

Shaping the National Park System

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Background

In 1978 Congress adopted amendments to the National Park Service General Authorities Act to address the dynamic growth in the number of national parks and to affirm that they were indeed a system, declaring

that these areas, though distinct in character, are united through their inter-related purposes and resources into one national park system as cumulative expressions of a single national heritage; that, individually and collectively, 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.

Many different phrases have been applied to the national parks, but one especially vivid description, penned by David Harmon in an anthology by the same name, is that they are a mirror of America, “with a compound of idealism and commercialism, of etched solitude and infuriating crowds...a thoroughgoing democratic institution.”

The growth of the national park system, from the first national park in 1872 to more than 390 units today, has proceeded largely without the benefit of an overall plan or vision. A convergence of political, social, and economic interests has been responsible for the establishment of most new units of the system, which over time have come to represent not only scenic wonders and archeological sites, but also such diverse themes as battlefields, biological diversity, industrial history, lakeshores and seashores, urban recreation, and civil rights.

What these areas share in common is a finding that they merit the highest level of national recognition and protection as part of the nation’s natural and cultural heritage. The first NPS director was advised that the national park system “should not be lowered in standard, dignity, and prestige by the including of areas which express in less than the highest terms the particular class or kind of exhibit which they represent.” This general guidance remains in effect today.

System Planning

The first effort described as a national park system plan was completed in 1972. It provided a framework for identifying gaps in the representation of natural and cultural themes, with the implication that such a plan could help set priorities for the addition of new areas. In 1976, under the leadership of Phillip Burton, Congress adopted an amendment to the General Authorities Act directing the

National Park Service to “continually monitor the quality of areas that exhibit characteristics of national significance... and each year send forward studies of not less than 12 areas that have potential for inclusion in the National Park System.” This provision quickly earned the tag of “the park-a-month club.” Although the Service sought to collaborate with other federal land-managing agencies in seeking nominations for study sites, its reports were often challenged by the Bureau of Land Management or the Forest Service. The Office of Management and Budget also frequently raised concerns about potential funding for land acquisition and facility development. The new area study program operated for four years. In 1981 a new administration proposed legislation to eliminate the program and cut funding, and the Service lost its ability to systematically evaluate and prioritize studies for potential additions to the national park system.

Since the early 1980s, in spite of legislative direction to “prepare and periodically update a national park system plan,” the Service has been reluctant to develop its own vision for the future of the national park system, in no small part due to administrative funding constraints and concerns about the potential costs of new parks. In the 1990s the Service updated its frameworks for evaluating the significance of historic and natural resources, but it carefully avoided describing these documents as a “system plan.” Meanwhile, all the major studies of the National Park Service and the national park system conducted over the past 25 years have deliberated and made recommendations about the future growth of the system, all taking an expansive view. A complete volume of the 1988 report published by the National Parks Conservation Association was devoted to “New Parks, New Promise,” listing 46 natural areas and more than 40 cultural resource sites for potential addition to the national park system.

Cycles of interest in expanding the system have alternated with periodic discussion of deauthorizing some parks. In 1954 the National Park System Advisory Board considered proposals by the Department of the Interior to make certain areas of the system available for administration by state or local governments, suggesting 13 candidates. In 1981 Secretary James Watt made a similar request for the Advisory Board to investigate the potential divestiture of parks that had been authorized but failed to meet certain criteria.

In the 1990s Congress considered another swing from expansion to contraction in the form of legislation that would remove units from the national park system using the model applied to military bases. Ultimately, instead of establishing a park closure commission, Congress repealed the authority for the National Park Service to “continually monitor” potential park candidates, and instead directed that studies of new parks could only be initiated when specifically authorized by Congress. In recent years, following directions from the Department of the Interior and the Office of Management and Budget, the National Park Service has essentially given up any role in identifying priorities for new area studies, instead providing a “no new starts” recommendation with its annual budget requests.

However, Congress has continued to be enthusiastic about authorizing studies of new areas, more frequently focusing on some type of partnership heritage area than on a traditional national park.

Partnership Parks

Partnership parks, unlike most traditional national parks, are areas where management responsibilities are shared, usually by many partners. Some units of the national park system are partnership parks: Canyon de Chelly National Monument, established in 1931, encompasses lands owned by the Navajo Nation, where they manage contemporary and traditional uses within the park boundary, while the National Park Service administers archeological resources. The Appalachian Trail, which was conceived, designed, and constructed—and is still maintained— by volunteers, is largely managed by the Appalachian Trail Conservancy. Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area and Jean Lafitte National Historical Park are other examples of national parks whose boundaries encompasses a relatively large region with ownership and management responsibilities being shared by many partners.

National Heritage Areas (NHAs) have become an enormously popular way for Congress to recognize important resources and assist in their protection without formally expanding the national park system and taking on responsibilities for land acquisition and management. Starting with the Illinois and Michigan Canal in 1984, the number of designated national heritage areas has grown to 37, and proposals for at least 15 more are active in Congress.

The popularity of heritage areas reflects a strong interest by states, local governments, and their representatives in Congress in having a national designation, along with technical assistance from the National Park Service, in support of the preservation and redevelopment, for tourism or other economic uses, of historic buildings and landscapes with importance to the American story. A report by the National Park System Advisory Board in 2004 confirmed that national heritage areas add a new dimension to National Park Service programs, providing an opportunity to conserve nationally important living landscapes and cultures. The Advisory Board endorsed “a future where NPS welcomes NHAs for their role in expanding conservation stewardship of nationally important historic resources, landscapes and cultures....so that the full scope of the American experience is revealed.”

Challenges and Opportunities

Establishing the Framework for a “Complete” National Park System

Efforts to define scientific or scholarly standards for evaluating new parks are often based on a goal of including representative examples of our complete natural and cultural heritage. This leads to debate among the experts about how many boxes need to be filled. Some think that battlefields are overrepresented in the system; others find no end to the number of Civil War battlefields that merit

inclusion. Some feel that arts and culture are not matters for representation in the national park system; others think we need more sites addressing these themes. Similar discussions occur around the representation of opportunities for outdoor recreation, given its potential benefits to the physical and spiritual health of the nation's citizens, especially for large urban populations. Even natural systems and resources raise issues. Do we need one example of an eastern deciduous woodland or do all the distinct subtypes warrant inclusion in the system? What about some representation of exposed Silurian rock—it is scientifically significant even if it lacks other “human appeal.” And even though NPS criteria traditionally have excluded natural areas that have lost their integrity, some people suggest that in order to preserve a full representation of America's natural heritage, disturbed areas with potential for restoration should be considered for restoration management and eventual inclusion in the system.

Even if ‘complete’ can be defined, establishing and maintaining a national park system that is meaningful to all Americans implies that the system may be complete only for one generation at a time. Broad demographic shifts within the population, the progress of history, and catastrophic changes in the natural world portend major changes in the national park system over the next century.

Managing Remnants

Ideally the boundaries of national park system units encompass sufficient lands to ensure effective resource protection and efficient administration. In practice they are often established through a series of compromises to reduce the amount of private land, exclude businesses and commercial interests, and provide convenient lines on maps that do not necessarily follow topographic features, natural habitats, or cultural landscapes. Although Congress has entertained legislation that would direct comprehensive boundary reviews for all NPS units, boundary adjustments are now only required to be considered as part of the general management planning process and are subject to a variety of constraints linked to limited funding for land acquisition and reluctance of other agencies to lose jurisdiction over areas that contribute to their missions.

In the next century, parks are likely to experience continued and expanding impacts from adjacent development to accommodate a growing and mobile population, especially near their boundaries and in gateway communities. The implications will include fragmentation of critical habitats that extend beyond park boundaries, air and water pollution from sources external to the parks, intrusions on historic settings, and increasing demands for visitor experiences and recreational use. In some areas, the national parks represent not only remnants of natural systems and cultural landscapes, but also some of the last remaining open space available for outdoor recreation; this places demands on the parks for recreational uses, such as jogging and informal team sports, which may not be compatible with the purpose of the park. It will become increasingly difficult to manage the parks for their intended purposes unless some new approaches are found to address these issues.

National Park Images and Myths

Studies indicate that the public holds the national parks in the highest esteem of all the public lands; however, people are not generally well informed about the breadth and diversity of the national park system, or about the fact that many nationally significant areas are managed by the Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Forest Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Ocean Service, state and local park systems, and private historic preservation and natural area conservation organizations. The public image of “national parks” is strongly rooted in Yellowstone, Yosemite, and other large, scenic mountain parks in the western United States. In fact, the national park system includes a great variety of sites, including national monuments, national historical parks, national seashores and lakeshores, national parkways, national battlefields, national recreation areas, national preserves, and national historic sites. Most of the current units of the national park system are relatively small historic and cultural sites. Another fact not generally understood by the public is that the national park system is not the exclusive repository of the nation’s most important resources. Mount Vernon and Monticello are two examples of nationally significant historic sites that are preserved for public appreciation by private organizations. Vast tracts of spectacular mountain and desert landscapes are managed by the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. Although other managers may have different standards for protection, some of the most critical habitats, including refuges for threatened and endangered species, are managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Ocean Service, and a network of state, regional, and private conservation agencies and organizations.

As the national park system becomes more inclusive and diverse, the lines between it and the rest of the nation’s protected natural and cultural areas are becoming less distinct. In the next century the popular image of a national park may evolve from a large natural area where the National Park Service has management control, to one where a complex mix of owners and managers cooperate to achieve conservation and preservation goals. The growth of the “greenline park” concept developed in the late 1970s and represented today by the increasing interest in national heritage areas indicates movement in this direction. As of early 2008 Congress has chosen to create 37 new national heritage areas. However, it has failed to define how these areas should be operated and how they relate to the traditional national park system.

Warren L. Brown

Warren Lee Brown served as Chief, Park Planning and Special Studies for the National Park Service (NPS) from 1992-2005. His responsibilities included policy formulation, program standards, budgeting, and development of training programs for general management plans and studies throughout the US National Park System. His responsibilities with

respect to studies of potential new parks, wild and scenic rivers, and heritage areas included developing criteria for national significance and thematic frameworks for evaluating natural and cultural resources. He also developed standards and procedures for conducting studies to address Congressional directions, and consulted with study teams advising them about how to meet legislative support requirements as new park or heritage area authorizations were being considered. Between 1980 and 1992 Warren worked as a resource policy analyst in the NPS evaluating general management plans and developing policies and guidelines for land protection planning. From 1978 until 1980 was part of the Federal Lands Planning Division of the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service. Prior to joining the National Park Service, Warren worked as a Project Associate for the Environmental Law Institute in Washington, as a Legislative Assistant for Senator Charles "Mac" Mathias, and as a Legislative Assistant to the District of Columbia City Council. Warren holds a Masters of City Planning from Harvard University and a BA in Public Affairs from the University of Chicago. Since retirement from the National Park Service in 2005 Warren has worked as a consultant with The Nature Conservancy and the Bahamas National Trust