

Into the Second Century of the National Park Service: A Synthesis of Student Perspectives at 100 Years

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AT THE DAWN OF ITS SECOND CENTURY, the National Park Service (NPS) faces an incredible number of complex and difficult challenges. Some of these were highlighted by the authors of this special section, including: achieving both aspects of the NPS's dual mandate; protecting resources in the face of climate change, land development, and record visitation levels; securing sustainable funding; adapting to changing visitor use patterns and leisure preferences; and building relevancy with an urbanizing and diversifying population. How NPS responds to these and other challenges, as well as to those that will undoubtedly arise, will largely determine its future. The inaugural George Wright Student Summit provided the opportunity for the voices of a younger generation to express their own ideas and perspectives about what these challenges are and how to best address them, as well as a vision for NPS moving into the second century.

Responding to critical challenges is not new to NPS. Throughout its history, NPS has fought for political relevancy, struggled for sufficient funding, adapted to changing leisure and travel patterns, addressed transboundary threats, and reimagined how it tells the story of America (Keiter 2013; Harmon and Conard 2016). Along the way, NPS has become a global leader in scientifically informed protected area management (Keiter 2013). The national park system has grown from a handful of mostly Western parks to having a presence in rural and urban areas in every state and territory. NPS is staffed by tens of thousands of highly dedicated and skilled personnel and enjoys broad public support (Pew 2015; NPS 2017a). We believe NPS is well positioned to navigate these challenges in a manner that energizes

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the storied organization and help make parks more relevant to the changing dynamics of our country and world.

Boldly moving forward: Reflections on the special section

The articles included in this special section of *The George Wright Forum* provide a reflective and thoughtful discussion on how NPS might effectively respond to the challenges it faces entering the next century. The Student Summit participants and their faculty advisors intentionally sought to offer bold and creative ideas unbound by common pragmatic or research constraints. Some of these ideas cut against our individual or collectively held sacred truths about park and protected area management. This article provides a synthesis based off the previous articles. In this, the authors of this article identified four common threads that emerged from the collection: Parks are for people; Promote the national parks; Building bridges across boundaries; and Embrace institutional reform. Together these four threads weave in and out of the collection to frame a vision that NPS, scholars, and practitioners can follow boldly into the agency's second century. In the following sections, we summarize and reflect on each thread.

Parks are for people

The first thread is a clear call for a stronger and more visible commitment to the public enjoyment aspect of NPS's mission. The park system exists in large part as spaces for people to play in, explore, recreate, and escape the pressures and challenges of everyday life. They offer unparalleled opportunity for learning and discovery, not just about park resources, but with friends and family. Yet, there is good reason to ask whether people see themselves *in* the parks or whether they simply see parks as types of museums that protect our history, our heritage, or the environment. And if the former, which people identify with parks and why do others not? NPS, Jones et al. (this issue) write, must care for visitors to parks to the same degree that it so diligently cares for the natural, cultural, and historic resources it protects. Such diligent attention to visitor use and enjoyment is critical to build and maintain cultural relevancy in today's society (Reynolds 2010; Peterson, 2014).

At first glance, it would be easy to miss how potentially subversive to NPS priorities this suggestion is. After all, the parks are witnessing record visitation and struggling to protect resources in the face of such onslaught (Keiter 2013; Flowers 2016). Yet, the authors are on solid ground when they question the agency's commitment, communication, and culture around the public enjoyment aspect of its mission. NPS has a complicated history with where people fit into its spaces and mission. Many of the iconic landscape parks, particularly in the West, were built on the erasure of indigenous peoples (Spence 1999), an erasure that is only recently being acknowledged and fitfully addressed (Nabokov and Loendorf 2004; King 2007; Wolfley 2016). Similarly (but in no way comparably), NPS's commitment to resource protection—which is unquestionably vital—has led to less stewardship of the visitor experience, or, worse, an organizational culture that can view visitor use as antagonistic to resource protection instead of the reason for it. Jones et al.'s word illustrations (this issue) artfully suggest how this cultural orientation has led to an imbalance in research and management

priorities between the two aspects of NPS's mission. This is further evidenced by the historical focus on visitor carrying capacity, as well as limited priority given to visitor use planning in its own right and at park-unit scales (Miller et al., this issue).

Going forward, NPS is encouraged to reflect on what image it communicates to the public about its place in parks. A brief review in February 2017 of more than 40 park unit home pages across all types of units and regions of the country underscores the current misalignment. The dominant photos on almost every park unit home page depicted unpeopled landscapes, or historic or cultural objects. Even pictures of visitor facilities such as campgrounds or urban running trails contained few people. Pictures that did contain people usually showed them at a distance, often standing politely as some uniformed personnel gave a talk. Close-ups, laughter, families, and play were only occasionally included. Notably only a handful of pictures depicted people of color, even in culturally oriented parks or parks located close to ethnically diverse communities. Anyone who visits these park websites would be justifiably excused for thinking that only older, white, middle-class nature-lovers belong in parks.

Changing this perception is essential if NPS wants to maintain long-term relevancy to the American public. Recent efforts to partner with community groups in urban, rural, or minority communities are to be commended and expanded. Yet, recasting parks as places for people requires more than just outreach and marketing. It requires an openness by park management to allow, encourage, and plan for new and diverse ways of enjoying that space. Greater investments in social science research would provide managers a more informed understanding of how people relate to, use, and want to use park spaces (Miller et al., this issue). This should be coupled with rigorous, integrated visitor and resource planning so that the two sides of the dual mandate can be simultaneously advanced as mutually supportive goals rather than antagonistic ones.

Promote the national parks

Addressing many of the challenges the parks face requires NPS to cultivate a broad base of social and political support. The Organic Act explicitly directs that NPS “*shall promote and regulate the use of Federal areas known as national parks...*” (16 U.S.C. §1; emphasis added). It is not discretionary, but rather a statutory and pragmatic imperative that NPS actively strives to inform the public and policymakers at all levels of government about why parks are important socially, culturally, economically, and ecologically to the health and vitality of the nation.

The recent national campaigns Every Kid in a Park (US Department of the Interior 2017) and Find Your Park (Figure 1; NPS 2017c) are great starts in raising visibility and getting new people into parks. Similar national campaigns that encourage people to visit parks should continue to be developed in partnership with state and local tourism bureaus, the tourism and outdoor recreation industries, conservation organizations, and other interested partners. Targeted efforts that seek to build awareness of lesser-known, less-visited, or local national park system units should also be undertaken in partnership with local businesses, educational organizations, and community groups (Depper et al., this issue).



Figure 1. The Find Your Park advertising campaign helped drive visitation to the US national park system to an all-time high of 331 million visitors in 2016. Photo courtesy of Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park.

Promotional efforts should strive to improve the diversity of visitors and the agency workforce to better reflect the changing face of America—a widely recognized priority (Peterson 2014) and the focus of NPS's recent *Call to Action* (NPS 2011). Jones et al. (this issue) make a highly provocative suggestion that to better reach new population segments (and especially younger demographics), NPS may need to rebrand itself from an agency that protects resources to an agency that provides special areas for leisure, learning, and discovery. As part of this rebranding, NPS and its partners could actively promote opportunities for people to learn and experience new ways to enjoy the outdoors. Just as visitors today can participate in ranger-led interpretive programs or park tours, visitors tomorrow could enroll in courses that teach outdoor recreation skills from camping to rock climbing, snorkeling to bird watching, among many others. Such courses would help people associate the national parks with being desirable spaces for recreation. In a similar vein, Depper et al. (this issue) suggest that the use of citizen science-type programs could lead to both greater support and understanding of the parks. This could help the public move from merely finding their park, to claiming a greater responsibility as citizen stewards of their national parks (Pitcaithley and Diamant 2016; Jones et al. this edition).

Finally, promoting the parks clearly must go beyond encouraging and facilitating visitor experiences to include the hard work of increasing public literacy about the national park idea and its importance to the American experiment. At their best, parks reflect our greatest

virtues as a people and actively promote democracy and equality through the quotidian interactions of visitors from many walks of life, as well as through the interpretation of our many stories. Parks also push us to live up to our ideals by shining an honest light on the darker episodes in our history, our present, and our collective psyche. And parks can be critical instruments of building peace and understanding between nations (Krafte et al., this edition). NPS is encouraged to be bold in communicating its importance in the social and political life of the country.

Build bridges across boundaries

Successfully managing the myriad challenges of the next century requires building bridges across external and internal boundaries. Krafte et al.'s brief history of transboundary parks (this issue) vividly illustrates that working across boundaries is of course not new. Yet in this era of rapid social and ecological change, it is more important than ever. The idea of building bridges offers a useful metaphor for this effort. Successful boundary spanning work must be deliberate, purposeful, and carefully designed and maintained or it is likely to fail. While bridges make boundaries more permeable, they also recognize the distinctiveness of the entities being linked, be they government agencies, human communities, conservation reserves, or social and ecological systems. It is imperative that NPS retains its distinctiveness as a conservation agency while opening itself up.

The first boundary to bridge is jurisdictional. Conserving ecological processes, viable populations of many species, or space for species to adapt to climate change requires greater collaboration with other federal resource agencies as well as state, tribal, and local governments. In certain places, such as the Crown of the Continent and Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, NPS has made steady strides toward more coordinated regional management (Sax and Keiter 2007). Yet even in these locales, such cooperative efforts have often run afoul of different planning processes, budgetary issues, and land use priorities. Greater attention to and research on how to overcome the various social, political, and institutional obstacles to secure better cooperation should be a priority in the years ahead.

Visitor use planning must also be undertaken at larger, multi-jurisdictional scales. To facilitate this process, Miller et al. (this issue) encourage the development of a “common language” in management-by-objectives planning frameworks. This bridge would smooth the collection and sharing of relevant social data as well as foster planning efforts that treat each agency's space as part of a larger recreation system. In turn, appropriate places for existing and emerging recreational activities could be debated (e.g., the disagreements over mountain biking, BASE jumping, kayaking, and snowmobiling in national parks) and identified (Figure 2). Other federal agencies would also be better positioned to handle the spillover from crowded national parks. Krafte et al. (this issue) point out that this will entail crossing firmly established sociocultural and economic boundaries when it comes to what forms of leisure and recreation are considered “appropriate” within national parks.

The authors widely encouraged the continued cultivation and expansion of partnerships with universities, nonprofits, and other agencies. Such partnerships are vital for conducting research, improving the visitor experience, reaching underrepresented populations, engag-



Figure 2. Highlining at Taft Point, Yosemite National Park. Debates about the place of so-called extreme sports and recreation activities within national parks could be informed by management-by-objectives planning frameworks. Photo courtesy of LiAnna Davis via Wikimedia Commons.

ing the public effectively, and strengthening the overall management of the parks. Partnerships with state and local park systems, Jones et al. (this issue) argue, could be a particularly productive way to build long-term cradle-to-grave support for park and protected areas.

Some of the boundaries identified for bridging are *internal* to NPS. Bureaucratic division of labor and a reluctant leadership have hampered effective unit-wide visitor use planning (Miller et al., this issue). Krafte et al. (this issue) go a step further, arguing NPS would benefit not just from greater coordination within park units, but working as an integrated park system rather than a collection of individual units under a common agency. Some of the most difficult and important boundaries to bridge, however, may be conceptual. The assumptions about the role of people in parks, NPS preservationist paradigms, the role of science and uncertainty in decisionmaking, the concept of agency as expert, and public participation in agency decisionmaking all could benefit from collective interrogation and reflection.

Finally, Thomsen et al. (this issue) and Depper et al. (this issue) raised the importance of developing and encouraging the next generation of park professionals. In addition to university-based professional management programs and associations cited therein, this effort should include programs to develop career on-ramps for other types of skilled workers or to raise the visibility of NPS as a desirable career opportunity among a wide sector of the

American public (Nelson 2016). Programs like the Latino Heritage Internship Program are encouraging steps in the right direction (Figure 3; NPS 2016).

Embrace institutional reforms

The fourth and final thread that connects these pieces together is the need to embrace myriad institutional reforms. This will not be easy. NPS is a proud bureaucracy with a storied history of accomplishments (Goodsell 2011). But the agency must not become a living history museum of bureaucratic organization and 20th-century scientific management. The merits of structural change aside, the reforms suggested by the authors of this special section are primarily to organizational culture and priorities.

Many of the ideas suggested invite NPS to undergo critical reflection at every level of the institution about its basic assumptions surrounding its mission, the public, nature, and even the park idea. One key area of reflection is what constitutes acceptable human use of the national parks. For the most part, our mental models are stuck in a post-War perspective of private cars, family picnics, hiking, and ranger-led programs. As the public's leisure preferences shift, NPS must carefully consider where and how it can accommodate new uses, not just resist on traditional or ideological grounds. Any decision must evaluate the present and future visitor experience as well as the conditions and character of affected resources. This reflection process must be continuous and would be well served by the use of both descriptive and predictive models.

NPS must also continue to grapple with the character of its relation to the public. The public must become partners in stewardship, not simply visitors (Jones et al., this edition). This shift will require the agency to rethink its expert identity and positionality in decision-

Figure 3. The National Park Service and Hispanic Access Foundation work together to provide the Latino Heritage Internship Program, which “connects cultures in conservation” and provides on-ramps to agency employment. Photo courtesy of the National Park Service.



making processes. Efforts to improve public engagement and participation practices are widespread but much work remains before they are successfully institutionalized (Leong, Emmerson, and Byron 2011).

Finally, a key starting point for institutional reform would be to hire more people trained in the social sciences, humanities, education, marketing, and communications (Thomsen et al., this issue; Miller et al., this issue). Hiring more people with experience working in other park systems (state, county, city) or nongovernmental organizations would further diversify the agency's professional expertise and backgrounds. Together this would bring fresh perspectives, knowledge, skill sets, and, importantly, a broader set of values to bear on management activity and priorities. These workforce reforms would help develop organizational capacity to successfully manage park visitors, build partnerships, and engage the public in productive dialogue. None of these or other reforms will come easy. Becoming a more open, flexible, and adaptable institution will likely prove critical to thriving for another 100 years.

Imagining NPS at its bicentennial

If these threads were incorporated into the fabric of NPS, what might it look like at its bicentennial? Imagine for a moment a hot August afternoon in Gardiner, Montana (just outside of Yellowstone National Park), in the year 2116. The director steps to the dais ringed by a staff whose diversity reflects the country. Perhaps the director is the daughter of climate refugees from a Pacific Island nation, or perhaps he is a white male. Neither would draw much mention due to the lack of novelty. The director leads a proud and respected agency whose commitment to its now 200-year-old mission remains as strong as ever. NPS manages a system that has grown to over 800 units. Most of the growth has been in urban parks and monuments that protect historical and cultural resources, or provide valued greenspace. Many other Second Century-designated areas protect urban rewilding and include remnants of their industrial past, or recently abandoned rural landscapes that include novel assemblages of species. Together they tell the stories of the country from the Pleistocene to the present, from Gwich'in caribou hunting to Fordist industrial development, from Southern Gospel music to zephonia (a mid-21st-century mash up of Middle Eastern and Afro-Caribbean beats).

Let's imagine that the director is a woman. Behind her, as she talks about NPS's ongoing efforts to ease the human-nature dichotomy, wild bison and elk graze vigorous re-growth from the prescribed fire set last fall by members of the Crow Nation. The burn was part of a co-management arrangement that utilizes collectively agreed-upon integration of traditional knowledge and Western management techniques. Other cultural and ethnic groups, as well as many local communities, have also assumed greater prominence in individual park management activities and decisions. These and other structural and cultural changes to the NPS bureaucracy have allowed the agency to become more responsive to changing leisure patterns and political expectations that can test the agency's mission.

As the director discusses the parks' changing roles in a re-ruralizing America, she highlights the continued importance of parks as core areas in conservation reserve networks and how parks have acted both as refuges from and facilitative spaces for adaptation to climate change. She highlights the record visitation and the strain it places on a still chronically un-

derfunded agency. And she identifies the need to reinvigorate broader political support to fend off attempts to open the parks to extraction of ever more limited, and valuable, raw materials. But overall, the state of the parks is strong, buoyed by a network of partnerships, innovative civic engagement, and a passionate workforce. In this vision, traditions, both ancient and recent, as well as innovations are on display.

Conclusion

The purpose of the George Wright Society Student Summit was to bring together students to discuss the next 100 years of NPS. The summit discussions covered five themes: (1) *Unbounding parks*, (2) *National Park Service core park values and identities*, (3) *Visitor use management in our most visited national parks*, (4) *The struggle to keep national parks as they were*, and (5) *Reimagining the National Park Service to be a resilient agency*. Four of themes were expanded upon and discussed in this special section of *The George Wright Forum*. This final paper identified four common threads that surfaced throughout the preceding papers. These included the importance of parks for people, the need to continue and expand NPS promotion, the use of partnerships and collaboration to build bridges across boundaries, and embracing institutional reforms. The participatory process that led to the themes, the summit discussions, and the continued thought processes through writing these papers have led to an identification of some of the most relevant and important ways that NPS can move forward in its second century.

In supporting the summit, the GWS made a statement that students' opinions and perspectives are important and valuable. This issue of *The George Wright Forum* has given a voice to students' thoughts. The summit allowed for students from different backgrounds with similar interests to meet and candidly discuss some of the most pertinent issues facing NPS and brainstorm bold strategies for addressing them. The summit was successful in establishing connections among students and developing communication channels for maintaining those connections. The opportunity to publish papers has cultivated continued collaboration and conversation among attendees from different campuses. With the many environmental, social, and political uncertainties that the field faces, providing opportunities for young professionals to engage and develop are integral. The George Wright Society's Student Summits provide a meaningful way for young professionals to start stepping into their roles as important voices for public lands management.

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