

Second Sentence for a Second Century: Integrating the Mission of the National Park Service

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IN DECEMBER OF 1981 NATIONAL PARK SERVICE DIRECTOR RUSS DICKENSON convened a regional directors' meeting in Seattle. He invited John Townsley, superintendent of Yellowstone, to address the group. Dickenson introduced Townsley by saying that from time to time he intended to include a superintendent in such gatherings. I don't know if Dickenson knew Townsley was ill; none of my colleagues seemed to know. In less than a year Townsley was dead, of cancer. The only thing I remember from his remarks is this: "*When our careers started we thought some parks were big enough; now we know that no park is big enough.*"

The mission of the National Park Service

In discussing the mission of the National Park Service (NPS), commentators frequently paraphrase the Act of August 25, 1916, the Organic Act, and leave it at that. An early entry in this series of essays examined the history and application of that legislation. I was one of the authors.¹ The concluding part of that essay is the starting point for this one. Let me quote myself:

The Organic Act is frequently cited as the mission of the National Park Service. The statement is incorrect because it is incomplete. Congress has given the National Park Service other duties, many of them outside the boundaries of the national

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park system. As many of the forces now threatening impairment come from outside the parks, these cooperative programs provide an opportunity for the agency to influence others to make decisions in favor of the parks. Collectively, the park and cooperative programs need to be seen as a single mission that can, in part, achieve the purposes of the Organic Act.²

The *Management Policies* (2006) display the complete mission on the inside front cover: “The National Park Service preserves unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations. The National Park Service cooperates with partners to extend the benefits of natural and cultural resource conservation throughout this country and the world.”³

It is interesting to note that the volume that follows covers, in 168 pages, the conduct required to accomplish the first sentence of the mission, never mentioning again the procedures governing the second sentence. I’ll say more about that later. The absence of such a text confirms the long-held agency view that these programs are separate and apart from each other and from the mandate to conserve parks. But in a world where John Townsley’s view is truer than ever, the integration of the two-sentence mission has the potential to contribute much to the preservation of parks. The “partners” contemplated reside in communities whose decision-makers have the potential to affect the health of parks for good or ill. Could the benefits of NPS leadership at the community level help realize the benefits of park preservation too? Here I use “community” in a generic sense. It could be a town, city, state, tribe, region, or the entire country. The cooperative programs work at all those levels.

An interesting debating topic at an after-hours session at the George Wright Bar and Grill might pit the sentences against each other: Resolved, in the 21st century, the second sentence is more important than the first. A point being that without the cooperation of the community it will not be possible to achieve the preservation of the national park system.

The cooperative programs

There is no single popular reference that outlines all the cooperative programs, unless the annual NPS budget, the Green Book, could be characterized as “popular.” What follows is my summary of those programs from the 2017 submission.⁴ Apart from organizing them by appropriation, I haven’t followed the budget system of hierarchy. Hopefully that will enhance clarity for the reader. As I compiled this section I was again impressed by their number and variety. Using my judgment about what to include, I found 37 programs. I probably missed some.

National Recreation and Preservation

- The **National Natural Landmarks** program recognizes and encourages the conservation of sites that contain outstanding biological and geological resources, in partnership with all types of landowners. Partnership is voluntary.
- The **Hydropower Recreation Assistance** program promotes national recreation op-

portunities, primarily through the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission licensing process.

- The **Chesapeake Bay Gateway and Trails** program provides technical and financial assistance to partners to provide better access to the Chesapeake and rivers and to conserve important landscapes.
- The **National Register of Historic Places** is the nation's official inventory of historic places that have been deemed worthy of preservation (over 88,000 sites, 1.7 million structures).
- **National Historic Landmarks** are properties that possess exceptional value or quality in illustrating the heritage of the United States in history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture.
- **Heritage Documentation** programs identify and record structures and sites that have an important place in the nation's history. They are: HABS, the Historic American Buildings Survey; HAER, the Historic American Engineering Record; and HALS, the Historic American Landscape Survey. Documentation is housed at the Library of Congress.
- The **Cultural Resources GIS** program fosters the use of GIS (geographic information systems) and GPS (global positioning systems) technologies in documenting, analyzing, and managing cultural resources.
- The **Archeological Assistance** program provides coordination and guidance to all federal agencies with responsibilities for archeology. It collaborates with states, tribal, and local agencies to ensure responsible stewardship.
- The **Technical Preservation Services** program administers the Federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentives Program, which provides a 20% tax credit to owners or lessees who rehabilitate income-producing properties listed on the National Register or located in a historic district (\$73.8 billion in completed projects).
- The **Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA)** program guides, regulates, and supports a process for museums and federal agencies to resolve rights to Native American cultural items.
- **NAGPRA Grants** are made to museums, tribes, and Native Hawaiian organization for museum and tribal projects.
- The **Heritage Education Services** program promotes public knowledge and support for cultural resources in communities and parks nationwide.
- The **Federal Preservation Institute** provides historic preservation training and educational materials for use by all federal agencies and preservation offices.
- **Japanese American Confinement Site Grants** encourage and support the research, interpretation, and preservation of the sites where Japanese Americans were detained during World War II.
- **American Battlefield Protection Program Assistance Grants** support site identification and documentation, as well as planning, interpretation, and educational programs (not land acquisition or improvement programs).

- The **National Center for Preservation Technology and Training** serves as a research and development laboratory for historic preservation and training and advances the application of science and technology to preservation programs. It serves as clearing-house for scientific and technical preservation programs.
- The **Heritage Partnership Programs and Support** program provides funding and support to 49 national heritage areas that conserve and commemorate distinctive stories through regional landscapes.
- The **Environmental Compliance and Review** program provides review and comment on environmental impact statements (EISs) pertaining to proposals and actions of other federal agencies that may affect areas of NPS jurisdiction and expertise.
- The **Office of International Affairs** supports the NPS mission by exchanging technical and scientific information with foreign governments and international and private organizations. The office has responsibility for evaluating potential sites to be submitted to the World Heritage Convention, and administers long-term programs with Canada, Mexico, Chile, Australia, and China. It also hosts international visitors.
- The **Southwest Border Resource Protection** program works with nine park units on or near the Southwest border and Mexican counterparts and other institutions to improve resource stewardship and achieve international cooperation along the border.

Historic Preservation Fund

- **Grants-in-Aid to States and Territories** is a matching grant program to states, territories, and tribes to pay for eligible preservation projects and National Historic Preservation Act Section 106 reviews, and to assist Certified Local Governments. Works through a system of state and tribal historic preservation officers (SHPOs and THPOs).
- **Grants-in-Aid to Tribes** are made for preservation of their cultural heritage, including Section 106 reviews. There is no matching requirement.
- **Grants-in-Aid to Historically Black Colleges and Universities** (HBCUs) identify and restore those historic structures on HBCU campuses considered to be the most historically significant and physically threatened.
- **Grants-in-Aid / Competitive Grants** are offered to encourage community engagement and innovative approaches. The 2017 request (\$25.0 million) is for preserving the sites and stories of the Civil Rights Movement and the African American experience.

Land Acquisition and State Assistance

- **State Conservation Grants** are 50% matching grants to states and local units of government for the planning, acquisition, and development of lands and facilities that will provide the public with access to new opportunities to engage in outdoor recreation. The properties must be maintained in perpetuity.
- **American Battlefield Protection Program Land Acquisition Grants**, part of the Land and Water Conservation Fund, are given to state and local governments to acquire fee or protective interests in Revolutionary War, War of 1812, and Civil War battlefield sites.

- As part of **Federal Acquisition/Collaborative Landscape Planning**, Department of the Interior bureaus collaborate with the US Forest Service and other government and local community partners to achieve high-priority conservation goals.
- The **Urban Park and Recreation Recovery (Act of 1978)** gives matching grants and technical assistance to eligible economically distressed urban communities to revitalize and improve indoor and outdoor recreation facilities.

Operation of the National Park System (ONPS)

Except for the national trails systems and the wild and scenic rivers system, the listed programs are carried out in units of the national park system. However, they all depend on partnerships that extend beyond parks boundaries and are consistent with the intent of the second sentence of the NPS mission.

- Under the **Volunteer in the Parks Program (Act of 1969)**, 444,000 volunteers contributed 8 million hours of service in national parks in 2015. The value of this work was estimated at \$182 million. My estimate is that about 15% of the labor in parks is performed by volunteers.
- The **Teacher/Ranger/Teacher** program provides K-12 educators a professional development opportunity during the summer months. Each year 195 teachers participate in 150 parks. About 197,000 K-12 students benefit.
- **Youth Programs** target 15-to-25-year-olds, including low-income and disadvantaged youth, who engage in public land and water restoration. This collection of programs include nine sub-programs, ranging from Junior Ranger to the Student Conservation Association.
- **Cooperative Ecosystem Study Units (CESUs)** are an interdisciplinary, multi-agency collaborative partnership of federal agencies and universities organized on a broad biogeographic basis. There are sub-networks that include HBCUs and Hispanic-serving institutions.
- In the **Cooperative Landscape Conservation** program Interior bureaus leverage their resources and expertise with that of other federal agencies, states, tribes, and others to focus on problems of concern to the nation's varied ecosystems.
- There are 19 **Research Learning Centers** located in parks that host non-NPS researchers and develop education programs related to their findings. The research covers a wide range of topics. Most of the centers are multi-park in scope. They operate as public-private partnerships.
- Led by the Environmental Protection Agency, the **Great Lakes Restoration Initiative** is a coordinated interagency process to restore and protect the Great Lakes region.
- The **National Trails** system is a nationwide network of national scenic trails, national historic trails, and national recreation trails. NPS supports 23 of the 30 trails.
- The **National Water Trails** system is a network of waterways for public exploration and enjoyment. NPS works with state and local partners to provide resources and technical expertise.

- The **Wild and Scenic Rivers** system preserves rivers with outstanding natural, cultural, and recreational values in a free-flowing condition for the enjoyment of present and future generations. The system comprises 208 rivers, with NPS having responsibility for 60 of them.

Strengthening the connections

What follows are some of my thoughts on strengthening connections. I do not represent it as comprehensive. It's really a game that any number can play. Readers are free to add their own approaches.

- The first step is to make these programs widely known in the NPS work force. If that can be achieved people will forge their own connections. Here's an example. Recently I was talking to the former superintendent of a new area. She said that in the early days, when the park had few resources, a HABS documentation project (see above) was invaluable in establishing credibility with the community.
- There should be a second volume of the *Management Policies* that includes all of the partnership programs and describes their content. It should be as widely distributed as the current volume.
- In each regional office there should be one position responsible for knowing what's going on in all the cooperative programs. This would be analogous to a project manager position in design and construction: knowing how the pieces fit together, but not responsible for operating the programs.
- On a pilot basis pick two superintendents and put them in charge of all the NPS programs in a relevant surrounding area. Let them make the connections that strengthen their park management. One might be urban, the other rural. Evaluate the experience after a couple of years. If useful, expand. (A confession here: this was an idea the late Bill Spitzer, who was instrumental in establishing the Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance (RTCA) program, gave me years ago.)
- Station some cooperative program staff in parks, not to work on park issues, but to do their program work in surrounding communities. The RTCA program might be a place to begin.
- As part of management development, rotate park staff through cooperative programs and vice versa.
- Strengthen the emphasis on cooperative programs in all training.
- Encourage and expand the sister park program in International Affairs. There may be non-international applications for this concept, e.g., with state or local parks.
- Make university and academic connections with parks stronger by expanding the scope of CESUs and Research Learning Centers.
- National heritage areas have proved their worth and should be a permanent part of the federal conservation strategy. Seek legislation that makes federal involvement perpetual and, like wild and scenic rivers and national trails, funds them in ONPS.

Conclusion

It was my great privilege to work with the National Park Advisory Board that produced the 2001 report *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century*. The last two sentences of that report encapsulate why I believe these connections are key to defining a successful NPS mission for the future: “By caring for the parks and conveying the park ethic, we care for ourselves and act on behalf of the future. The larger purpose of this mission is to build a citizenry that is committed to conserving its heritage and its home on earth.”⁵

References

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3. National Park Service, *Management Policies 2006* (Washington, DC: NPS 2005).
4. National Park Service, *Budget Justifications and Performance Information Fiscal Year 2017* [“The Green Book”] (Washington, DC: NPS, 2016).
5. National Park System Advisory Board, *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 2001), 30.

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[*Ed. note:* This is the final installment in our decade-long National Park Service Centennial Essay Series. In the next (December) issue of *The George Wright Forum*, Dwight T. Pitcaithley, who kicked off the essays in 2007, and Rolf Diamant, our regular “Letter from Woodstock” columnist and essay series contributor, will wrap things up with a retrospective highlighting some of the key ideas presented in the essays, along with their thoughts on how those ideas might change NPS in the years to come.]