THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CENTENNIAL

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Whose America? Whose Idea? Making "America's Best Idea" Reflect New American Realities

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[Ed. note: With this installment we open a conversation in the National Park Service Centennial Essay series on the topic of relevancy: Are American's national parks meaningful to the full diversity of today's public, and are they likely to remain that way to the America of 2050 or 2100? This is the first of several essays that we anticipate will treat these questions, either directly (as John J. Reynolds does here) or indirectly.]

As the 100th anniversary of the creation of the National Park Service approaches in 2016, there is an increasing amount of thought and discussion around the issue of "relevancy" of the national parks (individually, as a national park system, and as a continually evolving idea) in the 21st century and beyond.

The discussion is both warranted and timely. Warranted because we are a dramatically different nation than we were in 1916. Timely because, likewise, the assumptions the founders of NPS made back then—assumptions about who constituted "the public" the parks were meant for, and about what expectations this particular subset of Americans had for "their" parks—may not be valid in the future, or even now. I, for one, deeply believe that the social and demographic conditions of today are different from those which the founders perceived, and will continue to become even further removed from those of the past. This presents what is, potentially, a grave problem, for the assumptions of the value of the national parks to the public and the need for the continued existence of the parks themselves must always be in alignment.

The most recent issue of *The George Wright Forum* (volume 27, number 1) clearly illustrates the point. The Centennial Essay by Bill Tweed, which calls into question the viability of maintaining natural park resources in an "unimpaired" state, is a provocative introduction to one major facet of our changed nation. Lee Whittlesey's article ending the issue—describ-

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ing how the Park Service for years clung to an appealing, but discredited, story about the origins of Yellowstone—illustrates how difficult it is for a committed agency with a strong internal culture to see the forest for the trees, especially when it comes to changing that culture and its basic understandings of itself.

If we are in a starkly different demographic time than 1916, and if NPS is as unquestionably wedded to the assumptions of its past as my nearly 40 years with the parks leads me to believe is the general case (regardless of the obvious commitment to the future by the current director, Jon Jarvis, and some other influential leaders in the agency), then it is time to be not only willing to open our eyes and minds, but to look at the future as boldly and with as much prescience as Stephen Mather and Horace Albright did 100 years ago. They shrewdly analyzed the political landscape to identify core American constituencies whose values could easily lead them to believe in the national parks or who could profit from people wanting to experience these icons of Americanism. They targeted the media and meetings where these people got their information and conversed with one another. Big city newspapers and broadly read and respected magazines were the tools of the time for "mass promotion" to the politically influential and upwardly mobile classes, and they exploited them unabashedly. And, as you think about all this, remember, guaranteed voting and civil rights for non-white and female citizens were still in the future in 1916. A lot has changed since then in who "we the people" are.

It is necessary for all of us to focus on a truism about our way of government. Ours is a government of, by, and for the people. I believe this aphorism to be far truer, especially over the long run, than most of us would generally think. Few things have stood the test of time a century's passage represents as well as the national parks and the national park idea, yet projecting such success into the future is precarious at best.

Stated more starkly, the truth is that in a representative democracy there are no permanent entitlements. The national parks are not "entitled" to exist forever under the law; still less are they "entitled" to be relevant. They are only a part of the fabric of the nation because the collectively expressed experience of "we the people" makes them so, a "social compact" writ in law, if you will. Further, it only makes them so for so long as the collective will says it should be that way.

To go a step further, if one looks at how landmark pieces of legislation change over time, it is occasionally the case that those acts are weakened, and rarely that they are substantially strengthened. It is an anomaly, albeit a happy one for us, that the only changes to the Organic Act to date have been to strengthen it. Though it is comforting to think that this is precedent for the future, it is not. Witness the recent change in the firearms situation in the parks if you are skeptical of my warning.

One result of the long, successful run of the Organic Act is that it creates the illusion that the parks are a permanent entitlement to the American people that does not have to be continuously rejustified, continuously strengthened, continuously reaffirmed by the people as they exist today as opposed to how they once existed, or were thought to exist.

The people, in the long run, rule. Legislation changes, and seldom becomes more altruistic as time goes on. The people rule by influencing, directly or indirectly, both the Executive Branch and Congress.

To put a fine point on how that may affect the national parks and the Park Service itself in the future, the 1916 Organic Act is neither immutable nor assuredly permanent, much as we would like to believe otherwise. The degree to which it is either is, in fact, up to the people and what they want the Executive Branch and Congress to do.

Bill Tweed gets it, and has bravely and intelligently come forth to posit that the Organic Act, especially relative to the original big natural national parks, may need to be modified—and perhaps not just a little, but a lot. What happens if those parks' original resources become so altered that the rationale for creating them disappears or changes materially, and the people, the public, no longer supports these areas as the national parks they once were?

If that thought is frightening or maddening to you who read this essay, I have already begun to do my job of getting you to think about "relevancy."

The obvious next question for NPS, and those who love the parks and the national park idea everywhere, is then this: "How do we influence the people?" And the next question has to be, "Who are the people we need to influence to make the parks an indispensable cornerstone of our commonly shared public life for the future?"

Before we jump to what may seem to be an obvious conclusion, let's take time to examine our history a bit from the point of view of "Why has the national park movement been so strong for so long?"

Back in the early 1900s the movement to create NPS had a twofold basis. One was the one obvious to all of us: the need to have consistent, professional, unifying management.

The second?

The second is reflected in a part of the Organic Act seldom quoted and even more seldom acted upon: the "shall promote" language, which actually precedes the "and regulate" phrase. One of the primary reasons for the act was the realization of those working to create it that in this country it is "the people" who decide what happens, and if the national park idea was to flourish and survive "the people" had to want it that way. Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and the others who were working to create NPS understood that our Constitution is rooted in "politics"—the expression of the people—and as a result "shall promote" became central to the concept, to the acceptance and perpetuation of the national park idea. It was not an accidental phrase.

Mather and Albright not only understood the need and the context, they acted upon it. One of the very first things they did was to give top priority to the "shall promote" language and the need to obtain the support of the people. In other words, they understood the essentially political nature of their enterprise. So much so that Mather spent his own money to hire Robert Sterling Yard to promote the parks, highlight their direct benefits to the American people, and create the political strength to ensure their survival.

All three men also knew that understanding which people to convince was key to the future of the national park idea and system. As a result they targeted magazines and newspapers that reached potential visitors: meaning, at that point, relatively well-to-do people who held the power in the country, either directly or through association. Of course, in the early 1900s these people were all white, as was the great majority of the rest of the freely voting population. They also keyed in on the people who would benefit the most from visitors to the parks, such as the railroads, chambers of commerce, and hoteliers—what is now referred

to as the "hospitality industry"—because getting to the parks and hospitality were key to enjoyment, and enjoyment was key to the power to retain and grow the national park idea and system. It was certainly not lost on Mather, Albright, and Yard that these same people greatly influenced, both directly and indirectly, how "the people's" will would be interpreted in the Executive Branch and in Congress, creating increasing impetus for more money, more parks, and better authorities to carry out the "conserve and enjoy" missions of the Organic Act.

And so a pattern was cemented in place to sustain the parks, and grow their influence in the American mind.

Mather, as director, carried the concept one terrifically important step further. He understood that what we now call "broadening the base" could further solidify "the people's" will. Horace Albright shared this conviction, and after he succeeded Mather as director he convinced President Franklin D. Roosevelt to add landed history in the form of battlefields and memorials to the purview of the national park system, bringing their "people" with them under the same net. It was a brilliant move, automatically bringing a Western idea East in a big way, and therefore making it national.

This expansion of the NPS audience, though it included more people, still added primarily white ones. Other New Deal initiatives, such as the CCC, did provide opportunities for people of color (as well as lower-class whites) to experience the parks, but these initiatives did little over the long term to change the basic racial or ethnic composition of park tourism. In fact, recent scholarship has begun to document pervasive, overt discrimination against middle-class black tourists—including visitors to national parks in the South—from the 1920s on (Sorin 2009; Young 2009). And, as Terence Young has documented, NPS leadership only agreed to desegregate campgrounds in the late 1930s and early 1940s after being pressured by officials in the Department of the Interior (Young 2009).

Race and ethnicity were certainly not the only dimensions of the issue of access to national parks; class distinctions played a significant role too. But it is important to acknowledge a fundamental point: while some racism directed at national park visitors was intentional and overt, the very foundation of the parks was laid on a network of unexamined assumptions about which group of citizens the parks were "for." In short, the early development of America's national parks is a classic example of generally unacknowledged "white privilege" in action. In recent years, both scholars and activists have begun to recognize and understand how pervasively white Americans have been blind to the advantages their skin color has given them. It is without doubt that this pernicious phenomenon has played a role in the development of "America's best idea." In any event, the result was that it did solidify who the park constituency was in the minds of both the people themselves, and in some ways just as importantly, in the minds of the people responsible for carrying out the national park idea and its future: the employees of the National Park Service.

The self-reinforcing pattern continued, though the demographics of the country, especially the economic demographics, broadened the base of actual visitors. The broadening, however, was still virtually all white. Following World War II, although park facilities were both inadequate and in bad shape, newly inquisitive and economically freed people poured in. Director Conrad Wirth sold President Eisenhower on Mission 66, a national parks par-

allel to the interstate highway system and the blossoming of suburbs. His vision was another brilliant response to the needs of "the people," many of whom "had seen Paree" in the war and were no longer content to stay at home and not see, enjoy, and be inspired by their own great land. Doing so created a fervor of pride in the unique assets of our nation that had not been a part of the national psyche before. America was indeed America the Beautiful, and if you can go to Europe to war, you sure as hell can go to Wyoming or Maine or Utah to see and enjoy wonders that no other people anywhere have as their very own.

The idea and representativeness of the base were molded in other ways as well. The NPS park demonstration programs and support for state parks and other kinds of federal recreation areas provided more places for people and communities to "get" the idea of finding their own meaning and cultural associations in national park experiences. Later, the massive review of outdoor recreation through the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission in the early 1960s resulted in new kinds of national park units in new locales, not touched by NPS before: lakeshores and seashores.

As a result, the composition of the base of people enjoying America's best places grew, at least in number and a broadened economic demographic. But not in other ways: visitors to the parks were still virtually all white Americans, both in terms of the targeted constituency and assumed beneficiaries of management action.

The national parks have lived off the Mather–Albright–Yard constituency model and its legacy for decades. It is a legacy of inspiration, altruistic yet pragmatic political work, pride in our nation, and political and constitutional awareness. However, it is a construct, while good for its times, that is far too narrow for the 21st century, for who "we the people" are has changed, and change continues at an accelerating pace.

George Hartzog, Jr., a product of his times and the changing times of the nation as a whole, was the first and so far the most activist NPS director to discern what was happening to the composition of "we the people." He "got" what rapid urbanization, the culmination of the Civil Rights movement and the freeing of black voters in particular, the emergence of "minority" middle and upper classes, and the effects of burgeoning demographic shifts meant politically. Nothing more exemplifies his prescience in this regard than do his successes in leading the creation of Gateway and Golden Gate national recreation areas. The conviction that the national park idea also belongs to those with less economic means, those who see the nation differently than does suburban America (yet care just as much about it), was Director Hartzog's, and is the well-spring of the future in terms of continued relevancy.

Later, following some years after Hartzog's urban park and Summer in the Parks initiatives aimed at urban constituencies, Director William Penn Mott bravely jumped into waters not swum before: in no uncertain terms he established that it was the responsibility of the Park Service to interpret the role of slavery and its effects on the nation in appropriate parks. In an article in the National Park Service newsletter *Courier* he wrote, "I also believe the National Park Service has the responsibility to interpret and tell the whole story of slavery and its influences on the economic growth and cultural heritage of this country. We must not be afraid to discuss this subject, no matter how painful, or we may find that we cannot learn from this chapter in our history" (cited in Butler 1999, 196–197). I do not know if he explicitly justified that view in terms of "broadening the base," though I am quite sure he under-

stood the relationship given his shrewdness and his California experience. In any case, it was both inspired and inspiring and began to free the Park Service and its people to think more broadly about that and other issues of the full range of cultures that make up America. Subsequently, the questions of unfairness and lack of balanced inclusion in all kinds of situations, such as at Little Bighorn, began to surface and be treated more broadly. The variety of kinds of themes that are interpreted in parks and the inclusion of parks relating to a broadened constituency began to change, a phenomenon that is still evolving. The inclusion of "civil rights" parks as part of the system and Thomas H. Guthrie's new, thoughtful article on El Morro (Guthrie 2010), illustrate the welcome trend.

Nonetheless, though Hartzog's and Mott's understanding and forthrightness were clear, the idea did not "take" very deeply within the full span of the Park Service's activities and its thought processes beyond interpretation. It especially did not take in the original natural parks, the driving icons of the Park Service as a whole. To this day, national parks like Santa Monica Mountains, Golden Gate, Gateway, Lowell, Martin Luther King, or Manzanar are considered by much of the Park Service as "outliers" to the pureness of the national park idea. As such, the opportunity inherent in a broader, more inclusive view is still only a birthing movement.

What has happened to "we the people" since 1916? The largely white middle class has expanded hugely—and Wirth and Hartzog responded brilliantly. The demographic shift toward a "minority majority" accelerated, and continues to do so. Some directors have seen it coming, as have some employees, and notable achievements have occurred, but not in the agency's basic orientation of whom the parks shall be promoted to, nor, largely, in whom they serve. Whole sections of the country have become racially and ethnically varied, and population equality is a reality in many places. Virtually everywhere else demographic heterogeneity is obvious, or will be very soon. "We the people" has changed, and continues to do so at an accelerating pace.

Yet the agency core culture, the culture of the people closest to the ground, has often changed only in theory and not in action, if at all. Virtually all of the change that has occurred has been locally, at individual parks. Nationally effective strategic action that can be implemented throughout the system to fulfill the "to promote" language of the Organic Act does not yet exist in any overarching manner.

The Park Service's concept of relevancy, the definition of who the parks exist for, must adapt if the vitality and strength of the national park idea, and the parks themselves, are to survive as an iconic part of the American psyche. The needed adaptations are not something NPS can achieve on its own, without consultation, for it is from the people that viability and strength emanate, not from NPS itself. NPS is a steward on behalf of the rest of the people—all of the people. No other fact is so important to operate from if the value of the national parks is to survive as a vital part of our national culture. However—again with notable local exceptions—NPS generally continues to operate as though it, and not "the people," defines the agency's relevancy. This is a dangerous condition in a representative democracy whose population base is rapidly changing from what it was when Albright, Mather, and Yard so effectively promoted the parks and the national park idea.

So what makes relevancy?

As I see it relevancy has two parts, both essential. The first is political; the second, personal. The strength and viability of the former grows directly from the latter. In our nation, all politics are personal.

Political relevancy is the degree to which the benefits of national parks (meaning all units of the national park system) and the national park idea (as evidenced by national heritage areas, National Register properties, national natural and historic landmarks, national rivers and trails, and community assistance programs) are reflected by the actions of the political leadership of the Executive Branch (primarily in the Office of the President, Office of Management and Budget, and Department of the Interior, but in a broader reach could include, for instance, the departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, Veterans' Affairs, Education, and perhaps others) and by Congress through individual representatives and senators and the committees which fund and provide authorities for the parks.

So long as all of the above, and in particular Congress, believe in the parks in sufficient numbers and with sufficient financial commitment, the parks and the national park idea are not only safe, but will remain a vital part of the American psyche. However, as the belief and commitment of these people waver, so too does the idea and the day-to-day reality of the parks as worthy of protection, money, and authority. This is because the Executive Branch and Congress are the closest thing we have to a mirror of the collective will of the American public. As the constituents of these politicians exhibit strength and commitment, or waver, so do the politicians themselves. Such is the reality of the true genius of our Constitution, a unique construct that to this day puts "the people" in charge, albeit through many indirect and direct means of communication between them and the politicians. The diversity of our national political representatives, especially in Congress, changes more slowly than does the constituency itself. But it is changing. Perhaps names like Ken Salazar, Raul Grijalva, Loretta Sanchez, Linda Sánchez, Nikki Haley, Bobby Jindal, and Jesse Jackson, Jr., provide some clue.

Personal relevancy is how each individual and group discerns value to themselves in the national parks and the national park idea. I think of personal relevancy in two subparts: personal-direct and personal-societal, though of course they are totally interrelated and connected.

Personal-direct relevancy is generally reflected in the "rewards" individuals receive from a personal visit. They hike in lovely places. They are inspired by these places. They camp, climb, appreciate scenery, watch birds and wildlife, raft, take pictures. They sit in the sun, or in a snowstorm. They expand themselves at interpretive and education programs, through Junior Ranger offerings and in bookstores. They expand their personal outlooks by experiencing history, social movements, and other occurrences in the very places where they happened. They take away personal memories that stay with them. And they believe that they can return themselves, or with their children or grandchildren, and these memories can be remade. They can believe in the future. And in the parks.

Personal-societal relevance is based on the same internal responses, but relates to needs of society, of the people as a whole. Individual education opportunity relates to society's need for education. Visitors can gain an appreciation for their country as a whole by visiting all or portions of the system which appeal to them, solidifying the need of society for a cumu-

lative belief in and expression of itself. Visitors can participate in research that affects everything from global warming to the continuing formation of the nation and its values. They can use the parks as protectors of clean air and clean water. They can cry with shame at some of the things we have done as a nation (Manzanar), and they can exult in the achievements we have made (Martin Luther King, Edison, Women's Rights). They can visit places that lead us to understand that the people we took this country from still live (Pipestone, Death Valley, Knife River) and revere their own cultures, and we can learn from them. They can explore who we have been and, as a result, who we are. They can build understanding of our nation and our society, and contemplate their place in both. On the Mall in Washington and at the reclaimed mine near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, for example, they can memorialize those who have sacrificed for us all. These are but a few of the multitude of possible personal-societal relationships that parks can engender.

Both kinds of personal relevancy relate to each of us as individuals. The parks can and do create strong responses in people. The question at hand, though, is: "Are the parks creating strong enough motives in enough of us, and in enough of a variety of us, for the nation to keep them as valued touchstones for our cumulative heritage as a society?" Or, are they in danger in the long run because only a dwindling portion of us care enough to create political relevancy from personal relevancy?

This idea of creating political relevancy from personal relevancy is at the heart of our governmental construct. And, therefore, it is at the heart of the future of the national parks and the national park idea.

The stark political question boils down to this: As our nation evolves demographically, do visitation to and valuation of the parks depend on a diminishing bloc of voters, so that sometime in the not-too-distant future a majority of the electorate will be made up of people who simply don't care, or at least not enough?

Although surveys seem to indicate that to some degree all major demographic groups visit the parks, there seems to be little evidence that such visitation is translating into commitment to and support for the parks from these constituencies. Certainly, there is little strategic, concerted, national effort to promote the values of the national parks and the national park idea to those not already enamored of the parks. Promotion of the parks and their personal and societal values must be considered as important to the survival of "America's best idea" as good interpretive programs, excellent facilities, and the best of resource management and protection activities.

Mather, Albright, and Yard were geniuses at promoting the parks from within the Park Service, and exercised that genius unabashedly. More recently, though, promotion of the parks has been left to others—primarily the narrow culture of the predominantly white hospitality industry, and internal Park Service efforts have been largely rather straightforward exhortations to visit. This is a politically safe approach, for certain. But it hardly approaches "promotion" to historically excluded populations, or "the people" as a whole. Both of these "now-traditional" approaches can and should continue. However, limiting promotion to only these narrow efforts is not in the best interests of the parks. What we need, in addition, is a concerted effort by the National Park Service to do the on-going civic engagement necessary to identify what it is and can be about parks that is relevant to Americans, the full vari-

ety of Americans, all Americans today. That done, the Park Service must continuously adapt itself so that it aligns with that relevancy and is prepared to continue to change as the reality of relevancy changes. No, I do not mean that this effort will lead to loving the parks to death. Actually, I believe this handy, and value-laden, idea is the least of our worries, and is indeed antithetical to the continued relevancy of the national parks in the future. We have learned well how to manage parks so that they are not impaired (at least so long as the climate does not change), by and large. In so doing, however, we have turned our backs on Mather, Albright, and Yard's deep understanding of how people create reality in our national decision-making and how that affects the future of the parks.

Our challenge is to create a deep commitment to the parks throughout our society, in every ethnic and economic sector, in every region of the country. Some parks are experimenting on their own, ranging from "traditional" parks such as Yosemite, North Cascades, and El Morro to "outliers" such as Golden Gate, Santa Monica Mountains, Lowell, and Cuyahoga. Some activities, such as use of social networking sites, are becoming commonplace. Some places, those with active educational institutes in particular, are connecting parks to a broadened, modernized concept of who "we the people" actually are. To the extent that the National Park Service can equalize its commitment to promoting the national parks and the national park idea throughout the land as professionally and as diligently as it manages the resources entrusted to it by those very people, it will not only survive, it will flourish. To the extent that it does not, individual parks that promote themselves well and fully may thrive, but the system itself and the national park idea will suffer.

The basic operative concept for park managers today is to concentrate wholeheartedly on making that individual park as good as it can be. In money terms, this is reflected in the idea that a park's base is for the operation of that park alone. This individualistic park-centric view has its strengths, but not for the system as a whole, or for the national park idea itself. For both to flourish, and if in fact to most certainly assure the long-term viability of any individual park, some significant portion of the operation of any park must be devoted to the system and the idea as a whole. Doing so leads all visitors to understand that there is more to it than just the places they visit, and that the value of the whole is greater than just the sum of the parks, as evidenced so eloquently in the General Authorities Act of 1970, as follows:

> Congress declares that the national park system … has … grown to include superlative natural, historic, and recreation areas in every major region of the United States, its territories and island possessions; that these areas, though distinct in character, are united through their inter-related purposes and resources into one national park system as cumulative expressions of a single national heritage; that, individually and collectively, these areas derive increased national dignity and recognition of their superlative environmental quality through their inclusion jointly with each other in one national park system preserved and managed for the benefit and inspiration of all the people of the United States.…

Director Roger Kennedy championed this idea, asking that park superintendents spend

at least 25% of their time on activities devoted to the system and the agency as a whole. The Message Project of the late 1990s was designed as part of a strategic program to present the entire system as a unified entity as envisioned in the General Authorities Act. The bleak record of success for both precepts reflects how far the Park Service is from an effective 21st-century strategy "to promote" the parks as a keystone responsibility, and how little understanding there is of why doing so is important as America changes.

So what is the "take-away" from this essay?

It is this: Although the basis of the political relevancy that has served us so well for a century is still strong, its vitality as a reflection of our whole and evolving society is waning.

All is not lost … not yet. The National Park Service and its friends must act now in a strategic, focused, comprehensive manner supported by every park, every employee, and every organization the agency is associated with. The Park Service and individual parks must expand their focus to include people and organizations that have not been traditional allies or partners.

It is up to the Park Service, and its leaders, to lead. It is up to the rest of us to actively assist. Our goal? Every American believes that parks and the park idea are essential and relevant to them.

It is "we the people," all of the people, that are the strength of the parks and the national park idea.

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John J. Reynolds' career with the National Park Service spanned 40 years, during which he served as landscape architect, park planner, park manager, regional director, and agency-wide deputy director, among other assignments. He also maintained a strong interest in protected areas internationally, managing NPS assignments in over ten countries and serving five years on the United States delegation to the World Heritage Committee, three of them as its chief. Along with these accomplishments, Reynolds is recognized as a pioneer in environmental leadership practices that have been implemented throughout the national park system. In retirement, he has continued to contribute to parks through positions with the National Park Foundation, as staff to the National Parks Second Century Commission, and on other boards related to national park and youth activities. He is a life member and past board member of the George Wright Society.