

The National Park Service Centennial Essay Series: An Introduction

AMERICAN CULTURE, SO THE PUNDITS TELL US, IS ALL ABOUT THE HERE AND NOW. In this view, most Americans—especially most young Americans—are not very interested in, or adept at, looking either backward or forward. What lies behind us in time are the murky landscapes of history, a realm of half-remembered facts all too often tainted with myth. The past, in the memorable phrase of David Lowenthal, is a foreign country—and we all know how bad Americans are at geography. As for the future, Americans are notorious for not planning for it. We don't save enough money for retirement, we don't have the willpower to fix Social Security, we go about our daily lives as if there were no such things as global warming or peak oil.

There are good reasons to doubt all these snap generalizations, but for the sake of argument let's entertain the possibility that they contain more than a kernel of truth. What, then, are we to make of the fact that in just under ten years' time, on August 25, 2016, the National Park Service will celebrate its one hundredth anniversary? For this is an agency that rather awkwardly straddles the present. One of NPS's main goals is to provide for visitation—the enjoyment of the parks in the here and now. But it is also an agency uniquely constrained by the past and the future, for it must promote only those kinds of present-day enjoyments that respect the past while not compromising the interests of future generations.

Balancing the often-conflicting interests of the past, present, and future has been the Park Service's core administrative and legal challenge since its founding in 1916. That task also carries over to the commemoration of the agency's centennial. Somehow, NPS must approach 2016 with a judicious mixture of celebrating past achievements and planning for future changes and as-yet-unforeseen problems, while at the same time garnering political and financial support for meeting today's needs.

One thing we already know about the NPS centennial is that present-day needs will be attended by a great deal of public money, coupled with aggressive fundraising from the private and philanthropic sectors. The day this was being written, it was announced that the Bush administration's proposed 2008 budget includes requests for increases in the NPS base operations budget that would be the largest in the agency's history. This is the leading edge of the National Parks Centennial Initiative, the NPS's official program running up to 2016. When all the proposed increases are rolled together, as much as \$3 billion could be invested in the national park system between now and the big anniversary.

Even if these requests are not fully enacted by Congress, they evidence the serious intent of politicians from both sides of the political aisle to make much-needed investments in the national park system. Yet, as several commentators have already pointed out, the National

Parks Centennial Initiative has to be something more than Mission 66 Redux. It can't just be about fixing all the busted toilets and filling in all the potholes on the scenic drives. It can't just be about new or buffed-up visitor centers, or additional parklands. It can't just be about permanent increases in the NPS base operations budget, or fully funding employee salaries, or bringing on thousands of new seasonals, or ramping up the funds available to conserve historic objects or eradicate invasive species.

All of these concerns are important, of course—vitaly important. But there has to be something else at the core of all this activity. As it approaches its hundredth year, the National Park Service must commit itself to a “creed of discovery,” to the willingness to question all assumptions, right down to the very mission of the agency itself. What needs to be at the heart of the NPS centennial is not celebration, but *cerebration*: a rigorous and deeply penetrating process of reflection on every aspect of the national park idea.

The Park Service cannot, and should not, do this alone. The agency's leaders, to their credit, understand this full well. Many outside groups—the National Parks Conservation Association, the Coalition of National Parks Retirees, and others—are contemplating plans for being involved in the centennial run-up.

The George Wright Society is no exception. We see our role as a continuation of what we've always done: encouraging serious reflection on critical park-related issues across the entire spectrum of cultural and natural resource disciplines. In the context of the NPS centennial, this means challenging the agency to enact the creed of discovery described above, specifically by bringing voices into the centennial conversation that represent a broad range of viewpoints, including those not traditionally part of the discourse on America's national parks.

How will we do that? One way will be through the National Park Service Centennial Essay Series, to be launched in the next issue of *The George Wright Forum*. The series will run over the next 28 issues, one essay per issue, all the way up to August 2016. The GWS Board will commission essays from well-known writers who have a demonstrated interest in national parks, but just as importantly we will also seek out analysts who are addressing important issues that are relevant to parks but who have not yet applied their thinking in that way. We will certainly give room to established voices within the National Park Service, but will also be looking far beyond the usual fields we have come to associate with the administration of parks, protected areas, and cultural sites.

We welcome the participation of George Wright Society members and other readers of *The George Wright Forum* in this ambitious journey of discovery. Who are the people who have inspired you in your work? Is there a philosopher, an essayist, a novelist whose work has influenced your approach to issues affecting your park or its resources? Are there scientists, anthropologists, or historians whose thinking should be brought to the attention of the parks community? Which poets have gone straight to your heart with their words? Or maybe you weren't touched by words at all. What is the power of music, of painting, of the lively arts to inform the national park experience? Who should we talk to, and ask to talk with all of us?

Or maybe *you've* got something you'd like to share, either in your own voice or simply by passing along an idea that you think one of the Centennial Essays should address. We welcome that, too. Please see the accompanying box for guidelines.

If you had to boil all this down to a single question, that question would be: How is the National Park Service to remain relevant in a fast-changing 21st century? But even this is not straightforward. Several commentators have pointed out that the word “relevance” is in danger of being debased, of being turned into a wedge word by (for example) motorized recreation interests who want access to the parks and who complain that by keeping them out the Park Service is in danger of making itself “irrelevant” to the current preferences of the public. Still, such cynical uses are no reason for NPS to abandon the search for relevance so long as it adopts an expansive conception of the word: one which implies continuity with America’s past while maintaining the flexibility to meet the challenges of the future. It’s the only way the Park Service can escape the tyranny of the present that the pundits are so fond of talking about.

So look for the first of the National Park Service Centennial Essays in the next issue of *The George Wright Forum*—and feel free to join the conversation.

Guidelines for the National Park Centennial Essay Series

As noted in the text, we are glad to have your suggestions for topics that should be included in the Centennial Essay Series. It would be most helpful if they were accompanied by the name and contact information of one or more people whom you think would do a good job developing the ideas into an essay.

The GWS publications committee also welcomes specific proposals for essays from authors themselves. Again, proposals can come from any field of endeavor so long as they consider important issues related to the National Park Service as an agency or the resources of the national park system. Authors may send fully developed essays if they wish, but because of the competitive nature of the selection process it is suggested that initial proposals consist of a short summary (no more than 500 words) of the proposed essay, accompanied by a brief description of the author(s). Proposals will be reviewed by the publications committee; for those deemed of interest, authors will be invited to submit a complete essay for further consideration. These full essays will be reviewed by the committee (and, on occasion, by outside peer reviewers) to determine whether they should be included in the Essay Series. It is our hope that a selection of the essays will eventually be published as a book.

In general, essays should run 3,000–5,000 words, though longer or shorter ones are possible with prior permission from the publications committee. Style guidelines are the same as for regular submissions to *The George Wright Forum*. They can found on our website at www.georgewright.org/forum.html. All submissions—whether suggested topics, proposals for essays, or complete essays—should go to: The George Wright Society, P.O. Box 65, Hancock, MI 49930-0065 USA, or by email to