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THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CENTENNIAL ESSAY SERIES

On the Brink of Greatness: National Parks and the Next Century

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ALMOST A HUNDRED YEARS AGO, just before the creation of the National Park Service, the British ambassador to the United States, James Bryce, spoke to the American Civic Association on the subject of national parks and their importance to society. With great simplicity, he acknowledged the obligation to “carefully guard what we have got.” “We are the trustees for the future,” he charged. “We are not here for ourselves alone. All these gifts were not given to us to be used by one generation, or with the thought of one generation only before our minds. We are the heirs of those who have gone before, and charged with the duty we owe to those who come after...”¹ As this country begins to think about the centennial of the National Park Service, it is appropriate that we have a serious conversation about parks and their value to our society, and the role we want parks and the National Park Service to play in the future. What is our obligation, as the trustees of these magnificent places, to our children and their children? The upcoming centennial provides an opportunity to think creatively about the kind of National Park Service we want for the next century and envision systemic changes for its betterment and ours.

The one-hundredth birthday of the National Park Service should be cause for a national celebration. It should prompt us to imagine a future for the agency and the magnificent collection of parks and programs it manages based not on the vision of a hundred years ago, but on the reality of today. That realistic vision should embrace the complexity of managing parks within an ever-increasing array of congressional mandates, within ever-changing national cultural demographics, within evolving scientific and scholarly studies that continuously

refine our understanding of the world around us and our sense of who we are as a society. And most of all, that vision of the future should recognize the intricate interrelationships between the natural and human spheres and how human actions are having increasingly negative effects on our small ball of a planet.

The National Park System today is vastly different from the one envisioned and managed by Stephen T. Mather and Horace M. Albright ninety years ago. The complexity of issues confronted by park and pro-

gram managers today could not have been envisioned by the first generation of Park Service administrators. The agency that began in 1916 managing thirty-seven parks and monuments now cares for almost four hundred parks within nearly two dozen different categories. National Park Service administrators now manage parks and programs within a complex mix of congressional directives in a variety of areas including wilderness, clean air and water, protection of archeological resources, historic preservation, endangered species, wild and scenic rivers, and environmental protection.

Over the past nine decades, the National Park Service has evolved from an agency that managed a handful of natural parks and a small number of Southwestern archeological monuments into the nation's premier protector and preserver of places nationally and internationally significant for their natural and cultural resources. The Park Service administers eighty-four million acres in every state (except Delaware) and the United States territories of American Samoa, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. It now thinks in terms of ecological integrity and civic engagement and sustainable technologies and practices, terms and concepts completely unknown to Mather and Albright. Indeed, those first two directors of the agency would be surprised to learn that 60% of the three hundred and ninety-one units of the national park system were set aside by Congress and presidents to preserve archeological and historic properties. Undoubtedly they would also be astonished at the Park Service's management of conservation and preservation programs beyond park boundaries that nurture the nation's cultural and natural heritage. Programs such as Rivers and Trails, National Heritage Areas, the

National Register of Historic Places, National Natural and Historic Landmarks, the Historic American Buildings Survey, and Preservation Assistance encourage and support the preservation of natural and cultural resources in towns and cities throughout the country.

The creation of a national park is an expression of faith in the future.² As Lord Bryce remarked, it is a commitment made by one generation to future generations, for their children and grandchildren. The collection of national parks today is a reflection of who we have been—our towering successes, our failures, our aspirations. National parks tell the story of the American people. The National Park Service has come to the realization, over the past ninety years, that preservation of these special places is not the only goal of park creation. Rather, we preserve parks because they have stories to tell—stories of human triumph and folly, stories of environmental nurturing and degradation—and we have things to learn from those stories.³

In 2001, a report from the National Park System Advisory Board observed that national parks “should be not just recreational destinations, but springboards for personal journeys of intellectual and cultural enrichment.” The National Park Service, over the past several decades, has come to the realization that parks offer more than comfortable places to vacation. National parks possess the very democratic values upon which this country was built, environmental lessons with the potential to make our communities more livable, civic messages that will move us toward “that more perfect Union” imagined over two hundred years ago. Parks, the Advisory Board report reminds us, “offer citizens of all ages opportunities to strengthen their connections to

the environment and to renew their sense of wonder and appreciation for our democracy.” As we are increasingly forced to confront the fragility of our earth’s environment and the malleable nature of our evolving democracy, we should appreciate and nurture the capacity of parks to become models of healthy and sustainable ecosystems and to act as “classrooms” where this nation’s journey of liberty and justice become an essential part of our civic education.⁴

As we envision a future for the National Park Service, we must logically consider the problems that currently plague it—primarily those of inadequate budgets and increased politicization. While Congress is enamored with the idea of new parks, it has never felt obligated to support those parks with adequate and consistent funding. In 1953, the writer Bernard DeVoto, then a member of the National Park System Advisory Board, railed about the post-war under-funding of the national park system in an article in *Harper’s Magazine* titled “Let’s Close the National Parks.” Over fifty years ago, DeVoto wrote:

The crisis is now in sight. Homeopathic measures will no longer suffice; thirty cents here and a dollar-seventy-five there will no longer keep the national park system in operation. I estimate that an appropriation of two hundred and fifty million dollars, backed by another one to provide the enlarged staff of experts required to expend it properly in no more than five years, would restore the parks to what they were in 1940 and provide proper facilities and equipment to take care of the crowds and problems of 1953. After that we could take action on behalf of the expanding future and save

from destruction the most majestic scenery in the United States, and the most important field areas of archeology, history, and biological science.⁵

Fortunately for the national parks, President Dwight Eisenhower joined with NPS Director Conrad Wirth in 1956 to announce Mission 66, an eleven-year, one-billion-dollar program to improve physical facilities in parks. (While Mission 66 provided significant staff increases for interpretation, maintenance, and protection, its primary goal was the development and construction of park facilities.) Designed to prepare the parks for the fiftieth anniversary of the National Park Service in 1966, Mission 66 provided a badly needed infusion of funds to an agency that had suffered deep budget cuts during World War II. While the majority of Mission 66 funding was dedicated to capital development projects and not to building the capacity of the organization, the overall budget of the agency did increase, over the decade, by 150%.

After 1966, funding for the National Park Service never kept pace with the growing needs of the agency. During the thirty years following the end of Mission 66, approximately 150 parks were added to the system, including thirteen huge parks and preserves in Alaska which alone doubled the acreage administered by the National Park Service.⁶ The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act signed by President Jimmy Carter in 1980 added forty-seven million acres to a national park system that even then was unable to care properly for the resources entrusted to it. With the addition of these and other parks came heightened obligations to inventory the parks’ natural and cultural resources, create and organize collections, attend to preserva-

tion and restoration needs, and develop educational programs and media. While congressional appropriations increased, they did so gradually, and were constantly eroded by inflationary factors. Indeed, seventeen times since 1970, NPS appropriations failed to keep pace with inflation. During the remaining years, with few exceptions, the NPS budget stayed just ahead of inflation.

The chronic under-funding of the National Park Service has been well-documented by the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) and the NPS itself. A decade ago, the National Park Service prepared studies of its present abilities to manage the natural and cultural resources entrusted to it. The reports, titled *Natural Resource Management Assessment Program* (NR-MAP; 1995) and *Cultural Resource Management Assessment Program* (CR-MAP; 1997), determined that the Park Service employed only 25% of the staff needed to provide professional attention to natural resources and only 22% of the staff needed to care for its cultural resources!

More recently, the National Park Service, in partnership with NPCA and other organizations, has prepared “business plans” for a number of parks designed to analyze the financial history of individual parks and determine the level of funding necessary to manage its resources within “appropriate standards.” The results are not surprising. Among the almost one hundred parks that were studied, the budget shortfall is averaging 32%! Yellowstone’s is 35%, Gettysburg’s 35%, Everglades’s 32%, Valley Forge’s 36%, Acadia’s 53%, Fort Sumter’s 24%. Practically speaking, this means that the national parks have been operating on only two-thirds the funding required to preserve, research, and interpret

to the visiting public their collection of incomparable resources.

Finally, the NPS has been struggling for years to address the so-called “maintenance backlog,” the funding required to attend to the deferred maintenance of visitor centers and other administrative buildings, roads and trails, housing, water and wastewater systems, as well as archeological sites and monuments. In 2003, the Government Accounting Office (GAO; after July 2004 known as the Government Accountability Office) reported the deferred maintenance backlog at “over \$5 billion.” The NPCA currently estimates the backlog at between \$4.5 and \$9.7 billion. The National Park Service estimates its backlog at \$8 billion. By any measure, the \$2.4 billion in President Bush’s 2008 budget proposal, while generous when compared with recent NPS budgets, will not make much of a dent in this monumental shortfall. Moreover, if GAO’s 2003 estimate were correct and the National Park Service’s 2006 estimate were correct, the deferred maintenance backlog would be growing at a rate of approximately one billion dollars every year!

To complicate the management of this collection of very special places, the National Park Service for the past thirty-five years has been progressively influenced, not by scientific and scholarly recommendations, but by political directives. The degree to which politics increasingly influences National Park Service decisions was noted as early as the 1980s when Wallace Stegner observed trouble within the national parks. “Public pressures increase geometrically, appropriations arithmetically,” he astutely observed. “And as its problems increase,” he continued, “the Park Service has been increasingly politicized.”⁷ Consider, then,

that the first director of the National Park Service served under three presidents. From 1916 until 1972, a period of fifty-six years, seven different directors guided the activities of the agency through nine different presidential administrations. The turnover rate in recent years has increased exponentially. Between 1980 and today, a period of twenty-seven years, there have been seven directors for four presidential administrations! The rapid turnover in directors means that essential relationships between the NPS and Congress and interested support organizations, not to mention funding priorities, change with the administrations and that the focus of the agency shifts with political winds. These changes at the very top of the agency create a degree of instability in an organization that can only be successful in a future characterized by certainty and consistency.

The NPS director increasingly makes major decisions affecting park resources based on political considerations rather than the requirements of the ecosystems and cultural properties under his/her charge. The recent attempt to rewrite the Park Service's *Management Policies* to conform more closely to the current administration's interests in commercializing parks—an effort which received extraordinary and universally negative national news coverage—is only one egregious example. (Only a change in the position of the secretary of the interior, from Gale Norton to Dirk Kempthorne, saved the Park Service from a disastrous weakening of principles that have guided the agency for seventy years.) The appropriate number of snowmobiles allowed in Yellowstone is being determined less by scientific analysis, and more by political influences. In recent years, many essential career positions throughout

the National Park Service were deemed suitable for privatization. Biologists and geologists, archeologists and historians and others, whose collective experience and knowledge of park resources built over decades is critical to the “unimpaired” nature of parks, were slated to be replaced by private-sector contractors. (The extent to which politics has entered the day-to-day operation of the National Park Service was the subject of *National Geographic* in its October 2006 issue titled “Threatened Sanctuaries: The State of the U.S. Parks.”)

The problems facing the National Park Service as it begins to think about its one-hundredth birthday help us imagine reasonable solutions. Indeed, the Park Service has been envisioning a healthier and more professional future for itself for some time through a number of thoughtful reports. One outgrowth of the Park Service's celebration of its seventy-fifth anniversary was the production of *National Parks for the 21st Century: The Vail Agenda* (1992). Beginning with the statement that the Park Service was increasingly called upon to “play a broad role of preserving, protecting, and conveying to the public the meaning of those natural and cultural resources that contribute to the nation's values, character, and experience,” the report created six categories of objectives that would lead to excellence throughout the agency. Those six categories and their objectives—resource stewardship and protection, access and enjoyment, education and interpretation, proactive leadership, science and research, and professionalism—remain relevant and largely unrealized today. A decade later the National Park Service Advisory Board, under the direction of John Hope Franklin, produced *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century* (2001).

This report created a fresh and clear vision of the role that a well-funded and professionally managed agency might play in American society. It concludes by encouraging the Park Service to expand its horizons and think more expansively and creatively about its work as it faces the challenges of the next century.

As a people, our quality of life—our very health and well-being—depends in the most basic way on the protection of nature, the accessibility of open space and recreation opportunities, and the preservation of landmarks that illustrate our historic continuity. By caring for the parks and conveying the park ethic, we care for ourselves and act on behalf of the future. The larger purpose of this mission is to build a citizenry that is committed to conserving its heritage and its home on earth.

In 2005, the National Parks Conservation Association produced its own report (with recommendations) on the future of the National Park Service, titled *From Sea to Shining Sea*. Along with full funding of the NPS, *From Sea to Shining Sea* recommends strengthening the core functions of preservation, research, and education in order to meet the highest standards in “sound management, aggressive resource protection, and innovative public initiatives.” The existence of these reports allows one to envision a second century for the National Park Service based on a wide foundation of studies and projections.

There will be many proposals for marking the centennial milestone and the process will undoubtedly involve, over the next decade, modifications to all of them. Before any one plan is made final, however, this

country needs to have a very open and public conversation about its expectations and hopes for the future. That process began formally in March 2007 with the announcement by the current director of the National Park Service, Mary Bomar, and Secretary of the Interior Kempthorne of a nation-wide series of public “listening sessions.” Held around the country, these public gatherings have been designed to assist the National Park Service in planning for its future.

Anniversaries are a time for reflection and reassessment. The one-hundredth anniversary of an institution such as the National Park Service is an occasion for collective reflection on the part of the country in general, and the Park Service in particular.⁸ As the trustees of this collection of places that define us as a society and provide such potential for promoting an informed citizenry, what is our vision of the future? Given the myriad problems facing this troubled agency, now is the time for bold action. Now is the time to envision a healthy and vigorous National Park Service for the twenty-first century. To that end, the leadership of the Park Service should explore every aspect of the operation of its parks and programs and recommend steps to strengthen the agency so that it once more becomes the nationally and internationally recognized leader in natural and cultural resource preservation. It is hoped that the unfolding conversation over the next few months and years will challenge all of us to imagine a professionally managed and well-funded Park Service capable of attaining the highest standards in preservation, research, and education.

Centennial thoughts

As we begin thinking about the next century, the following constitute a few

thoughts on how the National Park Service might be fortified to prepare for both current and future challenges. Basic to the Park Service's future is, of course, funding. Over the next decade, Congress must attend to the dismal current budget of the agency, an agency which for decades has operated within a culture of poverty. Fundamental to the continuance of parks and their resources unimpaired is increased and consistent funding in the three principal management areas: protection and preservation, research, and education. Moreover, any projected budget for the national park system must address the huge maintenance backlog and provide for consistent future funding to ensure that the backlog is not only reduced, but that the Park Service has adequate funding to maintain its facilities and resources to the highest standards. Future budgets must also acknowledge that the preservation of these special places involves trained personnel in the several resource management fields. The resource assessments, (NR-MAP and CR-MAP) mentioned above, should be unpacked and updated and factored into future budget packages.

Research

Research is fundamental to the National Park Service's mission. Understanding the condition, evolution, and history of its resources is essential to resource management efforts, yet it was not until 1998 that the agency obtained specific authorization from Congress to establish a "scientific study" program.⁹ Because research is critical to park preservation decisions and to the development of thoughtful and thought-provoking educational programs, funding at the park, regional, and national levels should be strengthened significantly. To

ensure continued access to on-going research outside of the national park system, the ability to develop and maintain cooperative relationships with related organizations, universities, and scholarly institutions must be supported philosophically and financially. The Park Service must maintain a credible scholarly stature in all its disciplines. The failure of the Park Service, early in 2006, to renew its twenty-year cooperative agreement with the Society for American Archeology is shortsighted, and intellectually weakens the agency.

The intricate relationship between research and resource management is eloquently presented in the National Park System Advisory Board's *National Park Service Science in the 21st Century* (2004). Building on the Natural Resource Challenge, a multi-year effort by Congress to improve natural resource management in the parks with the infusion of sorely needed funds, this report evaluates the Challenge and provides recommendations for future directions. Its recommendations, crafted by a nationally recognized committee of scholars, provide a blueprint for strengthening science in the parks. It argues persuasively that "the National Park Service [should] raise to a new level its commitment to the fundamental purpose of preserving the parks unimpaired for all time." The centennial offers a timely opportunity to establish that new level of professionalism—and funding—throughout the national park system. To provide the same level of scholarly evaluation to the system's cultural resources, the Advisory Board should be asked to develop a parallel report with recommendations to guide the future of the humanities and cultural resource management within the Park Service.

Education

The National Park Service has recently completed two documents designed to strengthen its interpretation and education program. *Interpretation and Education Renaissance Action Plan* and *Interpretation and Education Program Business Plan* (both published in late 2006) readily admit that the Park Service “lacks the fundamental tools and resources to fulfill its educational responsibilities.” Funding and personnel lag far behind what they should be for an agency with education as a fundamental mission. Park films, publications, and exhibits are often thirty years old and remain in use long after scientists, scholars, and park managers have determined they contain either outdated or inaccurate or inappropriate information. The funds to keep exhibits and other interpretive media current have been dwindling for years. Planning for the centennial should include budgets sufficient to keep park interpretive media relatively current, and equip National Park Service interpreters and educators with the subject-matter knowledge and interpretive skills required for developing creative and challenging educational programs and media. It should emphasize the central function of education to the National Park Service mission, to erase any ambiguity in that obligation and prevent education from being perceived, as it was under the former secretary of the interior, as mission creep. A renewed vision for the future should also include authorization and funding (similar to that employed by the Department of Defense) for the National Park Service to send its employees—in all disciplines—back to institutions of higher learning to seek advanced degrees so the agency can manage its resources and programs with the very best of current science

and scholarship. Used extensively by military personnel, this authorization is essential if national parks are to be preserved and maintained “unimpaired” for future generations.

Funding

Having suggested that increased funding is essential for the National Park Service to meet its obligations to Congress and the American public, one must ask what the appropriate level of funding for the agency ought to be. The president’s current budget proposal calls for a dedicated increase over the next decade of \$1 billion in federal funding with another \$2 billion of possible funding through a matching arrangement involving private/public money. (Because of the conditional nature of the second part of this proposal, it cannot contribute to any reliable future funding projections.) If approved by successive Congresses, this federal commitment would raise the overall budget by 2016 to around \$3.5 billion. With the operating shortfall for park operations estimated at somewhere between \$600 and \$800 million and the deferred maintenance backlog estimated at somewhere between \$5 and \$8 billion, a total budget of \$3.5 billion remains substantially inadequate. Estimating budgets, of course, is no small task. One way to conceptualize a well-funded National Park Service, however, is to consider that the 1966 budget for the agency at the end of Mission 66 was just over two and half times the budget in 1956. Applying the same growth factor to the 2006 budget results in a 2016 budget of \$6 billion!¹⁰

With the tools at its disposal and with much spadework already done, the National Park Service should develop an optimal and annotated budget, dependent

on *consistent public funding*, as a centennial target. A budget of \$5–6 billion does not seem unreasonable given the requirements and rising costs of maintaining 20,000 buildings, almost 1,000 campgrounds, 1,600 wastewater systems, 1,300 water systems, 115,000,000 objects, 67,000 archeological sites, and 26,000 historic structures. Furthermore, the complex demands placed on parks by a panoply of congressional legislation and the role many envision the Park Service playing in American society all point to a 2016 budget far healthier than the one currently envisioned. Such a centennial budget would embrace full public funding of the Park Service and national park system. It would, appropriately, abandon the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program. This user fee is inherently inequitable. In a democracy such as ours, the educational and recreational benefits of the national park system should not be available only to those who can afford them. The riches of the national parks should be available to all without reference to economic status. The educational values found in national parks better us as a people and lead to a more informed citizenry. As the National Park Service has recently acknowledged, there is civic value in national parks, and if we as a society are to benefit from those values entrance fees to parks should be abolished.

The entrance fee program was designed to add critically needed funds to a financially strapped National Park Service without increasing the Park Service's budget, and it produces roughly \$150 million annually. Yet there are no similar entrance fees to the National Archives or the Smithsonian Institution. Our federal highway system could reap a harvest of "off-budget" funds by erecting toll booths on the interstate highway system; our public school

system could do the same by charging tuition to the nation's children. We do not do that because of the pride we have in both of those national institutions and the belief that both should be publicly funded and free to those who take advantage of them.¹¹ Why should our national parks be different? Furthermore, funding the basic requirements of the National Park Service constitutes such a small fraction of the operations of the federal government that if the current budget were doubled to \$5 billion, that figure would amount to less than 0.002% of the president's proposed 2008 budget! Proper funding of the National Park Service is not about money; it is about priorities. National parks are important to the ecological and civic health of this nation and should be funded with public monies.

Independence

Unless, however, something is done regarding the governing structure of the National Park Service and its susceptibility to political influence, the agency will never attain the excellence in preservation, research, and education expected of it for the next century. Balancing the goals of the National Park Service with the incompatible needs of other Department of the Interior agencies—such as the Office of Surface Mining, Mineral Management Service, and the Bureau of Reclamation—creates an environment in which the National Park Service is incapable of reaching its fullest potential.¹²

Perhaps it is time to have a conversation about where in the federal government the agency ought to be positioned. Perhaps it is time to consider an *independent* National Park Service, on the model of the National Archives and Records Administration.¹³ Over twenty years ago, the National

Archives was a part of the General Services Administration. It became apparent during the 1980s that the preservation of the national treasures managed by the National Archives—original copies of the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Gettysburg Address, to name only a few—within the General Services Administration was no longer in the best interests of those treasures or the American people. As an independent agency, the National Archives has been able to manage more effectively the records entrusted to its care. Independence for the National Park Service would enable it, like the National Archives, to focus more clearly on the mission of preserving its resources “unimpaired for future generations.”

Independence alone, of course, would not solve all of the ills facing the Park Service. Along with independence, a more stable organizational structure could be attained by appointing the director of the National Park Service for a period of fifteen years, on the model of the Government Accountability Office. This model has served GAO, and the American people, well by preventing politics from influencing that agency’s decision-making process. Following GAO’s lead in this regard would also break the detrimental cycle of the NPS director tendering his or her resignation on January 20th upon the inauguration of a new administration. The combination of creating an independent National Park Service and appointing the director to a fifteen-year term would go far in diminishing the political interference reported in the *National Geographic* issue mentioned above. Moreover, the qualifications for the position of director need to be reconsidered so that only someone who can demonstrate a history of experience and excellence in all

three of the Park Service’s core—and co-dependent—functions of preservation, research, and education is nominated and confirmed.

One goal for the celebration of this now internationally recognized and respected federal agency created ninety years ago would be the clarification of the National Park Service mission through a “general authorities act” similar in concept to the one passed by Congress in 1970. This “National Park Service Centennial Act” would restate the grand role set forth for the agency in 1916, and project a future based on present realities. Such a centennial present would include language on biodiversity and ecosystems and the humanities and the fundamental role they play, through parks and programs, in the environmental and civic health of the nation. It would create an independent National Park Service with a director appointed for a fifteen-year term, and include a re-statement of the Park Service’s core responsibilities.

A gift to the nation

What a gift this would be to the nation, to the citizens of this nation and to the future citizens of this nation! A professionally managed and adequately funded National Park Service and national park system—*publicly funded by the wealthiest nation in the world*—would affirm the highest ideals of those who championed the National Park Service cause one hundred years ago. From Yellowstone to Independence Hall, from the Everglades to Little Bighorn, the National Park Service administers the places that define this nation. The American people benefit from the preservation of these treasures whether they visit them or not. Countless citizens and communities profit from the conservation and

preservation and educational activities of the National Park Service through its outreach programs. The National Park Service should not only be the leading preservation agency in the country, it should set the “gold standard” for the preservation of natural and cultural resources throughout the country and the world. The centennial of the National Park Service presents the nation with an opportunity to attend properly to the needs of an agency that preserves reminders of who we are as a people and where we want to go as a community.

How we mark this milestone—how we address the profound problems facing the National Park Service and how we strengthen the agency that contributes so much to

our sense of place on earth and to our fundamental concepts of democracy and freedom and liberty—will reflect much about the American character. The centennial will either begin a renaissance for this most American of American institutions or it will pass, as so many centennials pass, with much fanfare and celebration signifying nothing more than the banal mediocrity which unfortunately we have come to accept from important national anniversaries. The path we choose will reflect the extent to which we cherish the remarkable cultural and environmental heritage values embodied within the national parks. The choice is ours.

Endnotes

1. James Bryce, “National Parks—The Need of the Future,” in *Universal and Historical Addresses: Delivered During a Residence in the United States as Ambassador of Great Britain* (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1968), 406. (First published in 1913.)
2. This is the first sentence of the National Park System Advisory Board’s *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society), 2001.
3. See Dwight T. Pitcaithley, “National Parks and Education: The First Twenty Years,” for a short history of the role education played in the early years of the National Park Service. On-line at www.cr.nps.gov/history/resedu/education.htm.
4. *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century*, 13–14.
5. Bernard DeVoto, “Let’s Close the National Parks,” *Harper’s Magazine* (October 1953), 49–52.
6. See Richard West Sellars, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1997.
7. Wallace Stegner, “The Best Idea We Ever Had,” in *Marking the Sparrow’s Fall: The Making of the American West*, ed. by Page Stegner (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1998), 135–142.
8. See the Spring 2007 issue of the NPS magazine *Common Ground* for Director Bomar’s vision for the National Park Service.
9. National Parks Omnibus Management Act of 1998 (Public Law 105-391). For an insightful analysis of the research authorization see David Harmon, “The New Research Mandate for America’s National Park System: Where it Came From and What it Could Mean,” *The George Wright Forum* (vol. 16, no. 1, 1999), 8–24.

10. Perhaps an even more analytical way of thinking about the centennial's budget is this: if one calculates the total budget for the decade between 1945 and 1955, one finds that the Mission 66 decade (the subsequent decade) represented a fourfold (411%, to be exact) increase from the previous decade. Thus, the 2006–2016 decade, if we were serious about properly funding the NPS for its centennial, might represent a 411% increase over the total for the previous decade of 1995 to 2005. In this case, the annual budget for the National Park Service from 2006 to 2016 should total \$8 billion per year! (Thanks to Denis Galvin for helping me think through these numbers.)
11. Indeed, there seems to be a correlation between the rising price of park entrance fees and declining park visitation. Visitation to Yosemite National Park declined starting in 1997 after a steep price increase went into effect. Visitation during the decade prior to 1997 rose 41%. See “National Park Entry Fees Heading for Steep Hike: Tourism Officials and Western States Fight Proposal for Ongoing Increases.” *San Jose* (California) *Mercury-News*, May 4, 2007. Between 1994 and 2001 nationwide, visitation to one hundred fee-demo parks declined by almost 2% while visitation to all other fee and non-fee parks increased over 20%. (Data gathering procedures changed in 2002, so current data does not provide reliable indicators for comparison.) See Department of the Interior, *Recreational Fee Demonstration Program: Progress Report to Congress, Fiscal Year 2001*.
12. Even with the best of intentions, interior secretaries can act counter to the best interests of the National Park Service. During the 1990s, Secretary Bruce Babbitt consolidated all of the Department of the Interior scientists into a new organization, which is now within the U.S. Geological Survey and titled the Biological Resources Discipline. Removing critical natural resource scientists from the Park Service may have made the Department's science program more efficient, but it was devastating to the long-term scientific programs in the national parks.
13. Unlike the Smithsonian Institution, another well-established independent federal agency, the National Archives and Records Administration is a completely publicly funded organization that reports directly to the president of the United States and does not employ a governing board of regents.

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Join the Centennial conversation!

Do you have a comment on the ideas presented in this essay? Ideas of your own to share? Whether it be criticism, praise, or something in between, we want to hear your thoughts on the National Park Service, its centennial, and the future of America's national park system. Write us at nps2016@georgewright.org and we'll post your comments on our Centennial webpage (www.georgewright.org/nps2016.html) and include a selection in the next issue of *The George Wright Forum*.