

Diary for a Second Century: A Journey across America's National Park System in Search of its Future

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Solstice Canyon, 2008

IT IS LATE AUGUST IN SOLSTICE CANYON in Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area in southern California. The streamside oaks provide some welcome shade. This is the first meeting of the National Parks Second Century Commission, and the commissioners are spending this warm afternoon seeing some things they never expected to encounter in a national park. Following a brief amphitheater orientation by Henry Ortiz, science coordinator for the Los Angeles Unified School District, we make our way to the water's edge where three dozen or so young "Eco-helpers," recruited from inner-city East Los Angeles, are carefully planting trees and shrubs. Most of these diverse kids are from single-parent homes, and today is family day for the Eco-helpers. Alongside their parent and a sibling or two, shovels in hand, they are hard at work. National Park Service (NPS) biologists share encouragement, advice, and a strong shoulder when needed. This is clearly not the stereotypical family visit to a national park. The pride and stewardship associated with this program suggest not only positive outcomes for all participants but also a deeper level of public engagement with the park itself.

The mandate of the National Parks Second Century Commission, which is funded through a grant to the National Parks Conservation Association, is to produce a report with a vision for the future of the national park system and NPS, and shape an action agenda for the Administration and Congress. The five commission meetings are scheduled for Santa Monica, Lowell, Yellowstone, Gettysburg, and Great Smoky Mountains, and will highlight the challenges and opportunities specific to these parks and common to parks across the system. These visits are to encourage serious reflection about innovation and recent lessons learned, and provide a setting for community partners to discuss the values and meaning of

parks today. The report is expected to be completed by fall of 2009 and coincide with the broadcast of the Ken Burns PBS documentary “The National Parks: America’s Best Idea.”

The commission is co-chaired by former US Senators Bennett Johnston and Howard Baker, and staffed by retired NPS Chief of Policy Loran Fraser. Jon Jarvis, Pacific West regional director [now nominated to be the next NPS director], is the point of contact for the National Park Service. I’ve been asked to work with Jon capturing lessons learned from the commission’s park visits and the many conversations with national park and program staff, topical experts, and park constituencies. At Santa Monica I am also teamed up with retired NPS Chief Historian Dwight Pitcaithley to make a presentation entitled “History of the National Park Idea: Points of Change.” The idea behind our presentation is that there have been times when NPS has embraced innovation and progress despite periods of retreat and retrenchment. And that it is useful to examine lessons learned from these experiences as the commission begins to think about what might be required to re-position NPS to be successful over its next 100 years.

Somewhere along our route through Santa Monica we stop on a ridge top, part of a slender corridor of open land recently traversed by a radio-collared cougar. The cougar has threaded its way past some nearby subdivisions to reach another one of the rugged ridges that envelop this vast landscape. Denis Galvin, a commissioner and former deputy NPS director, reminds me that it was in 1979 that he and I drove these mountain roads together when I was assigned, as a very young landscape architect, to organize a planning team for the newly minted Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area. The ink on the enabling legislation was barely dry, and it took an entire day’s drive for us to traverse this archipelago of future parkland, all the while thinking that Santa Monica was clearly going to present NPS with one of its most complex and difficult challenges to date.

But now it is thirty years later, and Deny and I are listening to Superintendent Woody Smeck talk about managing beyond park boundaries and the “urban/wildland interface environment.” Woody is explaining to us how one the most densely populated places in the United States can support a viable population of mountain lions. He also describes the critical role played by his partnerships—a seamless network of private, local, state, and national parks programmatically and physically linked to communities throughout metropolitan Los Angeles. Many members of these communities, particularly those who have been traditionally underserved by park agencies, are not only using these parks but are gradually becoming their most committed stewards and advocates.

When people ask why the Second Century Commission chose Santa Monica as the venue for its first meeting, the answer now seems obvious. If a national park can make such a transformative and meaningful contribution in this most challenging of environments—with an elaborate mosaic of land uses and agency jurisdictions, urban and suburban pressures, and the needs of so many diverse communities—perhaps there is reason to believe that national parks will not only survive but thrive in the dynamic terrain of their second century.

Wannalancit Mill, 2008

A brisk October breeze blows through the open sides of the trolley as we complete our urban

journey across the city of Lowell to the oversized wooden doors of Wannalancit Mill. The red brick mill—now part University of Massachusetts conference center, part NPS museum—functions like much of Lowell National Historical Park: as a great civic collaboration. The Second Century Commission has come to Lowell National Historical Park and nearby Essex National Heritage Area for its second meeting—with a clear intent to look more closely at the broad universe of partnerships. We gather in the Wannalancit Mill to hear Lowell Superintendent Michael Creasey, and partners from University of Massachusetts– Lowell and Middlesex Community College, discuss their deep long-term relationship, a relationship that is not only changing the city but also the way national parks are perceived. The establishment of the park in the 1970s, they explain, was a crucial step not only in the environmental, social, and economic renaissance of Lowell, but also in the transformation of Lowell into what they call an “educative city” with an ambitious agenda of curriculum-based civic learning and community service projects.

Each partner in this collaboration brings something different to the table, and these relationships are based on years of mutual effort and personal trust. Creasey describes the park as a “hub” in a much larger network of community and regional partners. He defines his success by how effective the NPS is in enabling the success of key partners. But we are also reminded that partnerships, even those that appear most successful, are only as strong and durable as the capacity of the partners to work through inevitable leadership and organizational transitions. The issue of leadership capacity is very much on the commission’s mind in relation to the future of the National Park Service.

Back in the early 1990s, I spent a year at Lowell National Historical Park as acting superintendent, and I still have friends among the staff there. But I quickly sense that the park is in some ways fundamentally different now, and the shift becomes clearer that evening when the commission is entertained by the Angkor Dance Troupe. Lowell has the second-largest Southeast Asian population in America and the Angkor Dance Troupe, an intergenerational group based at the park’s Patrick Mogan Cultural Center, is performing in traditional Cambodian dress. The troupe’s director is Duey Kol, a capable and effervescent young woman who also happens to be, in her “day job,” a national park ranger. The NPS in Lowell has taken its relationship with the Cambodian-American community, as well as other underserved populations, to a deeper level. The agency is accomplishing this by engaging young people, first with programs and then with jobs. Former NPS Director Roger Kennedy once said, “Resource protection only has staying power if it is also education. . . . Resource protection has to walk out of the park in the heart of the visitor.” The values of the park are enhanced when they are also perceived as a part of a larger set of cultural and community values that people care about. Park constituencies are created and strengthened not only from visits and recreational experiences, but also through service, cooperation, and community reciprocity.

Mammoth Hot Springs Hotel, 2009

It is January and deep winter in Yellowstone National Park. The function room in the Mammoth Hot Springs Hotel is packed for the third meeting of the Second Century Commission.

It is warm inside but outside the temperature is ten below and it is snowing. For those of us who work in smaller national parks, Yellowstone seems like a country unto itself. Stealing a glance out the hotel's window is a quick reminder of the scale of this landscape. Our venue is particularly fitting because this commission meeting is largely focused on the issue of landscape-scale conservation.

The relative isolation of many national parks in the 19th and 20th centuries, a characteristic of their original rural setting, is over. An invited panel of scientists, academics, and resource managers reminds the commission that even the largest national parks, such as Yellowstone, cannot adequately protect and manage wildlife that cross boundaries with regularity. National parks, large and small, have responsibility for only a part of much larger ecosystems, landscapes, and seascapes.

The panel describes how landscape fragmentation and habitat encroachment are accelerating throughout the West, but in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem the statistics are particularly alarming. From 1990 to 2007, there was a 62% population increase and a corresponding 350% increase in developed land. Many large tracts of private open land, farmed and ranched for generations, are being broken up into rural subdivisions and “ranchettes.” The impact of these trends on biodiversity is all too clear: in recent years, parks in the region have lost up to 40% of their wildlife.

While consensus is relatively easy to reach on defining the challenges, agreeing on the right approach to landscape-scale conservation is more elusive. The panel stresses the importance of using sound science and research in planning and policy development. Several panelists urge the commission to recommend stronger federal interagency coordination and more management consistency—particularly in a region such as the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem where national parks are part of a mosaic of federal lands. Others make the case that given the vastness of these larger landscapes surrounding parks and preserves, conservation has to become a shared objective for stakeholders throughout the region. They encourage the commission to strengthen the capacity of NPS and partners to work cooperatively with local land trusts, private landowners, and local governments. A former executive of The Nature Conservancy, Stephanie Meeks, summed it up this way: “We have learned that we cannot do conservation around these communities or for them; conservation will be successful only when considered and undertaken with them.”

Not all of the commission's time at Yellowstone is spent indoors. We have a guided field trip out to Norris Geyser Basin and the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone in a couple of snow coaches that the park owns and operates. When we enter the Norris overlook, one of our coaches throws a track. We file out of the disabled vehicle and a park interpreter gamely tries to redirect attention from our broken transportation to the magnificent geyser field before us. It's a long way back to Mammoth and we keep glancing over our shoulders at our NPS drivers, who are examining the damage. As it turns out, our drivers not only operate these complex machines but also know how to repair them, even in the field. So with some ingenuity, they do just that—all the while we are being treated to an extended talk on Yellowstone geology. As we gratefully climb back on board the repaired coach, I am reminded how much we depend on experienced, professional staff in the national parks who know a lot—about a lot of things. On the return trip I sit next to our driver and learn that he is not only a

snow coach driver and mechanic, but also a plow and backhoe operator, backcountry carpenter, and forest fire fighter. Not a job I would outsource.

Little Round Top, 2009

The fourth meeting of the Second Century Commission takes us to the rolling Pennsylvania countryside of Gettysburg National Military Park. We follow Commissioner James McPherson, Princeton professor and pre-eminent Civil War scholar, to the summit of Little Round Top. On this early spring day in March, we look over hallowed ground as far as the eye can see. Jim has given this tour countless times but his great passion for this place and its story has each of us transfixed.

The day before, the commissioners were asked to reflect on their experiences with the national parks. One commissioner referred to the parks as “the true heart of the nation” while another said that when she is in a park she feels a “profound sense of belonging.” One commissioner said that parks represent “an uncommon commitment to a greater public good,” and the “immersion in something fundamentally important to being a human being.” Several described a “huge sense of relief” when they finally enter a park after passing through a gauntlet of adjacent development. Another commissioner recounted her desire to yell out to fellow park users, “Do you know how many people it takes to preserve this? Pay attention—this doesn’t come free—it takes a lot to preserve this place.” The commissioners all seemed to agree that as the nation’s portfolio of parks and allied programs has expanded in size, diversity, and complexity, the imprint of the national park system on the public life of the nation has been expanded as well. The national park system has become a much larger civic endeavor than envisioned by its 1916 founders.

This change is evident in the new Gettysburg visitor center, a partnership project of the national park and the private Gettysburg Foundation. For the first time the stories of post-war reconciliation and battlefield reunions are told in the larger context of failed reconstruction, segregation, and African-American disenfranchisement in the years following the end of the Civil War. Visitor center exhibits, together with NPS educational programming, represent a seismic shift in the way the agency interprets the war. What we see at Gettysburg is the culmination of a concerted systemwide initiative, begun in 1997, when Civil War park superintendents decided to embrace the very best current scholarship and introduce the causes and consequences of the war into their interpretative programs. In a larger sense, what we are seeing at work at Gettysburg is an intentional effort to help people find broader context and meaning in the world around them. In the era of climate change, the civic engagement lessons of Gettysburg may also help prepare the national park system as a whole to advance public understanding and dialogue on the many critical issues we will face and choices that must be made.

Clingmans Dome, 2009

The fifth and final commission gathering has taken us to Great Smoky Mountains National Park. It is early summer. Water seems to be flowing everywhere on the Tennessee side of the

park and the mountains are drenched in layered shades of green. So it is particularly startling, pulling off the winding road to Clingmans Dome, to see the panoramic vista of forested mountains so thoroughly pockmarked with dead hemlocks. These “redwoods of the east” have succumbed to an adelgid infestation that has been rolling east and north, leaving in its wake dying hemlocks in forests from Tennessee to Maine. As winter temperatures continue to moderate with climate change, the reach of this ecological tragedy inexorably advances.

By the side of road the commissioners are introduced to a small “integrated pest management team,” a quiet, capable crew of young men and women who remain the last line of defense for the remaining hemlocks here. Armed with insecticidal oil sprays and predator beetles, they are making their stand along roadsides accessible to their vehicles and specialized equipment. In some ways, this battle may only be prelude to new assaults, yet unforeseen, abetted by the convergence of globalized disease and environmental stress—the harbinger of a climate reckoning that is first being played out in our national parks.

In his essay inaugurating this National Park Service Centennial Series, Dwight Pitcaithley wrote that “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.” The National Park Service can fulfill a distinct and urgent national purpose by offering venues for public information and dialogue, demonstrating ecological restoration and resiliency, and providing opportunities for useful experimentation and experience with adaptation and sustainable practices. In a subsequent essay, Pitcaithley further suggests that to the degree national parks, along with their friends and partners, can play this role, they can encourage “increased environmental stewardship in backyards and city parks and public places where we live, not just visit.”

FROM THE VANTAGE OF CLINGMANS DOME I’ve begun to reflect on a few of my own “lessons learned” from this journey:

- National parks must serve all Americans. We have seen in national parks, such as Santa Monica and Lowell, a vigorous commitment to inclusion, engaging diverse communities and demographic groups who have not been traditional park users and stakeholders. These efforts can ultimately make our parks increasingly more accessible, welcoming, and relevant. Film-maker Ken Burns described national parks to the commissioners as a “regenerative force” in the 21st century. The author Barry Lopez has written of national parks in the context of helping people live “decent and dignified lives.”
- People’s connections with their national parks are changing in fundamental ways. Traditional patterns of use, from episodic school field trips to annual family vacations, are being augmented by a deeper level of sustained engagement. We see more youth service-learning programs like that of the Eco-Helpers whom we saw at Santa Monica, park and school collaborations like the All-Taxa Biodiversity Inventories at Great Smoky Mountains and the Civic Collaborative at Lowell, public-private alliances like the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, friends groups, and a growing universe of community and philanthropic partnerships like the Gettysburg Foundation.

- This journey has reinvigorated my appreciation for what it means to be part of a system. People suggest that NPS often behaves more like a loose confederation. We have seen, however, what can be achieved when the National Park Service and its partners think and act like a system. The coordinated efforts of Civil War park superintendents to rethink their park interpretative programs, and the nationwide establishment of ecological inventory and monitoring networks, are notable examples. There is great power in sharing ideas, innovations, and experiences. Too often, unfortunately, exchange and learning are viewed as expendable and are the first things to be cut back, thus forgoing a system's greatest asset. In a larger global context, this has also been true for NPS investments in international cooperation, which have waned in recent years, when multilateral sharing of ideas, innovations, and experiences has never been more urgent.
- Horace Albright, the legendary NPS director, when he was nearing retirement, cautioned his staff: "Do not let the Service become just another government bureau." Today, the effects of growing centralized control, standardization, and privatization are threatening to bring about precisely what Albright warned against. It would be ironic if, in the name of efficiency, competition, and risk avoidance, we undermine the very relationships with long-term partners and cooperators so vital to the success of each of the parks the commission visited.

As the National Parks Second Century Commission prepares its recommendations to the American people, we appear to be on the cusp of yet another pivotal "point of change" for our national park system. The "national park idea" will always be reinterpreted and reinvigorated for the times we live in, as it should be. Over the years, the concept has grown larger than the national park system itself. Commissioner Milton Chen, early in this journey, made the observation that "national parks build human capital." My own hope is that our national park system will continue to appeal to our best instincts: love for the American landscape, respect for nature and the lessons of history, and the possibility that, through acts of intentional conservation and stewardship, we might raise the bar on our responsibilities to each other and to the world around us.

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