



Letter from Woodstock
Rolf Diamant

Find Your System

BY THE TIME THIS COLUMN COMES OUT, the commemoration of the establishment of the US National Park Service (NPS) in 1916 will have officially begun. This centennial celebration has been long planned with the National Park Foundation (NPF), philanthropic partner of NPS, playing a central role in the public rollout. The NPS/NPF “Find Your Park” campaign has been well underway for almost a year on social and mainstream media, in partnerships with the campaign’s corporate sponsors, and with the foundation’s Find Your Park logo liberally displayed in visitor centers and on park interpretive materials. This was the case at Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, which I recently visited. Though the park staff I spoke with at the lakeshore were certainly aware of the centennial, they appeared to be a little vague about the its overarching objectives and confessed to being “out of the loop.”¹

So I have decided to use this twelfth Letter from Woodstock to take a closer look at the centennial campaign just as 2016 begins. This letter will also serve as the third of three essays on what it means today to be part of a system of parks and protected areas. In part one of this series I explored the inherent advantages of the system derived from its broad mission and diverse components, its capacity for cooperation and leverage, and the reservoir of public affection associated with a recognized and trusted brand. Part two of the series looked at the many ways the system benefits from continued growth and change, including the vital linkage with contemporary relevancy and greater inclusiveness.

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Philip A. Hart Visitor Center, Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. Author's photograph.

As a first step, I thought it might be useful to take a look at how a sister federal agency, the US Forest Service, marked its own centennial in 2005. That commemoration largely focused on how the mission and culture of the Forest Service had changed over the years. There was a capstone national conference, “Celebrating a Collective Commitment to Conservation,” and a really good three-part documentary film, “The Greatest Good,” created by filmmakers Steve Dunsky and Ann Dunsky. I remember the film for the unusually candid assessments by former USFS chiefs on major Forest Service policy reversals in the 1980s and 1990s.

Unlike the Forest Service centennial, the NPS version appears to have less interest in retrospection. For that matter, despite all the challenges the national park system faces today, many of which I have addressed in previous Letters, there appear to be no events planned for 2016 that probe the system’s future. A good friend and former colleague was perplexed by the apparent absence of this kind of high-profile dialogue, particularly given the prodigious work being done by the various committees of the National Park System Advisory Board² on many key issues. I’ll have more to say about the Advisory Board a bit later on.

Along the same lines another friend expressed some skepticism that the Find Your Park campaign is actually raising public awareness of NPS’s lesser-known (though congressionally authorized) non-park functions, such as, for example, the Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance and National Historic Landmarks programs. Despite the campaign’s promise to “kick off a second century of stewardship of America’s national parks and engaging commu-

nities through recreation, conservation, and historic preservation programs,” rangers behind the visitor desks still stumble when asked about the larger NPS mission. It remains to be seen if Find Your Park’s high-profile focus on personal park experiences may come at the expense of greater public awareness about the richness and breadth of the system as a whole. Word that the *National Park System Map and Guide*—NPS’s only publication for the general public that depicts the system as a whole—is out of print, and now only distributed online,³ has further exacerbated this unease. For the record, the downloadable map file is unreadable on a smartphone and way too big to print at home. Given these obvious limitations, it strains the imagination that, on the cusp of the centennial, such an administrative decision would be allowed to stand, but the momentum towards e-government appears as unstoppable as ever.

These legitimate concerns and potential weaknesses notwithstanding, it is not my intent to pick apart the centennial just as it is finally gaining traction. I actually think the centennial’s overarching strategy—to reach out and connect with a much younger and much more diverse segment of the population—makes a great deal of sense. It may not be an issue- or policy-focused agenda that some people might have embraced; neither does it try to learn from the National Park Service’s complex and contested history. However, the centennial, particularly the NPS/NPF signature Find Your Park campaign, by largely focusing on one objective above all others, can still have a significant impact.

Pursuing this strategy, NPS is appealing primarily to a younger generation with much less identification or affiliation with the national park system rather than reaching out to a more familiar older, whiter, traditionally loyal park constituency. It would have no doubt been easier to appeal to friends who share similar values and narratives, and celebrate with the same handful of iconic national parks. Find Your Park untethers itself from convention and cuts a wide swath through the national park system inclusive of many smaller parks and urban areas (as well as the icons), interpreting a variety of park experiences through the eyes of enthusiastic Millennials.⁴ As the trade publication *Adweek* reported:

The campaign urges visitors to think beyond postcard landscapes when considering the country’s 407 national parks. Visitors are encouraged to see Alcatraz in print ads that use abandoned jail block space with the reminder, ‘Parks aren’t just about the history of geology. They’re also about the history of confinement.’ For the iconic civil rights location Little Rock [Central] High School, the ads urge visitors to remember, ‘Parks aren’t just about respecting nature’s diversity. They’re also about respect for all people.’⁵

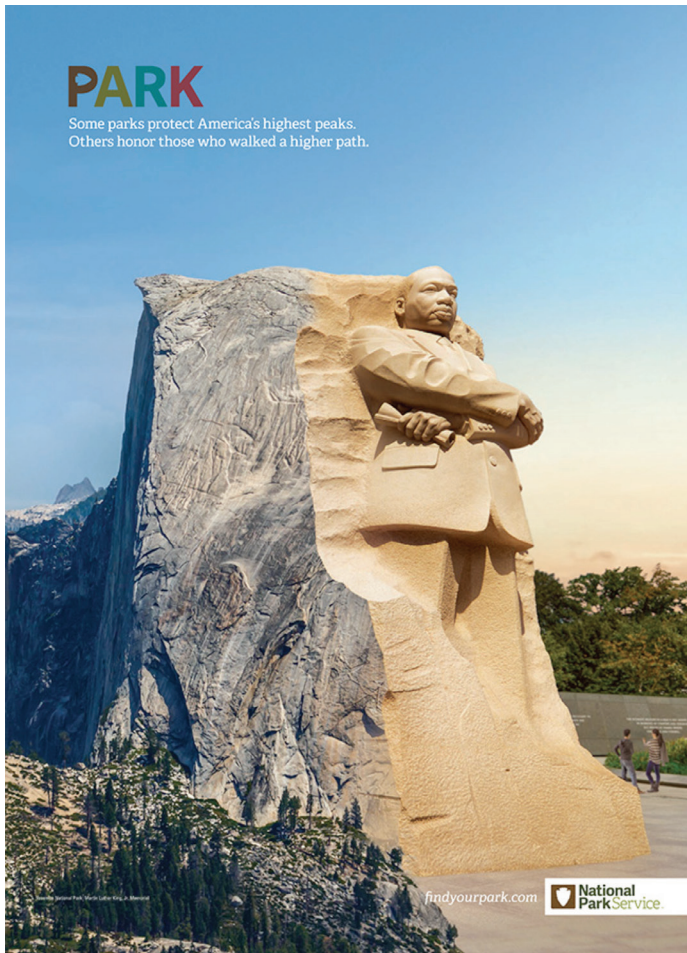
Much of what is on the Find Your Park webpage is pitched to what at first glance may seem to be a self-absorbed age demographic having a really good time in the parks. But it works, and its youthful energy is refreshing—the activities make being in the parks look like a lot of fun and there is nothing wrong with that.

Of course, the actual centennial year has yet to begin and some surprises could be in store. Granted, what I have seen may only be the tip of the iceberg and my interpretation could be wide of the mark, but I think the broad contours of the Find Your Park campaign are becoming increasingly clear. Make no mistake about it: this is a skillfully crafted campaign,

conceived with the help of Grey New York, a remarkably capable and intuitive advertising agency hired by NPF. As the foundation describes it:

Find Your Park includes a stream of programs, exhibits, events, promotions and public activities throughout 2015 and 2016 that will encourage everyone to find their park. As a holistic marketing campaign, Find Your Park includes broadcast, print, digital, outdoor and radio creative [content] featuring arresting visuals of the national parks, as well as public relations, influencer and social media efforts.⁶

But dig a little deeper and the message gets more specific. As Grey says in its own words, the national park system must be “accessible to all ... every day ... a source of personal self-worth and pride for every single American.” The Find Your Park campaign intends “to



Another example of the “Find Your Park” campaign. Image courtesy of the National Park Foundation.

re-introduce the National Park Service to a new generation of Americans ... in a changed America ... with a message that creates emotional connections, penetrates culture and will motivate people to action.”⁷ It is hard to argue with that.

In his dedication of Pullman National Monument, President Obama said, “No matter who you are, no matter where you live, our parks and our monuments, our lands and our waters, these places are the birthright of all Americans.” The president reminded his audience that places like Pullman, representative of our collective history, are “as undeniable and worth protecting as the Grand Canyon or the Great Smoky Mountains,” and that “places that look ordinary are nothing but extraordinary. The places you live are extraordinary, which means you can be extraordinary. You can make something happen.”

This message of equal access, environmental justice, and individual and community empowerment resonates as well through the centennial effort. Building on this spirit of social mobilization, Find Your Park has recruited a select group of celebrity “influencers” with vast legions of followers on social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat. To their credit, these personable “Celebrity Ambassadors,” as they are called, promote their adopted parks with full-throated, if theatrical, enthusiasm. There is a refreshing diversity within this group—and the diversity of national parks they are championing is equally refreshing. Not only do you have “Ambassador” TV personality Terrence J. marching in the footsteps of the Buffalo Soldiers through Yosemite Valley, but actress Roselyn Sanchez is doing her morning yoga near Fort Point, TV star Bella Thorne is romping through the Santa Monica Mountains, singer/songwriter and LGBT advocate Mary Lambert is reading her poetry in Faneuil Hall, and peripatetic Bill Nye, “the science guy,” is in a taxi careening around Manhattan sharing facts and trivia about Grant’s Tomb, Castle Clinton, the Statue of Liberty, and the African Burial Ground. This cheerleading cohort may not have “found” their entire national park system yet, but they certainly seem to be making progress. Even some of the “premier” corporate sponsors of Find Your Park, such as American Express, seem to have gotten the message as well, showing off more of the national park system in their online videos than you might have expected.

While Find Your Park with its ambitious and tightly targeted objective provides an appealing national face to the centennial, other activities are rather modest, apart from President Obama’s signature “Every Kid in a Park” initiative. There is an NPS-themed Rose Bowl parade (with Ken Burns as grand marshal), an IMAX film, and various National Geographic special offerings, but it appears largely left to individual parks to fill in much of the centennial’s substance with locally inspired and organized program content. However you may feel about the absence of more direct involvement by national leadership, it is not inconsistent with Director Jon Jarvis’ approach to designing his *Call to Action*. In both the *Call to Action* and the NPS centennial you can detect the influence of advisor Meg Wheatley on Jarvis’ theory of change. Wheatley, a member of the National Park Service Advisory Board and a former member of National Parks Second Century Commission, has long advocated, “supporting positive actions,” mostly emerging from the field, “that can be replicated and broadly supported.”⁸

However, with the exception of Yellowstone's NPS centennial celebration planned around the revitalization of its Roosevelt Arch/Gardiner entrance, at first glance, early park-based centennial events on the Find Your Park webpage calendar are not particularly inspiring. Many events appear to be regularly offered programs rebranded for the centennial. However, digging down a bit, several distinctive events caught my eye. Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site is sponsoring what it is calling a "social conscience gathering" in commemoration of the end of Civil War, enactment of civil rights legislation, and the establishment of the National Park Service. This gathering is intended to "identify barriers to social change, cultivating empathy for other people and cultures, and forging new paths toward global equality." This follows closely on the heels of Vicksburg and Shiloh national military parks co-sponsoring a related symposium at Mississippi State University, titled "The Fifteenth Amendment: From U.S. Grant to Lyndon B. Johnson's Voting Rights Act." Hopefully, more thought provoking centennial events like these will follow.

Perhaps the centennial's greatest test is the degree in which progress enabled by the NPS director's *Call to Action*, exemplified by the "Civil War to Civil Rights" network, Climate Change Action Plan, "Every Kid in a Park" initiative, "Healthy Parks/Healthy People" programs, and the NPS "Urban Agenda,"⁹ can be institutionalized and embedded within the agency. This test is particularly applicable to many of the National Park System Advisory Board's accomplishments and its wide-ranging recommendations on the future of the national park system including educational partnerships, relevancy and community relationships, science and climate challenges, innovation and leadership development, philanthropy and economic valuation, and other 21st-century NPS priorities.

With so much at stake, this question takes on special urgency as the 2016 centennial coincides with a national election. Given the unraveling of historical bipartisanship on environmental and park-related issues and the election's uncertain outcome, it is not entirely inconceivable that both the executive branch and congress might be controlled by people antagonistic toward public lands and predisposed to reversing more than a century of landmark environmental legislation, from the Antiquities Act to the Endangered Species Act. In such an environment, the continuation of the national park system as we know it today cannot be taken for granted; what has been authorized can always be deauthorized. Ultimately, the system's durability and long-term support depends on a broad social compact with the American people, a compact that requires constant engagement and renewal. Let us hope that a highly successful NPS centennial can dramatically expand that compact to the extent that there is enough political momentum coming out of the celebratory year to sustain and build upon the progress that has been made. At the very least the centennial can lay the foundations for deepening public engagement and establishing ever-more-meaningful connections between the national park system and the individuals and communities across the country that it serves. This includes more people of color, urban dwellers, new Americans, and younger generations of park users.

A progress report from the *Call to Action* may have gotten it half right when it stated in reference to the centennial, "To us, it's not about cakes and candles—it's about being an or-

ganization ready to take on the challenges of our second century.” But it is also about people “finding their national park system”—a park system that they perceive as increasingly relevant and useful to their lives in a rapidly changing world.



Endnotes

1. In fairness to the wonderful staff at Sleeping Bear Dunes, I’ve encountered this dearth of information about the centennial at several other recently visited parks.
2. Learn more about the National Park System Advisory Board’s work at www.nps.gov/resources/advisoryboard.htm.
3. The *National Park System Map and Guide* is available through the NPS Harpers Ferry Center online at www.nps.gov/hfc/cfm/carto-detail.cfm?Alpha=NPS.
4. Do check out <http://findyourpark.com/>.
5. Noreen O’Leary, “In Centennial Campaign, Grey N.Y. Offers New View of America’s National Parks: It’s Not Just about Geysers and Canyons,” *Adweek*, April 1, 2015.
6. National Park Foundation, “National Park Service and National Park Foundation Launch Find Your Park Virtual View Tour, Connecting People with Parks across the Country,” *NPF News*, April 2, 2015.
7. Ken Dowling, “Overview of Grey’s Approach to the NPS Centennial Campaign,” February 2013.
8. National Park Service, Report to the National Park System Advisory Board, “Developing Leadership and Nurturing Innovation,” November 4–5, 2015.
9. See Letter from Woodstock, “An Urban Parks Agenda for Everyone?” *The George Wright Forum*, vol. 31, no. 2 (2014); online at www.georgewright.org/312diamant.pdf.

Comments on “Letter from Woodstock” are always welcome. Write to LFW@georgewright.org.