

Last of His Kind? Some Reflections on the Career and Legacy of George P. Hartzog, Jr.

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ONE OF THE MOST ACUTE STUDENTS of recent National Park Service (NPS) history, John J. Reynolds, has said that “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 understand that NPS had to re-think its conception of the “public” that national parks serve. “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.”¹ Hartzog is on everyone’s list of the most politically skilled directors of NPS. In a new biography, *Reshaping Our National Parks and Their Guardians: The Legacy of George P. Hartzog, Jr.* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012), Kathy Mengak reports how Hartzog, nearing the end of his long and productive life, wanted us to remember his park work and his years as the NPS director from 1964 to 1972. How was Hartzog so effective? What meanings do Hartzog’s story of his career and his achievements have today, as we think about the futures of parks and protected lands? What aspects of his leadership are models for us today?

Our times are surely not his. His early years as director coincided with an expansive economy, in a political and social climate that, for some, fostered optimism about the possibilities of progressive changes in Americans’ daily lives. Our national legislature has always been a contentious place, but the present political climate in Washington would challenge and perhaps stymie even George Hartzog. Even more fundamentally, today global climate change, among other trends, forces us to re-examine possibilities for preservation and to scrutinize the varied meanings we attach to hallowed words like “nature,” “conservation,” and “environmentalism.” Global trade patterns, and the continuing, absolute necessity of recognizing the political ambitions and economic needs of workers and indigenous people worldwide, press more urgently than ever on people who manage and love parks. Experienced conservationists and naturalists raise questions about cherished assumptions, including the concept that NPS park lands can be preserved “unimpaired.” In the 1960s, with growing awareness of the environmental effects of modern industries and mega-agriculture, perhaps only the most

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far-seeing ventured to suggest that we (and the planet) were entering an “Anthropocene” era. Now, the question is not whether massive changes are upon us, but how best to develop new strategies and to identify the fundamental values that we should strive to protect, in a time when the social capital and political will needed for parks seem scarce.

Of course, it would be grossly unfair to ask “What would George Hartzog have done, faced with global warming?” He was a tireless, pragmatic, skillful, opportunistic administrator and lover of the national park system, not a seer or a scientist. His gusto for the business of cutting political deals, his enthusiasm for the work of influencing legislators and finding allies, and his bravado were legendary in NPS. Apparently he could be delightful, even inspiring, when you were on his side—and formidable if you were not.

Mengak’s biography is helpful for thinking about Hartzog’s legacy, but in a limited way; as she herself says, hers is a picture largely drawn from Hartzog and his supporters.² Basing her narrative largely on interviews with Hartzog and a few others, Mengak gives us Hartzog’s explanations of, and stories about, his intentions and his accomplishments.

His achievements are undeniable, especially his devotion to adding new parks to the system, including the urban, recreation-oriented Gateway and Golden Gate NPS units. Hartzog wanted us to remember him as an advocate of bringing national parks within reach of more Americans, especially city dwellers, and as someone who struck an appropriate middle ground in the debates of his era about the meaning of the NPS founding mandate for conservation and use within the parks. (Full disclosure: to me, framing this as a “preservation vs. use” conflict is stale and always was simplistic. This is a false dichotomy, in my opinion, in that it makes little sense to pit the present against the future.) The maxim that “parks are for people” was one Hartzog emphasized through a variety of initiatives such as “Summer in the Parks.” His advocacy for urban recreational areas as part of the national park system was ground-breaking and innovative in many ways. In other ways, it seems also true that this effort fit with NPS’ traditional emphasis on parks as places where public access and recreation were paramount concerns for the agency.

Drawing from his conception of democracy in the US, Hartzog skillfully operated on his awareness that Congress has a fundamental responsibility to express what the American public wants in its national park system. He was similarly astute about what kinds of initiatives “old line” NPS managers and rangers might readily accept. At the same time, he took great pride in the persuasive arts and wiles he used to convince people of the need for his initiatives. For example, he worked hard to lay some groundwork in Congress that later helped the authorization of huge new parks in Alaska. He emphasized democratic and demographic concerns, but he understood well that good outcomes for parks and protected areas require assiduous insider maneuvers and pragmatic behind-the-scenes work.

In describing Hartzog’s view of his career aims and effectiveness, Mengak’s book particularly invites us to reflect on aspects of his work in which he took most pride (like expanding the number of parks in the system). Hartzog perhaps took a more equivocal view of his efforts to place more emphasis on scientific research as a fundamental basis for park decision-making about natural resources.³ He became director as the famed Leopold and National Academy of Sciences reports (about NPS science) came out in 1963. These reports criticized NPS for not placing more emphasis on understanding and managing parks as pieces of complex

ecological systems, and for skimping on the research and rigorous analysis necessary for resource management in parks. Hartzog at some level understood the issue, and saw clearly that NPS needed publicly to respond to this criticism in constructive ways. Given the analysis in Richard West Sellars' *Preserving Nature in the National Parks*, it also seems fair to say that Hartzog did not, in the end, invest much political capital in approaches to the problem.⁴ In more recent years—and in the wake of Sellars' influential book—NPS had more success in increasing funding and attention to natural-resource research programming. The story of Hartzog's efforts in this area reminds us that many superintendents, traditionally, have felt a righteous proprietorship of management decision-making processes. In Hartzog's time as director, not all superintendents welcomed a more methodical, science-based approach to planning and decisions that they felt their experience and dedication equipped them to make on a more *ad hoc* basis. Still fewer superintendents have committed to comprehensive research agendas for the long haul, rather than the short term, as places to invest comprehensive (or at least consistent) funding. In my opinion, this climate, which encourages seat-of-the-pants, rather than systematic, research programming and planning, still prevails in too much of NPS. It is instructive that even a director as powerful and politically canny as Hartzog was, in the end, less than successful in persuading superintendents who were reluctant to embrace the idea of more independent, wide-ranging scientific inquiry in the service of park preservation and management.

Hartzog took pride in his efforts to do away with a system of dozens of formal administrative manuals that NPS had produced to guide decisions about a wide range of park management issues. He substituted three shorter manuals of policy, one each for parks categorized as primarily natural, cultural, or recreational. As Mengak acknowledges, these categorizations presented difficulties to managers of parks (and this is nearly every last one of them) with significant resources that demonstrate not only the folly of the idea that any national park is just natural, cultural, or recreational, but also the wisdom of recognizing that individual resources may be natural and cultural all at once.⁵ Hartzog's notion that there should be, in effect, separate management policies for natural, cultural, and recreational parks did not long survive. Hartzog's stated intention to foster more timely, flexible, innovative decision-making locally by superintendents is laudable. (It seems true, though, that many NPS managers perceived Hartzog as a "hands-on" manager quick to transfer superintendents who didn't perform to his satisfaction.) Today, though, as a broad principle, NPS people widely embrace the conventional wisdom that all units of the national park system are part of a whole, and all must be managed consistent with the NPS founding conservation mandate. Given the global challenges facing parks and protected areas today, some thoughtful people are re-examining that broad principle. I would bet that the best answers will come from fine-grained analyses based in localized scrutiny of individual parks and resources in global contexts, not from broad-brush top-down pigeonholing of parks and resources. Hartzog's approach in this area does not seem a model for the future.

Hartzog was undoubtedly a master of political processes, but by his own account, he sometimes had less-than-warm relationships with the broad-based environmental-advocacy groups that were increasingly visible in his years as director.⁶ Perhaps this reflects his sagacity about the back-scratching needed to manage and grow a national park system as a process

that had to be mutual. In other contexts, Hartzog well understood the value of partnerships, including arrangements that might entail NPS involvement in lands that the bureau did not hold.⁷ Today, as parks such as the Ebey's Landing National Historical Reserve demonstrate, NPS has embraced "less-than-fee" arrangements for a variety of preservation and conservation efforts.

So, what does it take to effect change in an organization like the National Park Service? Organizationally, the bureau is an unruly mix of hierarchy and decentralization. Socially, the motivations and devotions of its employees vary enormously, of course, but in general, the bureau tries to foster a climate of reverence for a founding "mission" in ways that perhaps only the military surpasses. This sense of mission can be a powerful tool for mobilizing employees, but NPS can also be parochial, insular, and stovepiped. Some of its employees are reluctant to recognize subtly and not-so-subtly racist and sexist approaches to historical interpretation. In some NPS quarters, there's a desire to feel good about parks as shrines to outmoded ideas about a single unifying national identity or "pristine" nature. This impedes the bureau's ability to deal honestly with conflicts and ruptures as well as continuities, with failures and tragedies as well as progress, and with the polyglot, multiform nature of this country and its peoples.

Hartzog's career shows us that one person with *chutzpah* and an appetite for politics can make significant change. It also shows that even the happiest park warrior will not overcome deeply entrenched attitudes and interests within or outside the agency. Perhaps, for example, Hartzog could have done more to use the 1963 Leopold and National Academy of Science reports to leverage immediate, expansive emphasis on park science and on park ecological values, systems, and contexts. Still, the context for Hartzog's directorship was different from the climate today in many important ways. Mengak's book succeeds in giving voice to Hartzog, as he explains his intentions and tells great stories.

Steering NPS from the director's perch remains a tricky and challenging job, requiring more than ever nimbleness and facility in the worlds of science, scholarship, and conservation theory, as well as a deep appreciation of social, economic, and political trends. To say, with John Reynolds, that Hartzog was "a product of his times" does not diminish his achievements or the admiration he deserves. It does suggest that we need new models if the National Park Service is to move forward in intellectually and socially responsible, sophisticated ways as a steward of the environment. NPS approaches to civic engagement in recent years provide new tools for building partnerships—not only in ways that Hartzog envisioned, but also in even more expansive, inclusive, transformative ways. Civic engagement strategies can ameliorate NPS tendencies to parochialism and stovepiping. In addition, NPS must take more seriously its role as a research institution, going beyond Hartzog's ambitions and actions in that area, if NPS is adequately to protect parks in the system in the 21st century, given the environmental challenges the world faces. Hartzog's canny efforts to build a park system that democratically served more people can inspire us, but today NPS needs approaches and tools beyond Hartzog's imagining for building partnerships, doing research, and thinking about climate change.

Endnotes

1. John J. Reynolds, “Whose America? Whose Idea? Making ‘America’s Best Idea’ Reflect New American Realities,” *The George Wright Forum* 27 (2010), p. 129.
2. “My contact with Hartzog’s critics was limited and would have provided a better balance”: Kathy Mengak, *Reshaping Our National Parks and Their Guardians: The Legacy of George P. Hartzog, Jr.* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012), p. 7.
3. Mengak, p. 195, 216–222.
4. Richard West Sellars, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 214–232.
5. Mengak, pp. 145–146.
6. Mengak, pp. 130–131.
7. Mengak, pp. 81, 151–152.

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