recreation in many public parks. New forms of recreation became popular from time to time, and most were added to the growing repertoire of recreation in parks. Given the common origins and mutually supporting continuity and growth of parks and recreation, we have placed Manning and More's paper, "Recreational Values Of Public Parks," immediately following Henneberger's "Origins."

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Bob Manning, a professor of recreation management at the University of Vermont, and Tom More, a U.S. Forest Service research scientist, report that their survey of visitors to Vermont state parks reveals that visitors rate recreation as the most important value of parks.

Beyond their analysis of the connections between parks and recreation, Manning and More set forth a number of arguments that support the view that much of the recreational value of parks can be realized only when they are owned and maintained by common action through government. They write: "In sum, parks are publicly important because they provide recreation (and other) services that the market either cannot create or cannot distribute equitably." Nowhere do they imply, however, that any and all forms of recreation are acceptable in public parks or that there are no limits to recreation. Indeed, they close with the following candid appraisal of the downside potential that one way or another is an inevitable partner of all human affairs:

The primacy of recreation in parks has led to several paradoxes that challenge contemporary park management. For example, if parks provide increasingly important recreational values to society, how can we ensure these values accrue equitably to all members of society? Minority populations are historically underrepresented in the national parks, and this issue will become increasingly important as minority populations grow substantially in the coming decades, and issues of social and environmental justice demand greater attention in public policy. Ironically, the popularity of parks may lead to 'capacity' problems, at least in some places at some times. For example, the U.S. National Park System

now accommodates nearly 300 million visits annually. While the popularity of parks is a testament to their success and cause for celebration, it may lead to unacceptable impacts to parks and to the quality of recreation experiences. How much and what kinds of recreation can ultimately be accommodated in public parks? A related issue concerns potential conflicts among the multiple values of public parks. When recreation affects significant natural, cultural, historical, scientific, educational, and other values of public parks as described in this special issue of THE GEORGE WRIGHT FORUM, informed management must balance all these increasingly important values.

Given that, "as a social science, economics focuses on improving the ways we use scarce resources to satisfy human needs and desires," and given further that public parks serve a significant array of those needs and desires, the linkage between public as well as private parks and economics is very clear. In his article, Tom Power, professor of economics and chair of the economics department at the University of Montana, examines both the direct and the indirect ways that the range of public parks serve a wide variety of human purposes of economic significance.

The economic role of public parks includes the variety of ways they "improve the 'livability' of neighborhoods, cities, and regions. They do this by providing a flow of valuable environmental services: open space, reduced congestion, contact with nature and wildlife, recreational opportunities, scenic beauty, improved air and water quality, quiet, a slowed pace of human activity, a relaxed place to meet and interact with

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fellow citizens, and so on.” This flow of services constitutes economic activity. “The point is that local environmental quality—natural, social, and cultural—matters to people, and, because of that, has significant economic importance. It is the contribution of public parks to those site-specific local amenities that is the basis of their economic importance.”

A major, very positive economic influence of the national parks is strikingly summarized as follows:

For the longer period of analysis (1969-1998), almost all the areas surrounding the large national parks showed above-average economic vitality. Ninety-one percent showed above-average population and job growth; 86% saw aggregate real income rise at above-average rates. A third had above-average growth in average real income. Averaged across all 21 large national park areas, population growth was almost four times faster than the national average. Job growth was almost three times faster. Aggregate real income grew twice as fast as the national average.

Beyond their economic utility, parks are important symbols of social equity. “People of all ages and various walks of life ... strolling, chatting, eating, playing games, boating, and generally enjoying themselves” says it all for most public parks of the world. Sure, our great national parks and others like them, such as Africa’s game parks, conjure up a very different vision. Parks in general, however, are wonderfully pictured in Heath Schenker’s article, “Why Public Parks: A Matter of Equity?” She is associate professor of landscape architecture at the University of California–Davis, currently on sabbat-

ical in Mexico, working on a book about nineteenth-century public parks.

Schenker reminds us that “it is important to remember that public parks are a potent symbol of certain principles that should never really be taken at face value. For one thing, they symbolize the principle of equity. The notion of equity has been intrinsic to public parks since they first began to proliferate around the world in the nineteenth century.” As a milestone example, Schenker points out that equity — fairness — was critically important to Frederick Law Olmsted in his pioneering designs of American parks. As she also points out, even tyrants have established public parks open to all. Reading her article has led me to a new conscious realization that there are no places more equitable than public parks.

A second meaning of equity has to do with financial considerations, namely, “the money value of a property or of an interest in a property in excess of claims or liens against it.” Modern parks, both private and public, early on had close financial connections. “The idea of public parks took hold around the world not only because they served certain political agendas and represented certain ideals of social justice, but also, in large part, because of real estate speculators who began to view them as a marketable amenity.” Successful middle-class businessmen “advocated public parks because they believed that they would improve the image of a city, and therefore make it more attractive to new business investors. What kind of businessman would want to bring his fam-

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ily to live in a city with no public park?!”

The case for the great natural public parks is clearly laid out in the history of wilderness, wildlife, and ecological protection. One can imagine only very rare instances in which a private refuge was set aside for wilderness, wildlife, and ecological protection. If there is any preservation need as acute as “protecting scenic wonders and wilderness landscapes of unique beauty against tawdry exploitation and industrial incursion,” the root of the national parks, it is the need to protect wilderness, wildlife, and ecological values.

True, “wildlife” was specified in the National Park Service Organic Act. It was not until 1930, however, as Jim Pritchard informs us in “The Meaning of Nature: Wilderness, Wildlife, and Ecological Values in the National Parks,” that “ecological and wildlife values became firmly intertwined in the national parks.” As a matter of very special interest to most readers of this journal, that firm intertwining drew heavily on the pioneering biological work of George Melendez Wright, for whom the Society is named. The newly established wildlife division of NPS, led by Wright, “instituted the *Fauna* series of publications on national park wildlife, recommended extensive biological research in the national parks, and proposed guidelines for wildlife management that departed from single-species management to emphasize an ecosystem-oriented approach and the restoration of wildlife to natural conditions.”

It was only after passage of the

Wilderness Act of 1964 that NPS overcame its historical reluctance to feature wilderness and to “embrace the wilderness preservation movement.” NPS leadership viewed Yellowstone, Glacier, and Grand Canyon “as entire units, possess[ing] the essential qualities of wilderness. Declaring any particular part of the park as wilderness was simply redundant, and so the NPS advanced conservative proposals for park wilderness areas.” As the years went by wilderness, wildlife, and ecological values gradually rose in importance in the management of the parks. Like so many significant developments, this was necessarily a step-by-step process. Pritchard, an environmental historian and teacher in the departments of landscape architecture and of animal ecology at Iowa State University, vividly details the events and the people who made that development happen. It required “successive understandings of nature” to redefine “the meanings of wilderness, wildlife, and ecological relationships.”

Maryland’s state parks evolved from state forest reserves, and were initially devoted to nature preservation and shortly thereafter to public recreation. As Ross Kimmel, supervisor of cultural resource management for the Maryland State Forest and Park Service, notes: “It wasn’t long, however, before sites of historic significance were added to a growing universe of public parks.” This process of nature conservation first, followed by recreation and then historic preservation, can be seen in the development of Maryland’s state forests and parks as described in Kimmel’s article “The

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Value of Historic and Cultural Resources in Public Parks.”

Although in Maryland many of the acquisitions of historically or culturally significant resources were made explicitly to acquire the resources, many such resources in “nature” parks were celebrated upon their discovery later on. Fort Frederick, a large stone relic of the French and Indian War (1756-1763), pictured on our cover, is an example of the first kind. A second, very different example is Point Lookout State Park, the site of the largest prison camp of the Civil War. Acquired for its historic significance, it has become a major resource for a wide variety of water-based recreation.

Kimmel also describes a paradoxical management situation in which an area “that is not natural at all” is being managed as if to keep it in a “pristine ‘natural’ state”:

Soldier’s Delight Natural Environment Area is a shale barren incapable of sustaining the typical deciduous forests of most of the rest of [Maryland]. Left to nature’s design, Soldier’s Delight would become a forest of scrub pine and swamp oak, the soil is so poor. However, the state, with volunteer help, routinely burns off sprouting trees in order to maintain the area as prairie grassland hosting flora and fauna that are rare in the state. And in so doing, we today continue a practice started in prehistoric times by Native Americans, who burned the poor forest cover in order to drive game and provide clear fields of fire for hunting. Is Soldier’s Delight truly a “natural environment area?” One could argue that it is in fact a *cultural* environment area, because human beings have for centuries artificially maintained it as grassland....

He concludes: “A wise society husbands its historic and cultural

resources, saves and protects them, and lets the people, whose heritage those resources constitute, experience and learn from the resources. Public parks are among the largest repositories of historical and cultural resources. It is therefore morally and profoundly incumbent upon public parks to protect, enhance, and interpret those resources for the benefit of humanity.”

Science and public parks present a remarkable mutuality. As David Graber, the senior science advisor for Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, sets forth in his article “Scientific Values of Public Parks,” the parks are important objects of a great variety of scientific research purely for the purpose of expanding our understanding of the universe. On the other hand, the results of such knowledge-seeking research increasingly contribute to the day-to-day and long-term management of the parks. We could call such a flow of information and analysis a by-product of the research. Scientific research conducted explicitly on behalf of park management in the first place, in order to enrich the surety of a wide range of management decision-making, is becoming more frequent.

Of course, very good reasons account for the scientific interest in the parks. Parks contain “natural or historic objects of significant interest and value to society” that are attractive objects of research to the scientist. Secondly, as Graber points out, “parks are relatively unperturbed by confounding variables,” making for cleaner targets of research. In the third place, many parks provide “invaluable

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reference points for comparison with the ever more extensive altered landscapes that have been converted to human utility.” This is of particular value to long-term studies.

It is in the relatively new arena of long-term ecological research and monitoring that parks and scientific research really come together, according to Graber. “Traditional research, in national parks and elsewhere, was designed to fit well within a period of a few years—the typical amount of time allotted to a graduate student’s research and (not coincidentally) the usual duration of a funding grant. The accelerating urgency of understanding the change taking place all over our planet, and an increasing need to place that change in the context of ecological time scales (decades to millennia) and evolutionary time scales (millennia to millions of years) has moved long-term research and monitoring to the forefront of conservation biology as well as to that of parks’ perceived needs for scientific information.

Alfred Runte, author of the modern classic *National Parks: The American Experience*, opens his article “Why National Parks?” with this observation:

Detailing why there are national parks in THE GEORGE WRIGHT FORUM would seem like rehashing what is obvious for those already convinced. Who better than park professionals know the evolution of the national parks, from cultural pride to biological sanctuary to historic preservation and urban redemption? More, who believes in these mandates without question? Who better understands—and again accepts—why the size and diversity of the system requires the federal government, including the power of the federal purse to

buy out local frivolities and special interests?

He goes on to remind us: “It is the common knowledge of 130 years. At their largest, America’s national parks maintain the hope of preserving natural systems; as historical parks, they remain the nation’s shrines. Parks of the people should be owned by the people, managed by the people, and remain a statement of pride to the world. The national parks are indeed a national mission, the country acting in Congress assembled.”

Whereas the principal “attackers” of the past were motivated virtually exclusively by economic considerations, Runte identifies more recent detractors as including persons of the very same intellectual character as the great early advocates and leaders for the parks. He vigorously denies the charges that the parks fail in terms of satisfying diversity and multiculturalism concerns. He focuses so sharply on the intellectuals that he practically brushes the far right and its “Sagebrush Rebellion” off to the side. Altogether, he provides a powerful answer to the question, “once again, why public parks?”

James Dunmyer, assistant secretary of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, identifies state parks as the backbone of the system of public lands in the United States (“State Parks: The Backbone”). He recognizes that state parks “have been created by all techniques imaginable, are managed in a variety of innovative ways” and provide a unique service to the public. Like a backbone, state parks provide a connection, in the system of public parks, between the local and federal parks. Recent events pro-

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vide additional support for the value of these parks.

Having supervised Maryland's state public lands system during the 1990s, Dunmyer concludes that the period was "not kind to state parks." The responsibilities of state park systems expanded while budgets and staffing declined. Parks simply could not compete for scarce public funds against schools, hospitals, or prisons. As a result, the state parks became innovators in the park profession, developing creative volunteer programs and other new ideas in funding, revenue generation, and operating policies. As parks became more business-like, problems arose because state parks are not a business. He clearly relates the business dilemma for parks: "it is impossible to delegate the public portion of the system's responsibility." There rests a powerful

argument for the existence of state parks as a distinct aspect of the public domain.

State park systems learned from the experience and now operate with numerous partners. This approach forms an important part of their future as state parks face significant changes in user trends, such as those seeking more active "flow-through" experiences on bicycles and kayaks. State parks must meet the challenge of these recreation trends and also develop a sense of stewardship ethic in each citizen. "What state parks need the most," says Dunmyer, "are advocates." The citizen-advocate can ensure that government follows the directive of the people. State parks—indeed all public parks—are an irreplaceable element of society. That, perhaps, is the fundamental answer to the question posed in this issue of the FORUM.

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