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## NEW NATIONAL PARKS IN THE 1990S

### THINNING OF THE BLOOD OR A MUCH NEEDED TRANSFUSION?

In 1991, the National Park Service (NPS) is being asked to get its arms around some new, rather ungainly park projects of unproven significance. These "new park proposals" known variously as heritage parks, rivers or canal corridors, cultural areas, partnership parks - the names just keep coming - are multiplying each new budget year.

Many of these new proposals also have come with powerful congressional support and generous funding. This has given these projects another and less desirable name - "park barrel". Although the parks are scattered across the map, they do have some unifying characteristics. The new themes, at least new for NPS - transportation, industry, labor history, ethnicity, ethnography, folklore, cultural landscapes, our recent past, your recent past - everyday life. They rely on a patchwork land management industry, local and state recreation areas, open space and historic attractions, as well as NPS ownership and control. An express purpose of many of these parks is the economic and promotion of the park region through commercial and industrial development and tourism. Most importantly, they rely on partnerships, often messy coalitions of citizen groups, task forces, governmental agencies, federally appointed commissions and anyone who walks in the door and wants to help.

They are indeed a real concern for an agency that for 75 years has maintained a high degree of credibility with a growing system of park units now numbering 356. They are also a real concern for an agency who has suffered years of no growth and reductions and has its resources stretched to the limits. It is indeed difficult to welcome these unfamiliar and possibly very expensive newcomers.

The National Park Service, as an agency in the forever business, will of course survive all of this. However, the issue before us is whether the Service can make some sense or something of continuing value out of this phenomena. While it may be too early to look for patterns and make predictions, we need to try. All time can do is prove us wrong.

## Historical Perspective

The NPS historically has gone through growth spurts - not just in the number of parks, but in the qualitative kind of parks that it has nurtured and acquired. The original 36 parks, united by the 1916 act that established the service, were all in the western states. They represented the great ceremonial landscapes, the wonders of a still growing nation.

In the 1930s, the National Park Service entered into the history business with the acquisition of the Washington Birthplace National Monument and Colonial National Monument, both sites that spoke to what was important about the past at that time. Executive Order 6166 of 1931, transferring the military parks from the War Department to the Service, was another important step in expanding the agency's reach into history. The final culmination was the 1935 act which created among other things the National Historic Landmark Program. NPS became a leader in the infant historic preservation program, and for the first time, undertook a systematic look at history, its identification, evaluation and preservation.

After World War II, NPS, drained of dollars and manpower by the war effort, undertook a major revitalization and recapitalization campaign through Mission 66. The park programs grew steadily during this period. It was also the era that launched the partnership with the states with new recreation, open space and historic preservation programs initiated by the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965 and the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. The Historic Preservation Act in particular, this year celebrating its 25th anniversary, established the standards for a national historic preservation program. It authorized the National Register of Historic Places, a grass roots program to identify, evaluate and protect resources. The Park Service assumed a role of standard bearer for state programs as well as for park units.

Today, after a decade of reductions - of no new area studies and almost no new parks - program demand is bursting at the seams. Equivalent reductions in partnership dollars for the state programs cut off this avenue as a safety valve. The system, ready for its next growth spurt, is moving forward through the political process and the NPS is being dragged along.

All of this discussion has been by way of showing the evolutionary nature of the National Park Service. Without much analysis, except to generalize that NPS growth has mirrored values of the past 75 years. To develop an understanding about the "new park proposals", we must look beyond the fact that they are located in a particular hotspot and try and understand what factors today have produced this phenomena.

## The Big Picture

Many of the "new park proposals" are hard to swallow because they include such broad areas and such ill-defined boundaries. Yet this may be a reflection of our broadened understanding of what it takes to protect resources, both natural and cultural, and what these resources are. The NPS has long recognized that park resources are affected by what goes on beyond their boundaries. A park is only a patch of a given ecosystem and is constantly buffeted by changes to the larger whole. In the acquisition of Jackson Hole and later the Alaskan parks, NPS showed recognition of this issue. However, political realities and dollars available have defined current park boundaries.

The same factors are also having a direct impact on resources in historic parks. Parks commemorating a specific event in time have often become an island in a radically changed landscape. These islands challenge interpretative efforts to make sense of a new surrounding. In addition, a full understanding of what were the associated historic resources outside the park was not always available when the park was created. The result has been a new tendency to cast the net very wide to avoid making the same mistake. But since the political and dollar constraints are still present and must be dealt with, the new approach is the use of soft boundaries and to fudge issues of ownership and control.

## Adjacent Lands

Similar to the big picture issues (discussed above), but more familiar to NPS is the question of coping with lands adjacent to park units. Many of the "new park proposals" are directly associated with existing parks, for example, parts of the America's Industrial Heritage Project in Pennsylvania. In addition, the energy and ideas generated by these proposals could be harnessed to provide some relief for this problematic area. The Greater Yellowstone Plan and the recent boundary legislation for Gettysburg are steps in the right direction. Heritage areas around parks to protect the environment and associated resources could be the next step.

## New History

Many of the "new park proposals" also reflect new ideas about history. They focus on coal, canals, iron and steel, laboring men and women and the diversity of America's past. They are far removed from the traditional National Park Service great men, great events historic sites. They present new problems because they reflect areas that have not been fully evaluated in the historic record. The historic content of industrial history and labor history has not been fully explored. National Historic Landmark theme studies for many of these topics have not even been contemplated let alone completed.

Since NPS's role has been in the past to ratify accepted and understood cultural values, it is now put in the difficult position of not just playing catch up but playing the leader. This problem has been compounded by the arbitrary and political process by which some of these areas have been designated. This is not to say these are not important themes. NPS historians and others have been calling for attention to this topic. It is just that no one expected the spotlight to turn on it with such force.

### Public Participation

NPS has been behind the curve in developing public involvement strategies for its parks and programs. Generally, it has relegated this issue to one more step in the general management planning process. The "new park proposals" are just the opposite. They are marked by a high degree of state, local and citizen participation in shaping their vision and making it happen. This is probably in response to the political need to involve the constituency and to get more done with less, but both are worthy of attention.

### What Should NPS's Role Be In "New Park Proposals?"

- 1) The traditional position would be that if a new proposal does not have national significance, or has not come through the usual process, or does not meet the generally accepted definition of a park unit, then the NPS should resist involvement. The Service should deflect the project if possible to state or local governments. If forced to march forward, it should do so under protest.
- 2) Another alternative unit that has been tried before is to create a separate unit within the Department of the Interior or elsewhere and move the current NPS external programs including the new, whatever we want to call them, into it. This idea will not have positive ring to those who remember the ill-fated Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service.
- 3) More feasible, perhaps, is to develop a heritage preservation program modeled after the current partnership programs that NPS has with the states for land and water conservation and historic preservation. NPS would establish the criteria for a heritage area, set standards for implementation, provide "tool box" techniques, pass through grants assistance and offer other partnership assistance. This approach is being tried on a limited basis through cooperative agreements, but might need a legislative framework to be truly effective.
- 4) The final approach and the current approach is for the NPS to take on the program directly. A number of recent reports have addressed how this

could occur. Most of these proposals for management are modeled after current regional office planning division programs and offer a structured technical assistance approach. The proposal is to do what the Park Service is currently doing, only to do it better.

However, NPS could take another track. They could consider mainstreaming these efforts into the traditional National Park's management program. They could see these "new park proposals" as a new way of doing the same old business. They could see them as the next step in the Park Service's evolution. But to do this, NPS must be able to accept these new parks - a shift in the paradigm of what is a park.

NPS must lift the barriers between natural and cultural resources and between exterior and internal programs. NPS should see itself as responsible for all nationally significant natural and historic resources but responsible in different ways using more than one strategy. If it can assume this leadership role and adopt some new ways of doing things, the program of new parks can be made part of the core agency mission. If this does not happen, they will continue to sap away funding and people into what is seen as a bottomless pit.

#### The Bottom Line for NPS Involvement

What is being suggested here is not that the NPS throw up its hands and welcome every new proposal, no matter how hair brained, into the Park Service fold. National significance and a level of integrity and feasibility as a park has to continue to be the bottom line. Otherwise, the National Park Service does not have a role.

To make this stick, NPS needs to articulate what it is looking for in a new unit, and perhaps adopt many of the positive features of these "new park proposals". Identification and evaluation are still the watch words by which the program must be run. The field of potential candidates then to join the Park Service's core mission could include:

- 1) Adjacent lands that contain natural resources related to the park's environment or that contain related cultural resources. That is an obvious place to start.
- 2) Both the National Park Service, the National Parks and Conservation Association and other organizations have lists of worthy properties. These could also be candidates for new park proposals.
- 3) The Park Service should recognize that it has a leadership role in nationally significant natural and historic resources wherever they are. They should reinvigorate the National Historic Landmark and the National

Natural Landmark Program. These programs should have a systemized approach to developing historic and natural contexts for evaluating individual resources. New theme studies should be undertaken for the new areas of history. NPS scholarship needs to be pro-active.

- 4) Finally, the National Park Service should continue its attempts to develop a standardized method for assessing the merits of new park proposals and attempt to get public and congressional buy in to the process.

### What Are The Indicators of New Park Proposals?

Beyond the opportunity to address new nationally significant themes that will broaden our understanding of natural and cultural history, "new park proposals" have some exciting features that reflect current cultural trends and have reference to current NPS park practices. These include:

- 1) Partnerships - True partnerships are developed between the federal government, state partners, local governments, local citizens and other related historic attractions. These partnerships are broad based, even regional in nature, and must be true partnerships, not just opportunities to come to a few informational meetings.
- 2) Economic value - Unlike traditional parks, the tourism and economic development role of a park in a community are directly addressed. Related natural and cultural preservation opportunities in the region are recognized and assisted.
- 3) Education and interpretation - The message is more complex than the one story line that can be told at one park or one site. The landscape and the natural environment in a broad area are used to tell the story.
- 4) Local priorities and capacities - Unlike a traditional park where the NPS has total control, economic, social and cultural concerns of the community must be incorporated into park planning and management. We could all shut our eyes and hope these "new park proposals" are a passing fad. But as an anthropologist familiar with the concept of cultural determinism, I doubt it. The phenomena of heritage areas and partnership parks is already too deeply rooted. By last count, NPS is already undertaking 15 of these projects, state heritage park programs are out in front, three major conferences on the topic have been held this year, and the National Trust is sponsoring a new Heritage Tourism Initiative. This is not just a trickle, it's a flood. The NPS has the opportunity to be out front taking the leadership role.