

THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CENTENNIAL

1916 ESSAY SERIES 2016

Final Centennial Thoughts

Dwight T. Pitcaithley and Rolf Diamant

[Ed. note: In this issue of The George Wright Forum, Dwight T. Pitcaithley, who kicked off the National Park Service Centennial Essay Series in 2007, and Rolf Diamant, our regular “Letter from Woodstock” columnist and essay series contributor, provide a retrospective highlighting some of the key ideas presented in this decade-long project, along with their thoughts on how those ideas might change NPS in the years to come. Diamant and Pitcaithley were also contributors to A Thinking Person’s Guide to America’s National Parks (2016).]

WHEN THE GWS BOARD OF DIRECTORS CAME UP WITH THE IDEA of launching a Centennial Essay Series on the future of the US national park system in the spring of 2007, the centennial honestly seemed rather far off. For the present capstone essay, we were charged with saying something meaningful about the National Park Service centennial as viewed through the filter of the 27 essays published in this journal over the past decade. Nearly ten years have passed, along with two presidential administrations and a much-anticipated year of centennial commemorative events marking the 1916 founding of our National Park Service. Twenty-seven well-known writers—all with a demonstrated interest in national parks—answered the call and contributed essays for the series. However, writing this final essay of the series turned out to be quite daunting. In some respects, the essays offer a tutorial of sorts on what the National Park Service has become over the past one hundred years. Viewed from another

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angle, they reveal a Pandora's box full of important problems and issues unimagined by Stephen T. Mather and Horace Albright but which, nevertheless, demand the attention of the agency as it prepares itself for the next century.

In writing this last capstone essay we have tried to capture some of the essayists' most salient points and also offer some perspective on the National Park Service's centennial itself. The former task was in many ways easier; the essays could be all read and discussed between the two of us, and a small sampling of their insights presented. The latter task proved much more challenging, as we admittedly lack the essential perspective of time to interpret the longer-term efficacy of the centennial project jointly managed by the National Park Service's Centennial Office and the National Park Foundation.

Centennial observations

That said, we might begin this summation by offering several somewhat random observations on the NPS centennial commemoration without the benefit of a more comprehensive analysis that will only emerge with time. We are sharing these impressions while they are fresh in our minds as a foundation of ideas others will undoubtedly build upon.

The Obama effect. Trying to capture the attention of the American people is a huge challenge under the best of circumstances. The "Find Your Park" campaign would have had an uphill battle, given all the background noise and competing demands for people's limited time and attention, even without competition from the most contentious and divisive national election in recent memory. That said, President Obama's frequent and often controversial use of the 1906 Antiquities Act may have at times over-shadowed centennial-related activities. In a way, however, it did get people talking about the national park system.

The fact is that Obama took the slogan "Find Your Park" to heart during his eight years in office. He actually "found" approximately two dozen new national monuments (as of the time this essay is being written), easily breaking Bill Clinton's old record of 19 monument proclamations. During the first ten months of the centennial year, Obama signed no fewer than eight monument proclamations. So perhaps the most impactful legacy of the centennial year will turn out to be the lands and stories preserved for posterity by President Obama's Antiquities Act pen. His new additions to the national park system include César Chávez, Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad, Charles Young Buffalo Soldiers, Honouliuli, Pullman, Belmont-Paul Women's Equality, and Stonewall national monuments. Significantly, the monuments, together with a handful of new parks authorized by Congress in 2014, will help make the national park system more representative of the nation as whole by broadening the system's national narrative.

Curious branding. Under the assumption that every campaign deserves both a tagline and an iconic image, the centennial folks provided problematic versions of both. "Find Your Park" encouraged people to self-identify with a park but there was always a measure of ambiguity in the message. What do you do next? And what about the rest of the National Park Service—the wide portfolio of preservation and community assistance programs—that are not physical parks? Despite good intentions, this under-recognized but essential component of the system was largely lost in the centennial branding campaign.

There was also confusion around the adoption of an empty silhouette of the traditional agency symbol to brand the centennial. NPS apparently decided against using the iconic arrowhead (so ubiquitous in units of the national park system) during its centennial campaign due of fears that doing so would lead to over-commercialization of the symbol, which has trademark status. The fact that NPS exerts total control over the symbol seems not to have played into the decision. One wonders, however, why the ghost arrowhead was then also used on internal government-produced products such as the *National Parks Index for 2016*? We heard a number of reasons for using this image, including that as a new brand it could be utilized by nongovernmental partners in their own centennial promotional materials. However, having NPS use this suggested arrowhead in lieu of the traditional arrowhead with the tree, mountain, and bison—one of the most recognizable and respected brands in the country—still leaves us scratching our heads.

Absence of history. The “Find Your Park” campaign primarily focused on connecting to the millennial generation with extensive use of video and social media. We wholeheartedly agree with the imperative of engaging younger, more diverse communities of park users. We are still puzzled, however, by the relative absence of history in the centennial program. The centennial, for example, coincided with the fifty-year anniversary of the National Historic Preservation Act, legislation that placed the Park Service at the center of this nation’s historic preservation effort. Programs such as the National Register of Historic Places, Technical Preservation Services, Grants-in-Aid to States and Territories, and Heritage Documentation all nurture preservation activities in communities throughout the nation. These important NPS programs, three dozen in total, were all but ignored during the centennial year.¹ It should not be overlooked, as well, that this centennial year began with the armed occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge and anti-government rhetoric echoing back to the Civil War. This is only one reason for paying more attention to history during the 2016 centennial. History reminds us never to become too complacent. What has been authorized can also be de-authorized. On the other hand, we were encouraged by the progress of the LGBTQ National Landmark theme study and the Civil War to Civil Rights initiative. The latter has transitioned into a program now called “The Arc to Equality,” which recognizes the continuing struggle for civil and human rights from Reconstruction through to today.

The centennial essays

Now to our centennial essays. In his introduction to the series in the April 2007 issue of *The George Wright Forum*, Dave Harmon wrote, “As it approaches its hundredth year, the National Park Service must commit itself to a ‘creed of discovery,’ to the willingness to question all assumptions, right down to the very mission of the agency itself. What needs to be at the heart of the NPS centennial is not celebration, but cerebration: a rigorous and deeply penetrating process of reflection on every aspect of the national park idea.”² And that’s what we got—27 essays that questioned a wide range of assumptions about the past, present, and future of national parks in American society.

Most of the essays tended to fall under three overarching themes. First and foremost, there were a great many dealing with the nature of climate resilience, impairment, and manag-

ing park resources in an unstable, anthropogenic environment of continuous change. A number of essays also addressed the criticality of education to the future purpose and meaning of national parks. And a last group probed the changing public perception and understanding of the national park system. These essays challenged the agency to re-align its programs, services, and even nomenclature if the system is to be perceived as relevant, fully representative, and meaningful to all segments of the American public in the 21st century.

Climate change. One of the most addressed topics was the subject of climate change, how it was affecting parks, and what the Park Service's response should be. Some advocated changes to the 1916 Organic Act while others thought that with or without altering that century-old expression of the agency's mission, the National Park Service should be acknowledging the issue more overtly than it was. Indeed, Brent Mitchell suggested that "climate change may eclipse biodiversity conservation as the main threat around which programs and funding are organized."³ It should be noted that Director Jon Jarvis is keenly aware of the role climate change is playing and will play in the future of the national park system. NPS has developed, in our estimation, a thoughtful and detailed series of informational web pages (<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/climatechange/index.htm>). But while the agency may be building a strong internal response to the new normal in managing natural and cultural resources with regard to the changing climate, that response is not readily apparent to the average taxpayer. While we are painfully aware of the political minefield "climate change" has become, we also understand that the current changes the environment is undergoing can be plainly presented to the visiting public based on solid scientific findings, as directed by the Park Service's 2006 *Management Policies*.

Education. A second topic mentioned in numerous essays was that of education. This is not surprising as the blue-ribbon reports *National Parks for the 21st Century: The Vail Agenda* (1992), *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century* (2001), and *Advancing the National Park Idea: National Parks Second Century Commission Report* (2009) all stressed the concept of education as a major focus of NPS work. The idea of parks as classrooms and the National Park Service as an educational institution with connections to colleges and universities and a robust research program was, of course, a primary mission of the Park Service from the beginning. Franklin K. Lane, Stephen T. Mather, Horace Albright, and Robert Sterling Yard shared the belief that the new Park Service had to develop a strong capability to "supplement the work of schools by opening the doors of Nature's laboratory." In his 1918 instructions to the nascent organization, Secretary of the Interior Lane charged that the "educational ... use of the national parks should be encouraged in every practicable way."⁴

The National Park Service has traditionally maintained an uncertain or uneven policy toward interpreting the parks. From its early commitment to the "educational value of our wonderful playgrounds," NPS pulled back from a broad environmental message in the late 1960s and early 1970s only to embrace "environmental education" later in the 1970s and 1980s. Offering any scholarly explanation about the causes of the Civil War was suppressed until the 1990s when battlefield superintendents insisted that the reasons for secession be presented to the visiting public. Director Roger Kennedy was a consistent advocate of a vigorous place-based educational program, believing that "resource protection only has staying

power if it is also education.... Resource protection has to walk out of the park in the heart of the visitor.”⁵ As contributor Rolf Diamant observed, some recent NPS exhibitions represent intentional efforts to “help people find broader context and meaning in the world around them.”⁶ One very successful approach to engaging the public with stories from the darker side of the nation’s narrative was articulated by Edward Linenthal. Chronicling his participation in the “Civic Engagement” initiative promoted by then-Regional Director Marie Rust, Linenthal conducted a series of seminars with park interpreters that were designed to assist them in presenting to the visiting public the “more problematic aspects of our national stories, ones that offer opportunities for somber reflection and as antidote against coarse triumphalism and preening ethnocentrism.”⁷ Denis Galvin captured this more expansive purpose for National Park Service interpretive/educational programs when he quoted from the *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century* report. “By caring for the parks and conveying the park ethic,” Galvin reminded us, “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.”⁸

While there are many interpretive/educational programs throughout the national park system that are striving to engage the public in a conversation that informs and enlightens, there remain many that provide only basic, mostly descriptive content. Some national parks still base their core interpretive message on decades-old scholarship. In that regard, it is disappointing that, in its centennial year, the National Park Service was unable to obtain the funds necessary to upgrade the films, exhibits, brochures, and pamphlets that convey messages no longer accepted by scholars. Current scholarly messages, from across the humanities and the natural and social sciences, must be embraced if the National Park Service is to be perceived by the taxpaying public as a leader in life-long learning.

The Second Century Commission’s acknowledgement that “national parks play an important role in building civil society” echoed the 2001 National Park System Advisory Board’s challenge that national parks “should be not just recreational destinations, but springboards for personal journeys of intellectual and cultural enrichment.” Essay contributor Robert Keiter argued this point from a slightly different perspective. If the Park Service is to become a relevant player in the nation’s educational system, it must be “engaging in public education to a much greater degree than is true presently. It is, after all, the only federal land management agency deeply engaged in public education, and thus uniquely positioned to impart environmental knowledge and related conservation values to the general public.”⁹

As the world grapples with the implications of global warming, the National Park Service is well placed to engage the public in a conversation about the earth atmosphere’s rising temperature and its effect on critical natural and cultural resources. As our environment becomes increasingly unstable, an inquisitive public will assuredly seek solace in places presumed to be durable and enduring. Rising sea levels and changing ecosystems thus will become rich topics that should be embraced by the Park Service. William Tweed captures this new reality in his comment: “In this dynamic and increasingly unstable world, the NPS must begin talking about change as an inescapable part of the park world.”¹⁰ Unless checked in some as-yet unforeseen way, rising oceans will soon force NPS to cancel all visitation to Fort

Jefferson (where Dr. Samuel Mudd was incarcerated for a time due to his treatment of John Wilkes Booth following the assassination of Abraham Lincoln) in Dry Tortugas National Park. As Michelle Berenfield cautions, “NPS should be thinking about those sites that could justifiably be the focus of massive public attention and expense should they be threatened by climate change....”¹¹ An excellent teaching opportunity exists in every park, not just coastal ones, to make climate change real. The ensuing conversation would amount to environmental education at its finest. If the National Park Service needed an icon and a slogan for that civic/environmental engagement, it might be advised to use, “Where will we move the Statue of Liberty?”

The centennial essay contributors who stressed the importance of education to the next century of the National Park Service did so, we believe, not to suggest that the agency’s current educational program was deficient in some way, but rather to encourage NPS to allocate more funds in its direction. After all, uniformed interpreters, and the exhibits and programs they manage, constitute the public face of the National Park Service. If the agency is to maintain its relevance in its second century, the stories shared with the public must not only inform—they must challenge. They must encourage the visitor (in-person and virtual) to share in the wonder of this planet’s natural systems and appreciate the very real threats that they presently face. At the same time, they must provoke (to use a Freeman Tilden term) the public into thinking more critically about this nation’s human past and how it has shaped our present. In the words of Duncan Morrow, “Our parks are ideal classrooms and laboratories for teaching the glorious, untidy progress of our people, their management, and their values.”¹²

Changing perceptions of the national park system. Embracing the centennial by invoking, yet again, the powerful and instructive words of the Organic Act does not ultimately get us where we need to go. Those words describe a path Congress designed for another time in another century. In his essay kicking off the series, Dwight Pitcaithley points out that “the National Park System today is vastly different from the one envisioned and managed by Stephen T. Mather and Horace M. Albright ninety years ago. The complexity of issues confronted by park and program managers today could not have been envisioned by the first generation of Park Service administrators.”¹³ Expanding on this observation, John Reynolds explains, “The United States is a dramatically different nation than we were in 1916.” Reynolds goes on to say that “the assumptions the founders of NPS made back then—assumptions about who constituted ‘the public’ the parks were meant for, and about what expectations this particular subset of Americans had for ‘their’ parks—may not be valid in the future, or even now.” Reynolds warns us that if our national parks truly want to be “relevant” in the next century, they and NPS’s programs must be “aligned” with ever-changing social and demographic expectations and needs.¹⁴ In her essay, Carolyn Finney points out that the founders of the National Park Service, and for that matter, the founders of our republic, very narrowly interpreted “we the people” and the publics they were serving. According to Finney, people of color “have gone unseen, uncounted, devalued, and dismissed in the larger process of creating an American environmental narrative.”¹⁵ A second century national park system has to be perceived as accessible and useful to all the people of America.

Several essayists turned their attention to the composition and public perception of the national park system as a whole. Dayton Duncan describes how George Melendez Wright, as far back as the 1930s, intrinsically understood how essential it was for the national park system never to become finite or static: “At a moment in history when some of the park idea’s biggest supporters were opposing an expansion of the system, on the grounds that too many proposed additions were not up to ‘national park standards,’ Wright saw the danger of doing nothing. Adding a ‘substandard area … would not be calamitous,’ he warned. ‘The failure to save Mount Olympus’ forests, the Kings River Canyon … and a host of others just as valuable would be the real calamity.... The logical answer is more not less park area.’”¹⁶

We should remember that “parks” by title have always been in the minority of special places managed by the National Park Service. Upon the creation of the agency on August 25, 1916, 38 preserved entities formed the core of what was to become the national park system and fewer than half were labeled “national parks.” While some of the giants of the system were included—Yellowstone, Yosemite, and Sequoia—most of the initial members were national monuments. On that inauguration day, the national park system began with 14 national parks, 22 national monuments, and two reservations: Hot Springs and Casa Grande Ruin.

Today, there are more than two dozen different park designations for the over 400 NPS-managed areas. Dave Harmon’s essay appeals for a more cognitive presentation of the system to the public. Harmon describes a “bewildering variety” of park designations. “It stokes the confusion, already widespread, over what the purpose of the national park system is,” observes Harmon, “and how its [at that time] nearly 400 … components relate to one another.”¹⁷ This artificial ecosystem subtly re-enforces a balkanization that detracts from one of the inherent strengths of a system: clear brand recognition.

As people use parks differently, Rolf Diamant suggests that their relationship to the system becomes more intimate and meaningful in the context of their daily lives. Diamant senses a profound shift: “People’s connections with their national parks are changing in fundamental ways. Traditional patterns of use, from episodic school field trips to annual family vacations, are being augmented by a deeper level of sustained engagement.”¹⁸ Essayist Janet McDonnell proposes that our perceptions of what parks are for in their second century may therefore need to expand: “Any vision for the next century clearly must focus on more than preserving the individual visitor experience; it must be firmly linked to the common good. The NPS and its partners must continue to develop and embrace a broader view of what the national parks are for.”¹⁹

In conclusion

The 27 centennial essays published in the *Forum* over the past nine years cast a broad net. They reflect the complex nature of the National Park Service at the end of its first century. The small agency began with a seemingly simple charge from Congress to preserve unimpaired the places placed in its care. In 1916, the National Park Service was completely focused on parks and monuments—all 38 of them. Almost all were natural areas located in the high-elevation American West. But within a span of 20 years, the thematic and geographic scope of the agency dramatically expanded with the 1933 NPS reorganization and the pas-

sage of the Historic Sites Act of 1935. The Historic Sites Act and, later, the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 assigned to the National Park Service wide-reaching responsibilities for assisting in the preservation of historic properties outside of national parks and monuments. A decade later, Congress put the National Park Service in charge of a program that provides federal tax credits for private property owners engaged in rehabilitating historic buildings. Through this accretion of responsibilities, NPS was placed at the center of the nation's historic preservation program with only minimal overlap with its responsibilities to manage national parks.

Congress continued to expand the mission of the Park Service through the requirements of the Wilderness Act of 1964, Land and Water Conservation Act of 1965, Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968, National Trails System Act of 1968, National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, Endangered Species Act of 1973, Archeological Resources Protection Act of 1979, Tax Reform Act of 1986, Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990, and many others. After 100 years, the initial charge of Congress "to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations," while still applicable, no longer adequately describes the "mission" of the National Park Service. As defined by Congress over the past century, the purpose of the agency is multifaceted and complex and has far-reaching responsibilities within and without the 400-plus units of the national park system. These responsibilities and their legislative authorities are captured in the 2006 edition of the *Management Policies* (<https://www.nps.gov/policy/MP2006.pdf>) and the 2013 edition of the *National Park Service Programs* (https://www.nps.gov/policy/NPSPrograms_September2013_small.pdf) guidance manuals.

In the next century, NPS will face significant challenges in managing the natural and cultural resources committed to its care, but also will need to confront the preservation and maintenance of park infrastructure—its water and sewage systems, its roads and trails, its contact stations and visitor centers. The current \$12 billion maintenance backlog has doubled over just the past decade, and its growth shows no signs of diminishing. By several reckonings, the Park Service has not only arrived at its century mark—it has also arrived at a crossroads. It cannot continue to be a viable player in the fields of environmental conservation, historic preservation, and education unless it receives significantly more support from Congress. A failing water supply system at the Grand Canyon, a failing sewage system in the Yosemite Valley, and failing elevators at Carlsbad Caverns and the Washington Monument do not represent the national park system at its best.

These basic needs will only be met if enough voters and taxpayers feel a connection to the National Park Service and perceive it as useful and valuable. As John Reynolds, a former deputy director of the agency, points out in his centennial essay, "The Park Service's concept of relevancy, the definition of who the parks exist for, must adapt if the vitality and strength of the national park idea, and the parks themselves, are to survive as an iconic part of the American psyche." The 1916 Organic Act charges the agency with *promoting* the parks as well as conserving the "natural and historic objects and the wild life therein." Promoting the parks

was something Mather and Albright were particularly good at, Reynolds observes, and it should be something the Park Service “boldly” embraces again. To be clear, promoting is not the same thing as lobbying—an activity all federal agencies are prohibited from doing. Nor is it simply inviting the public to “find” their park. Promoting/advertising/marketing the parks, park values, and the benefits of preserving historic properties and open space, and expanding recreational opportunities throughout the country, should become, again, a major focus of the agency. The Park Service according to Reynolds needs to engage in a “concerted effort … to do the on-going civic engagement necessary to identify what it is and can be about parks that is relevant to Americans, the full variety of Americans, all Americans today.” By committing to a thoughtful and consistent and enduring program of promoting the public benefits found in its multiple mandates from Congress, the Park Service will encourage Americans to understand that there is more to the agency “than just the places they visit, and that the value of the whole is greater than just the sum of the parks.”²⁰

As we write, the 2016 presidential election has just concluded, and the future direction of the National Park Service has never been more uncertain. A new secretary of the interior and a new NPS director will largely determine the immediate course of the agency. Will they consider the multiple opportunities available to strengthen the role of the Park Service in our troubled society and—in the words of essayist Mike Soukup, encourage the agency to “up its game”?²¹ Or will they instead passively assume all is well and simply reason that attracting more visitors to the parks is sufficient to maintain the future of the agency? Or, even more troubling, will they pursue the kind of shortsighted and misguided privatization or franchising business ventures that centennial essayist Holly Fretwell advocates?²² When Frederick Law Olmsted first articulated a philosophy of parks in his 1865 Yosemite Report, he argued that the establishment of “great public grounds for the free enjoyment of the people” was a primary “duty” of the government. To start selectively franchising parts of the system and breaking apart its cadre of professional employees takes us down a long dark road that will demoralize and cripple the National Park Service on the cusp of its second century.

All this, and much more, remains to be seen. Nearly 50 years ago Congress declared “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.”²³ Our belief is that only by broadening the national park system’s appeal, by overtly promoting the intrinsic value of the parks and the park values inherent in the Park Service’s community assistance and preservation programs, and by expanding the agency’s role in the nation’s educational and environmental conservation systems, can our national park system attract the broad base of support it needs to do the work that Congress and the American people expect it to do.

Endnotes

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