



## *Letter from Woodstock* Rolf Diamant

### **When Will We Really Have a System of National Parks?**

I WOULD LIKE TO USE THIS NINTH LETTER FROM WOODSTOCK to examine the tangible and intangible attributes and benefits of a national park system and how well are they understood, valued, and used to full advantage. I am going to talk about the US national park system, which I am most familiar with, though many of my observations may be applicable to protected area systems in other countries.

The US system is a highly complex and increasingly diverse assemblage of 401 national parks and 49 national heritage areas. The National Park Service (NPS) is also legislatively directed to oversee, as an important part of the system's portfolio, a number of national conservation and preservation assistance programs functioning outside the boundaries of national parks that work with cities and communities throughout the country (including the National Historic Landmarks (NHL) Program, which I will say more about in a moment). There are many tangible benefits that the system provides, from hiking trails to historic preservation tax credits. However, the system offers many intangible benefits as well that embrace, according to former NPS Chief Historian Dwight Pitcaithley, "the very democratic values upon which this country was built, environmental lessons with the potential to make our communities more livable, civic messages that will move us toward 'that more perfect Union' imagined over two hundred years ago."

I have experienced those intangible dimensions of the system on many occasions but perhaps none as memorable as the time I was asked to present a national historic landmark plaque to the Old Labor Hall in Barre, Vermont. Stone carvers and quarrymen who had emigrated from northern Italy to Vermont built the Old Labor Hall in 1900, and used the building in the early years of the 20th century as they organized for hard-fought social and labor reforms. Rescued from demolition in the 1990s by the Barre Historical Society, the two-story brick structure was rehabilitated by descendants of these Barre granite workers for use as a community center. The hall was designated a national historic landmark in 2000.

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No one from the NPS landmarks program office in either Washington or Philadelphia was able to attend the NHL dedication ceremony in Barre, and, as I had recently been appointed superintendent of Marsh–Billings–Rockefeller National Historical Park in Woodstock, Vermont, I volunteered to represent NPS and present the plaque. On that clear, crisp November morning, wearing my formal uniform, I arrived at the Old Labor Hall, the heavy bronze landmark plaque carefully tucked under my arm. Making my way through an overflow crowd I took my place on stage. First the governor and then each member of the congressional delegation addressed the audience to polite applause. When it was my turn at the podium. I made a few brief remarks about the national significance of landmark designation, and then lifting up the plaque so that everyone in the room could see it, I said, “Now for the best part! On behalf of the secretary of the interior and the National Park Service, it is with great pleasure”—and that was I as far as I got. The hall erupted into a wild cacophony of foot stomping, whistling, and cheering.

It was a rare moment when a public event becomes an expression of *both* local and national pride, so that people who may be infrequent users of national parks or perhaps may never step foot in a national park, on that day, made a meaningful connection with their national park system.

I think it may be useful to picture the national park system as a geologic formation, with each park and program (such as national historic landmarks) adding additional strata or layers of meaning and purpose that are further compressed and metamorphosed into a composite that is both stronger and far more interesting than any individual layer. Recreational experiences are often mixed with a pursuit of spiritual and physical health; stories of perseverance and struggle are blended with the exploration of cultural and heritage identity; lessons of resilience and sustainability are combined with the practice of civic engagement and environmental stewardship. The national park system is about people perceiving unexpected connections and relationships and being able to see the world around them differently. “How does Yosemite relate to Charles Young Buffalo Soldiers National Monument?” asks my friend John Reynolds, reviewing an early draft of this essay. “How does Yellowstone relate to Hawaii Volcanoes? How do Andersonville and Manzanar relate?”

John also reminded me of the introductory language in the Act to Improve the Administration of the National Park System, otherwise known as the General Authorities Act of 1970. On this occasion Congress, taking advantage of the hindsight and experience gained from nearly a century of national park making, thoughtfully reflected on the totality of their grand achievement and clearly articulated the linked, interdependent benefits derived from a system:

... these areas, though distinct in character, are united through their interrelated 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 superb 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....

I have also come to prefer the term *park system users* rather than *park visitors*. The term *user* suggests a more inclusive definition of the many ways people today engage with the their park system—in the national parks themselves but also in schools and communities, on vacations and weekend excursions but also on a regular or even daily basis, and as tourists and recreationists but also as volunteers and committed stewards. To underscore and popularize the complexity and richness of the system, I am joining Bob Manning, Nora Mitchell, and Dave Harmon (as co-editors) and nearly 20 contributing authors—all with important experiences and perspectives on the national park system—to produce a book, tentatively titled *A Thinking Person's Guide to the National Park System*. The book, scheduled for publication in early 2016, is designed to be a very different type of “guide,” one that that will explore the themes and special places that best illustrate the extraordinary diversity of the national park system.

The book will hopefully serve as a counterpoint to a persistent tendency in the media to repeatedly publicize the same handful of large, high-profile parks—the so-called Crown Jewels—and largely pass over the system as a whole. I have come to expect this from the travel writers at *USA Today*, CNN, or Huffington Post, but nearly every mailing or communication I receive from organizations who should know better, such as the National Park Foundation (NPF) and National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA), also tend to highlight many of the same places again and again. I support and belong to both groups and they do important work I believe in, but they continually disappoint me on this point. How many times have I flipped through one of their beautiful calendars searching in vain for a set of park images more reflective of the system as a whole? I understand NPF and NPCA are marketing park images that they assume their audience will readily recognize and respond to. But if the most influential and able park advocates do not present the system as it really is, will their constituencies and funders ever fully appreciate its breadth and potential? In their public television series on national parks, filmmakers and honorary park rangers Ken Burns and Dayton Duncan, by choosing to focus their camera on the (at the time) 58 officially designated “national parks,” missed an opportunity to widen their lens and present a more up-to-date and inclusive view of the national park system and its increasingly diverse users. Ironically the filmmakers did present to NPS, for internal use, a handful of wonderfully thoughtful and evocative shorter films capturing many of the broader dimensions of the system.

This is not the first time this subject has been raised in the pages of *The George Wright Forum*. Dave Harmon's excellent 2012 NPS Centennial Essay, “Beyond the 59th Park: Reforming the Nomenclature of the US National Park System,” appeals for a more cognitive presentation of the system to the public. Harmon describes a “bewildering variety” of some 40 different park designations. “It stokes the confusion, already widespread, over what the purpose of the national park system is,” observes Harmon, “and how its nearly 400 [at the time of writing] components relate to one another.” This artificial ecosystem subtly re-enforces a balkanization that detracts from one of the inherent strengths of a system: clear brand recognition.

One unintended consequence of repeatedly promoting the same parks can be seen during the government shutdown last year. Governors of Arizona, New York, South Dakota,

and Utah cherry-picked a handful of larger national parks for re-opening (with the acquiescence of the administration) while hundreds of other parks remained closed to the public. Grand Canyon re-opened, but Canyon de Chelly, Hubbell Trading Post, Organ Pipe, and Saguaro did not. Statue of Liberty re-opened, but Gateway, Home of FDR, Saratoga, and Women's Rights did not. Utah's five national parks, including Zion, re-opened, but Massachusetts's fifteen national parks did not. As long as the national park system as a whole remains largely invisible and unsupported in the public's mind, the system will be increasingly vulnerable to selective fragmentation with inevitable winners and losers, placing the overall unity and health the system at risk. In his Centennial essay, Harmon describes how, when he explains the mission of the George Wright Society and George Melendez Wright's many contributions to science in the national park system, "most people give me a very blank look. I am then compelled to add that 'The National Park Service is the federal government agency that is in charge of national parks, like Yellowstone.' This usually—but by no means always—produces a spark of recognition."

Years ago, on a mission abroad, I complimented a European park manager on his park's innovative youth programs and superb interpretive materials. Wistfully he replied, "Yes, thank you for the compliment, but what I wouldn't give to be part of a park system like that of the United States, with your wonderful design center at Harpers Ferry and your Denver Center for planning." At the time I thought to myself about how both of these centers were being downsized, and more and more of the work contracted out. But I also thought about how much we take for granted the extraordinary national park system we have in the US, however stressed or unappreciated it might be. Who would not be envious of a system with a strong peer support network, with access to multi-disciplinary specialists, and with shared standards, guidelines, and management policies? And who would not be especially envious if such a system of parks derived "increased national dignity and recognition of their superb environmental quality through their inclusion jointly with each other?"

I am pleased to report that the "Find Your Park" campaign, recently launched by NPS and NPF, seems to be taking an important step in the right direction. Described as the centerpiece of the 2016 Centennial, the campaign calls for "making all 401 national parks go-to destinations," and pledges that NPS and NPF will also "highlight the historic preservation and outdoor recreation work the National Park Service does with communities across the country and the value it brings to Americans every day."

Time will tell how effective the cumulative efforts of the National Park System Advisory Board, Second Century Commission, the Director's *Call to Action* and now the "Find Your Park" campaign will be in re-aligning the identity of the agency, in the eyes of employees, partners and the public, with a fresh and significantly more inclusive centennial perspective.

When will we really have a system of national parks? When we recognize it, promote it, and use it to its full potential.

