

Our public lands in twenty years: national parks or amusement parks?

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To conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein, and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such a manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.

— National Park Service Organic Act (16 U.S. Code, Sec. 1)

Introduction

A few years back, my wife and I visited Lake Powell at Glen Canyon National Recreation Area on the Arizona–Utah border. At the park’s entrance station, the park ranger staffing the kiosk handed us several materials, which I assumed were National Park Service (NPS) brochures and maps. Unfortunately, the materials were private advertisements for the many commercial services available at the park. The cover of one of the brochures proudly proclaimed that Lake Powell is “America’s Playground.” Inside, no mention was made of the need for resource protection or the conservation mission of NPS. Rather, my wife and I were encouraged to take part in questionable activities such as riding jet skis. The brochure proudly put forth that one should “raise your heart rate” on the thrill-craft.

To some, forfeiting of Lake Powell to the motorized thrill-craft industry is no great loss. However, to others it signals that the Park Service may be losing sight of its paramount mission to leave the park system’s resources and wildlife “unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.”

The battle to determine the appropriateness of jet skis, snowmobiles, and off-road vehicles in the National Park System is part of a much larger struggle over what type of vision will determine the future of national parks like Yellowstone, Glacier, and the Everglades. Will our national parks remain those sites where America protects some of its most sacred ideas, hopes, and places, or will they be allowed to degrade into nothing more than motorized amusement parks?

Unimpaired Mandate

In 1872, Yellowstone became the world’s first national park. It was created for the benefit and the enjoyment of the American people. Forty-four years later, Congress passed the Organic Act, which mandated that present enjoyment must leave park resources “unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” By passing the Organic Act, Congress declared that forms of recreation which cause lasting damage to park resources are inappropriate for the National Park System.

The vast majority of America’s public lands are managed under the multiple-use doctrine. This means that federal land managers, such as those in the U.S. Forest Service, must accommodate multiple uses such as recreation, logging, and wildlife conservation on these lands and waters. In contrast, Congress has set aside a small

portion of the U.S. landscape—roughly 5%—for special protection within the National Park System (NPS 2001). These areas were selected because they contain unique, nationally significant, ecologically sensitive and irreplaceable resources—such as the Grand Canyon or the giant Sequoias of Kings Canyon and Sequoia national parks.

From the Organic Act mandate, it is apparent that Congress exempted the Park Service from the multiple-use doctrine and clearly instructed the agency to authorize only those uses and activities which leave park resources unimpaired. The Park Service appears to understand this limitation and, over time, it has phased out popular, although highly questionable, activities such as Yellowstone's bear shows and Yosemite's fire falls (Sellars 1997). However, in recent years, public lands have seen a flood of new, higher-impact activities, such as the use of motorized thrill-craft (i.e., jet skis, snowmobiles, and off-road vehicles). In the USA alone there are roughly 5 million thrill-craft, with an additional 500,000 new units sold every year.

Given the congressional limits on what activities the Park Service can authorize, a growing list of concerned citizens are questioning the appropriateness of motorized thrill-craft in the Park System. Why?

Motorized thrill-craft cause impairment

Countless studies have documented the significant damage motorized thrill-craft cause to air and water quality, cultural resources, soils and soil stability, private property, visitor enjoyment, public health and safety, natural quiet, and wildlife. For example, the majority of thrill-craft on the market today are powered by conventional two-stroke engines. These motors dump between 25 and 30 percent of their gas and oil mixture unburned into the environment (EPA 1996). At Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks, for example, it has been estimated that one winter season's snowmobile traffic dumps approximately 100,000 gallons of unburned fuel onto the parks' snowpack and water bodies (Bluewater Network 1998). In addition, these engines expel pollutants that have detrimental impacts upon plants and wildlife. A study of Lake Tahoe found that marine outboard motors produce polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), which are toxic to aquatic plants and fish even at minute levels—parts per trillion (Oris 1998).

Research is also revealing that motorized thrill-craft have a negative impact upon wildlife. For, example, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is concerned about snowmobile activity and its impact upon the long-term survival of the endangered Canada lynx. Snowmobile operation, especially off-trail use, leaves tracks which provide other predators such as the coyote or bobcat access to hunting grounds that were previously the sole domain of the lynx. These new predators place stress upon the survival of the lynx by reducing the overall prey base (USFWS 1998).

For more on the impact motorized thrill-craft have on the environment, please see Bluewater Network's Web site: www.bluewaternet.org.

Caught off guard?

Unfortunately, the exploding numbers of motorized thrill-craft seem to have caught the Park Service off-guard. At several parks, thrill-craft use is becoming well entrenched. Furthermore, new thrill-craft, such as the solo water-ski machine and the motorized all-terrain dirtboard, are continually being brought to market.

On a positive note, throughout the past several years NPS has begun measures to rein in thrill-craft damage. For example, last year the agency finalized regulations that prohibit jet ski operation in all but 21 national parks (36 Code of Federal Regulations Sec. 1, 3.13). At Yellowstone and Grand Teton, the agency has begun phasing out snowmobile operation, replacing it with a cleaner and quieter mass-transit system (*Federal Register*, 22 January 2001). Finally, at Big Cypress National Preserve, NPS recently completed a long-overdue management plan designed to protect the preserve from off-road vehicle damage (NPS 2000a).

Disturbing trends

Sadly, despite strong public support for these measures, the thrill-craft industry is unleashing its well-financed lobbying machinery in an attempt to block further implementation. With a new administration in the White House, some of industry's schemes appear to be gaining traction. For example, industry lawyers are meeting behind closed doors with Department of Justice lawyers in the hopes of reaching an out-of-court settlement that would bar enforcement of snowmobile bans at Denali and Yellowstone National Parks (CNN 2001).

What should be done to protect the parks?

Given the recent change in administration, it is highly unlikely that new national initiatives dealing with motorized thrill-craft will be forthcoming anytime soon. However, even in this political climate there is much individual park units can and must do regarding motorized thrill-craft activity.

Take stock of recreational use. In the Park Service's 2001 management policies, the agency states that those recreational activities not mandated by law will only be allowed if "they are appropriate to the purpose for which the park was established and they can be sustained without causing unacceptable impacts to park resources" (NPS 2000b). To comply with this goal, the Park Service should collect baseline data on the types and amount of recreational use currently taking place at each park unit. Collection of this data could be incorporated into future park management processes, such as the revision of a general management plan.

Once the data have been reviewed, an environmental analysis should be initiated for those forms of recreation that are believed to pose a potential threat to park resources and values. If the analysis determines that the activity is causing impairment to park resources, mitigation measures, including prohibition if necessary, must be implemented.

Monitor impacts. Last year, the General Accounting Office (GAO) released a report regarding the management of motorized thrill-craft by the four major federal land-management agencies (U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, USFWS, and NPS). In the report, the GAO found that these agencies have collected very little information on thrill-craft use or its impact upon federal resources (GAO 2000). This lack of information is particularly troubling given the fact that President Richard Nixon's Executive Order 11644 requires federal agencies to monitor thrill-craft impacts on federal lands and waterways (Nixon 1972). Without this information, it is impossible for land management agencies to make sound management decisions. At a minimum, at those park units that currently experience motorized thrill-craft use (both legal and illegal), the Park Service should immediately set up monitoring programs, paying particular attention to the machines' impact upon air and water quality, visitor enjoyment, public health and safety, natural quiet, soils and soil chemistry, cultural resources, and wildlife.

Take proactive measures. Besides barring impairment of park resources, federal law also empowers the Park Service to take proactive measures to protect park resources and wildlife. Superintendents at dozens of park units have used the power afforded them in the Superintendent's Compendium to close their waters to jet skis. Superintendents at other park units are encouraged to use the compendium in a similar fashion.

Provide and promote opportunities for contemplative recreation. In 1898, John Muir wrote: "Thousands of nerve-shaken, overcivilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home: that wildness is a necessity; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life." Many Americans share Muir's belief that the

best way to escape life's pressures is through such contemplative forms of recreation as hiking, wildlife viewing, and seeking solitude. A recent survey conducted by the state of Washington found that, out of 15 potential activities, more contemplative forms of recreation, such as walking and hiking, were the most popular across nearly all age groups. In contrast, operating off-road vehicles rated near the bottom with other activities such as hunting and hang gliding (State of Washington 2001).

Unfortunately, due to the noise, stink, and pollution of motorized thrill-craft, it is often impossible for other park visitors to engage in more contemplative forms of recreation. Furthermore, these visitors must venture further into the backcountry to escape the mechanized onslaught of off-road vehicles. At Yellowstone, for example, it was discovered that snowmobile noise can be heard up to ten miles away from snowmobile trails. In addition, newer thrill-craft are more powerful and reliable than models made just a few years ago. As a result, new areas once thought inaccessible to thrill-craft are now seeing the machines. This in turn means that there is a diminishing number of wild places which allow the public an escape from everyday life.

In contrast, according to the GAO, thrill-craft riders enjoy a disproportionate amount of access to federally managed lands and waters (GAO 2000). In particular, the GAO found that, despite the fact that thrill-craft operators represent less than 2% of the visiting public, their machines are permitted on or in roughly 50% of all federally managed waters and lands. Therefore, prohibiting thrill-craft from the national parks will not significantly reduce the number of areas where users currently operate their machines. However, a ban on the machines will greatly increase the number of areas that can provide opportunities for contemplation.

Protect the aura of the parks. Ultimately, it appears that the motorized thrill-craft industry fails to comprehend the spirit and purpose of the National Park System. Advertisements which state that "Scenery's for saps," or, "Be on a first-name basis with the sound barrier," flaunt the industry's belief that public lands such as the national parks are just another place for riders to exploit in search of further thrills. These ads promote a vision of the parks that reduces the awe-inspiring setting of the Grand Canyon, or the magnificent lakes of Glacier, to the status of side shows at an amusement park.

The National Park System is much more: it symbolizes our national heritage. As such, it has become wrapped in a special "aura."

Recreational activities can either enhance or detract from this aura. Over the years, the Lincoln Memorial has developed a special "feel" which honors not only President Lincoln but also other great Americans, such as Martin Luther King. For some, the memorial's steps, railings, and smooth surfaces present an ideal environment for skateboard riding. However, the Park Service correctly understands that skateboarding in the Lincoln Memorial would belittle the values and purposes for which it was established. Skateboarding would also severely diminish the experience of many visitors. Therefore, the Park Service has barred skateboarding and similar athletic activities from the National Capital Parks (36 CFR Sec. 7.96).

Conclusion

Just like skateboarding in the Lincoln Memorial, motorized thrill-craft at parks such as Yellowstone, Big Cypress, and Lake Mead are detracting from Park Service values and diminishing the enjoyment of other visitors. Since damage to park resources may not always be reversible, the Park Service would be wise to err on the side of caution when managing these questionable activities. Bluewater Network believes that NPS would go a long way toward achieving its paramount mission of leaving the National Park System unimpaired for the enjoyment of present and future generations by banning these machines.

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