



Letter from Woodstock Rolf Diamant

William E. Brown: Now More Than Ever

TWENTY YEARS AGO BILL BROWN WROTE HIS FIRST “LETTER FROM GUSTAVUS” for *The George Wright Forum*. Bill, the author of *Islands of Hope: Parks and Recreation in Environmental Crisis*, retired from the US National Park Service (NPS) in the early nineties and settled in Gustavus, Alaska, on the rim of Glacier Bay National Park. Back then our paths crossed once or twice at conferences and we had a few Alaska friends in common. I had read *Islands of Hope* and a college friend of mine, Richard Caulfield (now provost at University of Alaska), had worked alongside Bill and Bob Howe, former superintendent of Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve, in the very early days of the Yukon–Charley Rivers National Preserve.

Bill Brown’s 32-year career with the National Park Service as a writer, historian, and “key-man” played out primarily in the Southwest and Alaska. It was a career that was interrupted several times by an innate restlessness, a desire to write and a yearning for more direct conservation engagement and advocacy. Each time Bill left the Park Service he was brought back into the organization, first by Director George Hartzog, and then later by Regional Director John Cook. In an interview, Brown recalled Hartzog’s invitation to return: “He said words to the effect: as long as I am Director we want people with strong opinions and a diversity of opinions—that keeps us alive as an institution.” Neither Hartzog nor Cook were put off by Brown’s characteristic directness; rather they both valued his plain-spokenness and a knack for building friendships and relationships in skeptical if not often openly hostile communities. These skills were put to the test when Bill joined the NPS Alaska Task Force in the mid-seventies.

Bill Brown served on the task force with a remarkable group of colleagues, with unusually varied backgrounds. Bob Belous and John Kauffmann, for example, had experience in journalism; Stell Newmann and Zorro Bradley were anthropologists; Ray Bane had been a

The George Wright Forum, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 18–20 (2012).

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high school teacher in Hughes, Alaska. They fanned out across Alaska at a time of widespread public misinformation and distrust, to learn as much they possibly could about the places that were to become new national parks and the diverse people who inhabited them. They spent a great deal of time working with people from traditional cultures and experiencing firsthand many of their specific subsistence activities. Most importantly, they attempted to place a human face on a relatively large and remote bureaucracy as they tried to build local relationships and establish some level of trust and mutual respect.

In his administrative history of the early Alaska national parks, *Do Things Right the First Time*, G. Frank Williss writes: “Bill Brown and John Kauffmann for example . . . sought to physically immerse themselves in their respective field areas to experience more fully the areas and appreciate the nature of the place, something they believed necessary for proper planning. Brown, along with Rick Caulfield and former Glacier Bay National Monument superintendent Robert Howe, spent as much time as possible in the Yukon–Charley proposal and nearby communities running rivers, inspecting proposed trails and campsites, taking dog-sled trips, and becoming acquainted with local residents. . . .” (A number of these people, including Bill Brown, were later interviewed in a series of extraordinary oral history projects conducted by NPS and the University of Alaska; see <http://jukebox.uaf.edu>.)

In light of this background, it is with a great deal of humility that I embark upon this first “Letter from Woodstock.” Like Bill was when he began working on his “Letter from Gustavus,” I am recently retired from the ranks of the National Park Service. The decision on where each of us would make our home—Bill and family in Gustavus, Alaska, Nora Mitchell and I in Woodstock, Vermont—was guided in large part by a curiously similar philosophy. As Bill explained in an interview, “. . . one of the great benefits of the Park Service and system is its dispersion. . . . I chose to be close to Glacier Bay . . . this is a place where some good, discreet, specific work can be done.” Nora and I feel much the same, living in Vermont near Marsh–Billings–Rockefeller National Historical Park and its Conservation Study Institute, where we worked for many years.

Bill wrote a “letter” for each issue of *The George Wright Forum* from 1992 to 1996. His writing style wasted few words. His opinions, guided by his sharp intellect and a powerful moral compass, were invariably incisive and provocative, and framed in a larger, global context. It is not the intention of this “Letter from Woodstock” to either replicate Bill’s distinctive perspective or style—that would be a tall order for anyone. Rather, the editors of *The George Wright Forum* asked me to re-establish the column’s original “op-ed” feel and purpose—recognizing that having such an independent perspective on a range of national park and protected area conservation issues will always be a good fit for this journal.

I recently reread Bill’s last column and found his words as prescient today, perhaps even more so, than when they were written almost 16 years ago. So I thought I might begin my letter where Bill left off: his August 1996 “Letter from Gustavus” entitled “Islands of Hope: Now More Than Ever.”

Bill suggested that the United States (though he could have been speaking of many different countries) “is based on the three legs of livable home environments, public health, and public lands” that are all under stress. He recalled the positive impact of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, published 34 years earlier. I think it is worth noting that there was a campaign

at that time to discredit Carson, accusing her of “exaggeration and sensationalism”—using rhetoric eerily similar to today’s cynical attacks on climate science. In his 1996 letter, Bill prophetically warned about the manipulative use of “falsehood and fear” which he referred to as “acid in the face of established fact and the looming patterns that warn us.”

Bill went on to admonish us all about the disappearance of “common courtesy and collegiality” from the “polluted public discourse” on environment and public lands issues. In particular he was distressed by “current ‘take no prisoners’ attitudes and expressions.” When public dialogue is “dominated by absolutist stridency” he worried that “the democratic processes designed to help people of different views and interests find common ground” would be “poisoned.”

Again, this was the year 1996. But Bill could have been describing the political landscape that we are facing in 2012, and in particular challenges to the stewardship of our public lands. These challenges have been exacerbated over time by the advent of near-instantaneous communications and a blogosphere that can provide a cloak of anonymity for grandstanding and enmity.

There also seems to be less and less time available for really getting to know people and communities and for maintaining functional relationships based on trust and respect. But this investment of time and attention cannot be considered optional in an unforgiving political and technological environment where issues can rapidly escalate into controversies, polarize communities, and raise the risk of litigation and higher-level political intervention. Make no mistake—this is not a rationale for an abandonment of principles or weakening established legal frameworks for park and protected area governance. It is, however, a recognition that there will always be a need for precisely the kind of openness, experience, and emotional intelligence that Bill Brown and his colleagues on the Alaska Task Force offered to the National Park Service and the people of Alaska at a pivotal moment in conservation history.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Roy Dammert". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "R" and a long, sweeping underline.