

Bringing Parks Back to the People: Revisiting the Dual Mandate and Core Values of the National Park Service

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Introduction

THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE (NPS) is tasked with protecting natural and cultural resources while simultaneously providing opportunities for public use and enjoyment. This dichotomous mission, known as the “dual mandate,” defines NPS’s unique and complex purpose. In 2016, NPS’s centennial year, many national parks saw record-breaking visitation (Repanshek 2016; Tabish 2016). The impacts associated with increased visitation garnered extensive scrutiny and focused attention on the challenges of managing for both resource integrity and social engagement.

Leading up to the centennial, NPS prioritized making the national parks relevant to all Americans (National Park Service 2011; National Park Service Stewardship Institute 2015). Though national park visitation is greater than ever (Flowers 2016), many Americans still appear to be unconnected to the parks (Peterson 2014). Enhancing relevancy and engagement while mitigating the ways in which people impact park resources presents yet another pair of disjointed challenges for NPS.

As we examine the core values of NPS, we review the historical treatment of the dual mandate and attend to the marginalization of the “public enjoyment” aspect of the NPS mission. We then explore ways for NPS to embrace leisure and recreation in order to foster stewardship among an increasingly diverse and urbanized American citizenry. To secure relevancy *and* reinforce conservation, we ultimately recommend that NPS re-calibrate its internal priorities to encourage use of parks and engender a long-term connection to nature.

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Where have we been?

The dual mandate stems from the NPS Organic Act of 1916, which states that the agency shall manage national parks for resource conservation and public enjoyment. Tension between the two edicts of the dual mandate developed quickly, and in 1925 NPS's first director, Stephen Mather, reasoned it would be impossible for the public to enjoy parks without maintaining intact resources (Martin 2005). The Redwood Act of 1978 (amending the General Authorities Act of 1970) supported Mather's position by stating protection should take precedence over use by the people whenever the two are in conflict (Dilsaver 1994). Current NPS management policies reaffirm resource protection as NPS's predominant duty (National Park Service 2006). While stringent resource protection policies have guided vital national park conservation decisions, we maintain that NPS should establish equally high standards for providing opportunities for public enjoyment. Alternatively, by minimizing its charge to provide public enjoyment, NPS further distances itself from the American people and from its duty to cultivate citizen stewardship.

The astonishing scenery and unique story of this country are assets shared by all Americans, and NPS must engage with the public as responsible owners and stewards of their communally owned parks. Yet, in current dialogue people are referred to in sterile terms, such as "carrying capacity" or "number of visitors," and the public enjoyment function of the dual mandate has taken a back seat in research discourse and management practice. Figure 1 illustrates how researchers have focused more on issues related to protection of the national parks *from* the people than on designing experiences *for* the people.

An imbalanced approach to researching and managing national parks may have contributed to the challenges NPS now faces. Within its overarching agency goal of achieving relevance, NPS addresses multiple issues connected to the public enjoyment edict. Cultural disconnect among young people, poor representation of diverse populations (both as park visitors and in the NPS workforce), and increasing incidents of visitor transgression in parks all are complex problems of public enjoyment (Peterson 2014). With this in mind, we consider the commendable work NPS is doing to address such issues, and we urge NPS to take further action by adopting an internal priority shift toward public enjoyment.

Where are we going?

New park interpretation practices exhibit NPS's desire to focus more on visitor enjoyment and engagement. For example, park interpreters are beginning to use facilitated dialogue techniques to create interpretive programs that involve the lived experiences and perspectives of visitors (Stephen T. Mather Training Center 2013). Outside of park settings, a growing number of new programs and strategic plans invite people to explore and connect with NPS. Initiatives include: The Urban Agenda, a plan to connect NPS to people living in cities (National Park Service Stewardship Institute 2015); OneNPS, a strategic objective to activate the synergy of parks and NPS programs in communities (National Park Service Stewardship Institute 2015); and Every Kid in Park, a program to give all fourth graders in America access to federal lands and waters (US Department of the Interior 2017). In addition to new programs, recently designated national monuments, such as César E. Chávez and Charles

visit their national parks, it is crucial for them to be treated as stewards and conservationists rather than as threats to resources. Furthermore, people need to feel emotionally connected to parks in order to develop a sense of ownership and an ethic of stewardship.

How do we bridge the past with the future?

Leisure is a direct motivation for the public to visit this country's national treasures (Sne-penger et al. 2006). People who visit national parks do not do so to be instructed; rather, they visit to experience and be moved by the grandeur of iconic places (Figure 2). Emotion is a critical and fundamental motivation of human behavior (Dolan 2002; Phelps and LeDoux 2005). Thus, if people are emotionally connected to parks and feel as if they belong, they are more likely to support the parks and treat them respectfully. By focusing on leisure and recreation as mechanisms that foster emotional connection, NPS can help visitors develop an ethic of care and a willingness to safeguard parks for future generations.

Figure 2. People don't come to national parks to learn lessons. They come to be emotionally moved by the experience of iconic places. (Above) Vietnam Veterans Memorial (photo courtesy of Marvin Lynchard/Department of Defense). (Below) Big Bend National Park (photo courtesy of Niagara66 via Wikimedia Commons).



While continued focus on providing leisure is one method for sustaining support for parks, further consideration should be given to the unique park characteristics that appeal to various visitor identities. One potential method for understanding how national parks appeal to people is examining the brand of NPS. Graves (2013) presents a relevant psychological rationale underlying consumer behavior: when people buy products, they may often do so largely based on the branding of the product as opposed to an overt rationalization of the purchase decision. Extensive marketing research has constructed an entire consumer psychology of brands (Schmitt 2012), providing vital concepts such as brand attachment and brands as identity signals. Applying psychological principles of branding, NPS can design a brand that people trust and value, much like they trust and value their favorite brand of car or computer. With this in mind, we are compelled to ask some difficult questions: Does the current brand of NPS reflect the duality of its mission? Does the NPS brand suggest positive emotional experiences for visitors, or does it instill a sense of restriction to the public?

If the NPS brand communicates how it sustains rather than restricts access to parks, the agency may appeal more broadly to people who are not already natural resource enthusiasts and avid outdoor recreationalists. NPS can better define and exemplify its brand by reconsidering the public image it portrays. For instance, NPS can emanate a sense of familiarity to visitors by presenting parks as special places and not just as protected areas. Similarly, a renewed focus on serving visitors may stimulate profound, lifelong connections to national parks that extend beyond one-time visits.

In order to manage a possible rebranding, NPS should consider restructuring its current ranks agency-wide. By involving more communicators, marketers, psychologists, sociologists, and other professionals from the social science disciplines, NPS would be better positioned to attend to both prongs of the dual mandate equally. By building a workforce that hosts specialists in human behavior and other social disciplines, NPS can better create a foundation that reflects both the resource and social aspects of stewarding the national parks.

Lastly, NPS should cultivate stronger external relationships with state, regional, and local parks and nature centers (Figure 3). Research suggests that regularly occurring family leisure activities are better predictors of overall family cohesion than those that require greater investments in time, money, or effort (Zabriske and McCormick 2001). Similarly, environmental socialization research suggests the importance of recurring, expanding, and frequent interaction with nature in the developmental stages of many “natural-history-oriented young adults” (James, Bixler, and Vadala 2010).

Considered together, core family leisure and environmental socialization conceptually support the recommendation that NPS should consider strengthening relationships with local nature-based parks. While some natural resource professionals may reason a single visit to a national park provides a transformative experience, it is an unlikely outcome for most visitors. It is more likely that visitors develop lifelong interests in nature through repeated emotional experiences with nearby nature. By supporting public engagement with nearby parks and natural spaces, NPS can develop visitor interest in local natural and cultural heritage, which may evolve into a broader interest in protecting and enjoying national parks.



Figure 3. NPS should cultivate stronger external relationships with state, regional, and local parks and nature centers. Research suggests that regularly occurring family leisure activities are better predictors of overall family cohesion than those that require greater investments in time, money or effort. Among the groups Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area partners with are the City of Malibu Parks & Recreation Department, The Children’s Nature Institute, California State Parks, and Los Angeles County Recreation & Parks Department. Photo courtesy of the National Park Service.

Summary

The dual mandate enunciated in the National Park Service (NPS) Organic Act has guided administration and management of America’s national parks since 1916, shaping an enduring and inspiring legacy. But as modern society evolves and new generations mature, NPS must direct increasing energy and attention to maintaining its cultural relevancy. While acknowledging the importance of preserving resource integrity, NPS would benefit immensely from making a commitment to care for its visitors in the same manner in which it cares for the resources under its purview.

NPS can strengthen its relationship with the American people by talking *with* visitors as opposed to talking *to* and *about* them (Figure 1a); after all, people come to the national parks to seek emotional and fulfilling leisure experiences, not to be lectured and managed (Snepenger et al. 2006). NPS can expand its workforce to include people with educational backgrounds in social disciplines to balance staff who specialize in science and conservation, a restructuring that honors the dual mandate. NPS can allocate resources to constructing new affiliations with state, regional, and local parks, nature centers, and cultural heritage sites to encourage more frequent and recurring experiences in parks and nature beyond the occasional visit to a national park.

To many Americans, NPS is the green and gray uniform, the arrowhead, the American bison, the giant sequoia, and purple mountains' majesty. However, if a modern public recognizes national parks as crucial bastions of the nation's cultural and natural history, NPS is more likely to endure as a relevant cultural concept for *all* Americans. By seeking ways to become not just relevant but *indispensable*, NPS encourages the American public to become invested in national parks. Though conservation work is both prudent and necessary, by providing opportunities for quality public enjoyment, NPS fosters key stakeholder support that will protect the national parks in perpetuity.

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