

Professionalism and its Discontents

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DAVID HARMON'S ESSAY IN A PREVIOUS ISSUE of the *Forum* described how National Park Service (NPS) personnel became a target for both political and public animosity during last autumn's government shutdown. Harmon drew our attention to, among other problems, the public's lack of understanding of the professionalism required to keep the parks open. "There is a widespread failure to understand the NPS mission," he noted, "and the basic requirement that national park resources need both protection and professional stewardship."¹

This sense that one's work is under-appreciated and/or misunderstood is shared by other heritage professionals. In the course of my research for a recent book on cultural heritage and sustainability, the professionals I interviewed or met at conferences frequently expressed similar complaints.² Here I argue that these perceptions in fact reflect major changes in the status of professionals in general over the past century and also specific points of tension relating to the public image of heritage professionals in particular. A clearer perception of the deeper issues involved may point the way toward better policies to deal with them.

Let us examine then in turn both the general trends and more specific issues relating to natural and cultural heritage professionals.

General trend #1: From moral leader to scientific expert

Cultural and natural heritage conservation are relatively new professions, but they nonetheless participate in trends affecting the liberal professions as a whole. In his provocative volume *In an Age of Experts: The Changing Role of Professionals in Politics and Public Life*, Steven Brint argues that over the course of the 20th century professionals went from being seen as responsible for setting the moral standards of their communities—that is, as highly qualified people who were placed in a position of trust—to being viewed as scientific experts with no particular ties to communities and no particular moral authority. Brint writes, "From a sociological perspective, expertise is now a resource sold to bidders in the market for skilled labor. It is no longer a resource that requires an extensive sphere of occupational judgment about purposes."³

The George Wright Forum, vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 101–106 (2014).

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Both cultural and natural heritage conservation took a decidedly scientific turn during the second half of the 20th century. Overall, it can be said that this scientific approach has served to increase the prestige of heritage professionals and their organizational field: that is, all the organizations active in this area who interact with each other, with the government, and with the public at large.⁴ Nonetheless, problems have arisen over the course of the years regarding the use of science as a source of legitimacy for cultural and natural conservation.

The first problem is that, while science is evident in some NPS job titles—ecologist, fish biologist, forestry technician—it is less evident to the public that other job titles—historian, museum professional, or landscape architect—can also be guided by a scientific approach. And what about other jobs, such as human resources specialists or park police? What is their status in the eyes of the public? The second problem is that claims to science do not always impress park visitors. As historian Françoise Choay has written about cultural heritage sites, “The Parthenon, Saint Sophia, Borobudur, and Chartres recall the enchantment of a quest that, in our disenchanting world, is proposed by neither science nor critical analysis.”⁵ The same might be said of the parks. Some of the earliest parks have achieved near-sacred status: Mount Rushmore, Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon. But what about other, more recent additions? Do all the parks and protected areas within the system truly recall the enchantment of a personal quest or a grand national narrative? Or are they recognized and protected primarily because of their assumed scientific importance, their distinctive landscape or habitats, or their relevance to a specific moment in American history?

Science serves conservation by protecting against the many forms of personal or group prejudice that could bias site selection, protection, and interpretation. Science has also played a key role in creating a system of best practices and shared standards. However, this positive role has its negative counterpart, for the public frequently appears unimpressed with scientific expertise and is suspicious about those who use it to assert the superiority of their position. As David Lowenthal has written, the professionalization of heritage conservation has served more to increase public distrust rather than trust: “With it goes resentment that heritage concerns are dominated by elites and special interest groups, and suspicions of self-interest undermine appreciation of heritage as a public commodity.”⁶ The National Park Service has sought to fight this impression by becoming increasingly user-friendly. But the great divide still exists between experts and audience, as the budget crisis demonstrated only too clearly.

Overall, the public appears reluctant to view science as holding the key to the global future. Indeed, sociologist Krishan Kumar demonstrates how utopian visions of a future based on the popular image of science have been balanced by *dystopic* visions of a future world dominated by science and deprived of human values.⁷ These dystopic visions reflect the fact that scientific approaches often appear ill-suited to the task of resolving problems of social policy, especially those problems that require some measure of prediction of future trends and outcomes.⁸ The government shutdown and the protests it engendered reflect just such complicated problems whose solutions are not to be found in pure science but rather in a creative mix of social science approaches and public engagement. Heritage professionals like to claim that heritage conservation is more about people than about places, more about looking toward the future than preserving the past. Yet the act of claiming the status of science

by itself alone does not appear to be a future-oriented strategy for dealing with the challenges that lie ahead, challenges relating to ecological crisis, economic reversals, and public policy standoffs.

General trend #2: Growing tension between democratization and maintenance of expert control

Cultural and natural heritage conservation has come a long way since the founding days of Britain's National Trust, when heritage was considered quite naturally the preserve of the elite. Robert Hewison recounts how Lady Sylvia Sager, whose great-grandfather and grandfather founded the Dartmoor Preservation Trust, responded to the suggestion that the trust should try to involve more working-class people. For Lady Sylvia, such involvement would mean the "entry of elements that favor unrestricted motoring and caravanning and resent restraints on building or advertising." Dartmoor, she argued, was unique and of national importance, and could "no more be left in the care of local farmers than Oxford's colleges (could) be left in the care of the car workers of Cowley."⁹ Indeed the very concept of "trusts" assumes a tutorial relationship between heritage managers and their public, one that puts the public in the position of undisciplined children likely to break the furniture and bother the animals. As Robin Fedden wrote, "In a utopia where a perfect sense of values prevailed there would be no place for a National Trust."¹⁰ Yet the ready mention of "perfect values" reflects an elitist assumption of superiority over those who value heritage less highly.

This state of affairs began to change in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the development of what became known as the New Social History. A younger generation of historians influenced by the sixties no longer wanted to do what they considered "elitist" history or the history of presidents and kings. Instead, women's history, ethnic history, and the history of the working class became the most popular avenues of inquiry, and a range of methods both qualitative and quantitative were put to use to construct history from below. Enthusiasm for this approach rapidly spilled over into the heritage field, even if efforts to preserve the visible reminders of working-class industrial history did not always meet with unanimous approval of the working classes. Tamara Hareven noted that some of the strongest opposition to the preservation of New England textile mills came from the former workers and their families who wanted to forget the past rather than to commemorate it.¹¹ Similarly, Dominique Vanneste found that residents of 19th-century industrial neighborhoods in Ghent, Belgium, had absolutely no interest in seeing the old textile factories restored, and were more concerned with whether or not restoration would increase traffic in the neighborhood.¹²

Yet it is one thing to try to attract a broader public to cultural or natural heritage, and quite another to resolve tensions between expert control and public expectations. This gap is reflected in the social status of conservation professionals. For sociologist Andrew Abbott, determinants of status differ depending on whether one is a member of a particular profession or of the public it is meant to serve.¹³ Within a profession, the further one's activities are separated from actual contact with the public, the higher the status one is accorded by one's colleagues. Thus the purely conceptual architect, or the architect who designs only a few highly emblematic structures, has higher status than the one who works on primary

school additions; the university professor who teaches few students has higher status than the one who teaches classes with large enrollments; the scientist engaged in pure research has higher status than the one working on a problem in applied research. Direct and open contact with the public is seen within professions as potentially polluting and even dangerous, and high-status practitioners are often separated from unsolicited contact with the public by layers of administrative support. While professions can and do occasionally reward those members whose work reminds them of their essential public service role, on a day-to-day basis status tends to follow separation from public contact rather than immersion in it.

By contrast, the public tends to be most impressed by professionals who display a willingness to engage on a personal level with relevant issues. Examples would include physicians who appear on television talk shows or lawyers who write advice columns in popular magazines. It would also include professionals who dedicate their talents to solving real-life problems in local communities and who commit for a substantial period of time, rather than just flying in to make guest appearances. In the same way, members of the public appear less concerned with whether or not heritage is a science; they are more concerned with whether heritage conservation adds appreciably to the quality of their lives and that of their communities. These are reasonable concerns, and indeed it can be argued that they are shared by many NPS professionals. But the different starting points of public and professionals reflect more than a problem in communication: they also reveal deeper cultural assumption about how parks contribute to this quality of life, and what happens when access is denied, even temporarily.

Shutdown politics and deep culture

David Harmon's article emphasized the fact that journalists quickly focused on the national parks to illustrate the drama and significance of the government shutdown. The press *could* have used closed IRS offices as their example, but that would only have delighted the public. By contrast, many Americans hold a positive attachment toward the parks as a place of family vacations and outings, of emotional regeneration and spiritual renewal. This, at least, is something to celebrate. In this context, the venting of emotion over their closure is very understandable.

Better understood, the anger expressed by certain members of the public over the closing involved issues of control, and whether the relationship between experts and public is the old tutelary relationship between unequals referred to above, or whether it takes the form of contract relationships between equals, as, for example, when we hire accountants to help with our taxes. NPS has been telling the American public that we are in a contract relationship with them rather than a tutelary one. It tells us that we own the parks and that NPS is there simply to look after them for us, conserving them, interpreting them, and guaranteeing access. If that's the case, then the parks' closure represented a breach of contract. We the public have done our bit by paying our taxes. The fact that contracted services are not being provided makes us begin to wonder what we've been paying for in the first place. If the parks are truly "our property," surely they could make do with a skeleton crew just as the trains do,

or as is the case with other businesses when workers go on strike? A few maintenance men could keep things in order until the politicians sort themselves out.

Members of the public rightly suspect that they are not being treated like adults but like children, and that the parks are holding back their candy. The old system of tutelage has never, in fact, gone away. The professional experts are intent on maintaining firm control. That is, after all, their job, and a hard one at that. It is not simply the parks that are being managed, it is also the public. In the words of the cartoon character Pogo, "We have met the enemy, and he is us!" Everyone within NPS is well aware that the parks must constantly battle against acts of vandalism, theft, and other behaviors that endanger both natural and cultural sites. The fact that this control often remains invisible, other than the passing presence of park police, reflects positively on the professionalism of the service. But the public suspects that the wizard is still behind the curtain, pulling switches and levers to manipulate, even if it is said to maximize, the visitor's experience.

This contradiction reflects the deeper malaise that at least some Americans feel toward their government. When local residents oppose the creation of a new national park, a common theme is the loss of control over the land. But the control that concerns them is not over how to deal with invasive insect or plant populations or how to manage staff and provide services. Rather, the loss of control is more a fear of one's self being controlled, of not being allowed to hunt, fish, or picnic when and as one will. This in turn reflects a broader current in American culture, often positively referred to as rugged individualism, negatively as a refusal to respect the claims of the commons. As we have seen in the lamentable shutdown episode, NPS serves as a lightning rod for endemic resentment toward the government as a whole.

What, then, is to be done? If the problem truly reflects a more fundamental discord within the social contract between government and public, it is unreasonable to think that NPS alone can resolve the conflict. All NPS can do is to work toward making the public more aware of the complexity of tasks involved in operating and conserving the national parks and of demystifying the professional expertise necessary to their accomplishment. The public clearly understands and values its right of access to national parks: that much was made clear by the shutdown. What it needs to develop is a better appreciation of the responsibilities involved in their conservation and of its role in contributing toward meeting them.

Conclusion

In this age of ecological crisis, economic cutbacks, and resulting social dislocations, the National Park Service will need a higher public profile and a higher degree of public support. It can achieve this not by disavowing the science ingrained in much of its work or the professionalism that has allowed the accomplishment of many worthy actions. It must do this by finding new visions more in-line with public concerns: visions that can be communicated by a range of media, not just organizational websites and welcome centers. In working toward the goal of achieving more visible and effective outreach, the National Park Service should move beyond *science* to draw more heavily on *social science* and its findings on topics such as how to build trust between experts and publics and how to motivate people to make difficult personal choices and to work toward social change.

Endnotes

1. David Harmon, "Six Shutdown Lessons for the National Park Service and its Supporters," *The George Wright Forum* 30:3 (2013), 242.
2. Diane Barthel-Bouchier, *Cultural Heritage and the Challenge of Sustainability* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2013).
3. Steven Brint, *In an Age of Experts: The Changing Role of Professionals in Politics and Public Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 15.
4. Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell define an organizational field as "those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life." See their "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality," in *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*, Walter W. Powell and Paul J. DiMaggio, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 64. For more theorizing on organizational fields, see Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, Randall Johnson, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
5. Françoise Choay, *L'allégorie du patrimoine*, rev. ed. (Paris: Seuil, 1996), 183.
6. David Lowenthal, "Heritage Stewardship and the Amateur Tradition," *APT Bulletin* 30:2/3 (1999), 7.
7. Krishan Kumar, *Utopia & Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).
8. In their classic article "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning" (*Policy Sciences* 4 (1973), 155–169), Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber identify eight specific traits that make policy-oriented problems unsuited to purely scientific solutions.
9. Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry* (London: Methuen, 1987), 140.
10. Robin Fedden, *The Continuing Purpose: A History of the National Trust, its Aims and Work* (London: Longmans, 1968), 53.
11. Tamara K. Hareven, *Amoskeag: Life and Work in an American Factory-City* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).
12. Dominique Vanneste, "Conservation of Built-up and Social Heritage in 19th Century Industrial Neighbourhoods: the Impact of Identity in Some Neighbourhoods in Ghent (Flanders)," in *Conservation in Changing Societies: Heritage and Development*, Teresa Patricio, Koen Van Balen, and Krista De Jonge, eds. (Leuven: Raymond Lemaire International Centre for Conservation, 2006), 305–312.
13. Andrew Delano Abbott, *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

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