

National Park Service prepares for next 100 years

By Nona Dennis

On August 25, 1916, President Woodrow Wilson signed the **National Park Service Organic Act** into law, thereby establishing the National Park Service (NPS) in the Department of the Interior. The Centennial this year is an opportunity to celebrate the astonishing diversity of irreplaceable resources that have been preserved by the Act, and also to reflect on the challenge of keeping them timeless and, at the same time, resilient and relevant in a fast-moving world.

Marin has such "irreplaceable resources" in Point Reyes National Seashore, in (half of) the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, and in Muir Woods National Monument. These treasures are our pride, but they can be our burden if we view them only through a zoom lens. Under such close scrutiny, both the beauties and the blemishes show up. We are easily entangled in the tensions between parks and communities, whose residents are understandably dismayed by the national and international reach of their federal neighbors and by the millions who visit them. Maybe we are also a burden when we seek out a "Yellowstone" or a "Grand Canyon" or a "Great Smoky National Park." These all belong to us, but their popularity can be a trial for locals in close view. So for a moment, put on a wide-angle lens to contemplate the breadth and challenges of "America's best idea" in the coming century.



Beginning of the NPS

In 1916 there were already 35 national parks and monuments; among them in California were Yosemite and Sequoia National Parks and Muir Woods National Monument. They were administered variously by the Department of the Interior, the War Department, and the Forest Service.

The basic intent of the Organic Act was to bring together the loose collection of national parks and monuments—roughly 8 million acres at that time—under one agency, the NPS, with a staff, a budget, and a broad range of authorities. In the four years it took to gain legislative approval, the language changed many times. Rep. William Kent co-authored the bill and was one of its most ardent supporters. Possibly the least controversial words at that time were contained in the statement of national purpose:

"...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 a means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."

To provide for enjoyment and leave unimpaired? This fundamental contradiction between public use and conservation, and the meaning of *unimpaired*, would be interpreted over and over in the years to come.

One hundred years later, a vastly changed NPS oversees 401 "units" across the country, 84 million acres (more than half in Alaska), in 50 states and five territories, including District of Columbia. Of these, 58 are national parks, 333 are national monuments, and the rest include historic sites, recreation areas, seashores,

and two to three dozen other designations, depending on who is counting. They range from America's most spectacular landscapes, to little known historic sites that represent, as one observer put it, "a chapter in American history."

One or many "best ideas?"

Wallace Stegner first called the national parks "the best idea we ever had." Filmmaker Ken Burns turned the "best idea" into a cinematic panorama of America's most iconic landscapes. It became one of the most watched public television series, tracing the birth and the constantly evolving nature of the national park idea. His introduction hints at the complexity of that evolution:

"Like the idea of freedom, the national park idea has been constantly tested and is inherently full of contradictory tensions: between individual rights and the community, the local and the national interests, between preservation and exploitation, the sacred and the profitable, and between one generation's immediate desires and the next generation's legacy."

From a beginning in which the main park attractions for tourists were spectacles like "Old Faithful" and feeding bears at Yosemite, multiple conceptions of the national park idea have waxed and waned, shifting with societal swings, national political priorities, evolving scientific knowledge, and emerging technologies. Robert B. Keiter, eminent conservation lawyer who has spent his career exploring America's public lands, questions that the national parks rest on ONE idea only. (*To Conserve Unimpaired* [2013]) In reality, the national parks are not a single idea, but rather a complex assortment of ideas whose commonality rests in their national significance (variously defined) and in a shared commitment to safeguard a legacy for present and future generations.

Ten years of celebration

Preparation for the Centennial began almost 10 years ago under then-President Bush, who issued a "National Parks Centennial Challenge," calling on the NPS *"to enhance the national parks during the decade leading up to the 2016 centennial celebration and put America's National Parks on track for another century of conservation, preservation, and enjoyment."* He directed the Service to select signature Centennial projects and committed a budget of \$100 million a year over ten years, to be matched by funds from philanthropy and partnerships.

Thousands of pages have been written since then in anticipation of the Centennial. Among them is a Centennial Essay Series launched in 2007 by the George Wright Society to encourage serious reflection on critical park-related issues. (The Society is named for a young forester who initiated the first serious study of wildlife and other natural resources in the parks. The father of Mill Valley's Pam Lloyd, Wright was killed in his thirties in an accident.) The 26 essays that resulted are both guarded and optimistic about the future of the "best idea," but all are thought-provoking.

In a 2010 essay, William "Bill" Tweed, retired Chief Park Naturalist at Sequoia and Kings Canyon National



Valentine's Day 2016 on the Marin Headlands' Coastal Trail in the Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

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Parks, called for redefining the NPS's core dual mission, which requires both preserving resources and providing for their appropriate enjoyment. To successfully meet this challenge, he wrote, the Service should adopt more nuanced, even controversial, approaches to managing its cultural and natural resources, while, at the same time, sustaining iconic resources (giant sequoias, for example) that attract tourists and, thereby, garner essential public support.



The Point Reyes Peninsula, Point Reyes National Seashore

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Countering Tweed, Michael Soukup, retired scientist with the Service, wrote in December, 2015, that "the real magic of the national park idea rests in the language and implications of the Organic Act." Each park unit, to preserve the nation's heritage, has learned how to protect resources as well as use them and restore when feasible. "Unimpairment means allowing nature to operate unfettered *to the extent possible* [emphasis added]—a clear and possible goal for every site in the national park system."

Although the Organic Act serves as the "Magna Carta" for the national park system, some critics suggested rewriting the Act, in view of its inherent contradiction. With today's Congress, however, this would open Pandora's Box! In any case, interpretations, policies, and laws that have accumulated around the Organic Act already enable new policies and strategies needed to address contemporary issues like climate change, changing public needs, and technology.

Finally, Rolf Diamant, President of the George Wright Society and a career NPS Superintendent, wrote in his 2013 essay: *"My hope is that our national park system will continue to appeal to our best instincts: love for the American landscape, respect for nature and the lessons of history, and the possibility that, through acts of intentional conservation and stewardship, we might raise the bar on our responsibilities to each other and to the world around us."*

These visions of our national parks at 100 are mixed, but a wide-angle view allows us to appreciate their extraordinary diversity and to celebrate their collective aim. The close-up view is also important. It prompts us to be grateful for our own local national parks, and, when problems arise, work constructively with them.

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