

HOW THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE FROM AMERICA SHOULD STEP-UP ITS WILDERNESS MANAGEMENT

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Abstract: *Renowned historian and western writer WALLACE STEGNER calls the National Parks the best idea America ever had. He makes his case on the observation that voters make “almost criminally irresponsible choices” and elected representatives push bills that “sadly confuse private (read ‘corporate’) interests with the public interest” (1998, 135). But the National Parks “reflect us at our best rather than our worst,” and are, with a wink to his previous statement, “a cure for cynicism” (STEGNER, 135). The Wilderness Act of 1964 created a legal designation to protect some of America’s most pristine lands. The Wilderness Act eloquently defined wilderness as “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain” (FROME 1997, 214). Congress did not create an agency to manage wilderness, however, but engaged existing land management agencies—including the NPS—to incorporate wilderness into their holdings. The National Park Service NPS now manages 84 % of its land as wilderness (combining designated, proposed and recommended wilderness areas) and manages more wilderness than any other federal land agency (Smith 2006). That battle is the creation and execution of wilderness management plans. NPS 2001 Management Policies show that the agency directorate sets a high priority for managing wilderness within the NPS (NPS 2000b). The NPS website proclaims, “Wilderness management is the highest form of stewardship we can offer” (NPS 2007b). Despite the admirable talk, however, wilderness management in the parks is not living up to the rhetoric. Seventy-seven National Park sites have designated wilderness areas. Only about 15, though, have official wilderness management plans (SMITH). These plans are created following federal guidelines and involving input of the public and other*

stakeholders. The process can be contentious, as stakeholders often disagree on many facets of the plan. The end result, though, allows parks to better understand their resources and how best to protect them, as well as offering a detailed road map for managing the resources. The enabling legislation of the National Park Service (NPS) created the mandate to “conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations” (NPS 2004). This mandate is a source of pride and frequent reference for NPS managers and staff who are charged with preserving America’s treasures. (HAINES, 1974). The Wilderness Act established one National Wilderness Preservation System made up of the wilderness areas managed by four federal land management systems, the NPS, BLM, FWS, and the Forest Service. This requires ever increasing coordination and cooperation among the four agencies (NPS 2001a). The conclusion of a 2001 report by the Pinchot Institute says, “There is a need to forge an integrated and collaborative system across the four wilderness management agencies” (NPS 2001a), also pointing out that, “Local day-to-day management actions may set precedents that could affect wilderness stewardship across all agencies” (NPS 2001a). To say the word wilderness is to conjure an image of pristine, natural landscape— “untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain” (FROME, 214). Not only is wilderness an official legal designation, but it is also a philosophical and spiritual description of the last, best natural area in America. WALLACE STEGNER writes, “If the national park idea is...the best idea America ever had, wilderness preservation is the highest refinement of that idea” (131).

Key words: *wilderness, strategies, management, legislation, policies*

INTRODUCTION

A History of Wilderness. “We are a great people because we have been successful in developing and using our marvelous natural resources; but, also, we Americans are the people we are largely because we have had the influence of the wilderness on our lives.” Those are the words of Congressman JOHN SAYLOR introducing the Wilderness Bill in the House of Representatives in 1956 (FROME 1997, v.).

The wilderness movement began in earnest in the 1930s by people like Bob Marshall, a professional forester and government official. Biographer JAMES GLOVER suggests that wilderness enthusiasts—Marshall and his friends—were disillusioned in the 1930s by actions of the NPS such as entertaining visitors with tunnels carved through giant sequoias, feeding bears to make them half-tame, the spectacular fire falls from Glacier Point at Yosemite, and the increase in road building through pristine landscapes. This disillusionment led Marshall, Benton MacKaye, and Harvey Broome to create The Wilderness Society which became a thorn in the side of government agencies but led the way toward official governmental protection of wilderness territories (GLOVER 1986).

The post World War II boom years saw a dramatic increase in timbering in western National Forests. Wilderness Society and Sierra Club members were roused to action as, in the words of wilderness scholar MICHAEL FROME, “Industrial civilization appeared destined to occupy all the unoccupied land” (1997, 138). The leader of this action in the 1950s was HOWARD ZAHNISER who called on the public and Congress to establish something new and different—a national wilderness preservation system based on legislation. He worked with members of the Senate and House to draft the first wilderness bill. Eighteen hearings were held between 1957 and 1964 with the bill being rewritten time and again to allow for compromise and politics. President Johnson signed the bill into law in 1964 creating the Wilderness Act (FROME 1997, 139-140).

Renowned historian and western writer WALLACE STEGNER calls the National Parks the best idea America ever had. He makes his case on the observation that voters make “almost criminally irresponsible choices” and elected representatives push bills that “sadly confuse private (read ‘corporate’) interests with the public interest” (1998, 135). But the National Parks “reflect us at our best rather than our worst,” and are, with a wink to his previous statement, “a cure for cynicism” (STEGNER, 135).

STEGNER began visiting National Parks, however, in the 1920s when the dual mandate of the National Park Service (NPS) – to conserve and provide enjoyment – was easy to achieve due to low visitation. But as the decades rolled on parks saw a huge increase in visitation. Today the NPS manages 390 sites containing 84 million acres of land. Annual visitation is close to 300,000,000 (NPS 2007a). Fortunately the NPS and other land management agencies have been given further legal tools to protect their resources.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The Wilderness Act of 1964 created a legal designation to protect some of America’s most pristine lands. The Wilderness Act eloquently defined wilderness as “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain” (FROME 1997, 214). Congress did not create an agency to manage wilderness, however, but engaged existing land management agencies—including the NPS—to incorporate wilderness into their holdings. The NPS now manages 84 % of its land as wilderness (combining designated, proposed and recommended wilderness areas) and manages more wilderness than any other federal land agency (SMITH 2006).

Today designated wilderness lands exist within the boundaries of four federal agencies: The NPS, the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and the U.S.

Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). While the priority of the NPS is conservation, these other agencies have mandates to provide for recreational activities, resource extraction, and harvesting beyond strict preservation. Yet each agency also has the challenge of managing wilderness lands in rigorous adherence of the Wilderness Act. As Congressional staffer James Bradley notes, “The battle to preserve wilderness is not over when Congress passes a wilderness bill. Instead the battle has just begun” (1990, 139).

That battle is the creation and execution of wilderness management plans. NPS 2001 Management Policies show that the agency directorate sets a high priority for managing wilderness within the NPS (NPS 2000b). The NPS website proclaims, “Wilderness management is the highest form of stewardship we can offer” (NPS 2007b). Despite the admirable talk, however, wilderness management in the parks is not living up to the rhetoric. Seventy-seven National Park sites have designated wilderness areas. Only about 15, though, have official wilderness management plans (SMITH). These plans are created following federal guidelines and involving input of the public and other stakeholders. The process can be contentious, as stakeholders often disagree on many facets of the plan. The end result, though, allows parks to better understand their resources and how best to protect them, as well as offering a detailed road map for managing the resources.

In addition to the great number of parks trying to manage wilderness without comprehensive plans, the NPS has not made recommended changes to staffing to meet the needs of wilderness management. Other agencies, particularly the BLM and the Forest Service, are doing many things right in regard to wilderness management. Many BLM field offices have staff with the title “wilderness manager” or “wilderness planner.” National Forests with designated wilderness also employ “wilderness rangers” and the Forest Service created a wilderness training center in Montana (BRADLEY 1990, 141). The NPS, on the other hand, tends to assign wilderness as a collateral duties to resource managers and law enforcement rangers.

Although the NPS directorate seems sincere in its prioritization of wilderness, obstacles hold the NPS back from reaching its wilderness goals. The NPS could improve wilderness management by dedicating the resources to live up to its own agency directives, studying best management practices, and implementing interagency recommendations and suggestions from the field. The Wilderness Act is a unique tool that the NPS has at its disposal to afford its land the ultimate protection. In order to do this, though, the NPS needs to improve its system of planning and managing wilderness at the park level to mutually benefit the land and the Service itself.

The Purpose of the National Park Service. The enabling legislation of the National Park Service (NPS) created the mandate to “conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations” (NPS 2004). This mandate is a source of pride and frequent reference for NPS managers and staff who are charged with preserving America’s treasures.

Yellowstone was made the first National Park in 1872. At the time no bureaucratic agency was established to manage parks, but sufficient public and governmental interest existed to save this stunning landscape. The land which had been occupied by American Indians for centuries was being saved from the encroachment of America, specifically private ownership and control. But it wasn’t being saved for the specific rights of wildlife, open space, or Native heritage. It was being saved as a “pleasuring ground for benefit and enjoyment of the people” (HAINES 1974).

About twenty more parks were created in the enchanting landscapes of the American west before a federal agency was created to manage them. In 1916, Congress passed the

National Park Service Organic Act which contained the lofty language that set out the apparent dual mandate of conservation and recreation (NPS 2004). The battle over the apparent dual mandate of the NPS legislation intensified over the years as the parks received more and more visitation.

While there is some discrepancy in thought as to what the primary mission of the NPS is and should be, good arguments exist to support preservation. Historian and park enthusiast ROBIN WINKS speaking at an NPS conference in 1988 told park superintendents, “You are conserving the great natural and historical heritage of society and the wildlife thereof...While recreation will occur in them, let’s not forget why we created them...You should think of those visitors as coming for an education”(NPS 2001b). Winks used the expression “a university without walls” which captured the imagination of the attendees (NPS 2001b). And former NPS Director GEORGE HARTZOG wrote, “This nation is not so impoverished (deficits and all) that it must consume the seed corn of our posterity” (1988, 222).

As population increases and demands are made on parks from various interests, parks need as many tools as possible to preserve the unique and pristine landscapes within their boundaries. Some of these tools are legislative, such as the Wilderness Act of 1964. The Wilderness Act supplements the NPS’ basic statutory authority (NPS 2007b). As special interests argue over appropriate use of park resources, parks with designated wilderness are insulated from local political and internal pressures to take actions such as extending roads inappropriately into wild lands (NPS 2007b). This gives the NPS a greater authority to make decisions that support its mandate of preservation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Wilderness Act brought about a new and unparalleled opportunity for preservation. Speaking at a Wilderness conference in 1990, H. KEN CORDELL and PATRICK C. Reed noted that there is no other designation that is “capable of duplicating that kind of mandate and responsibility” (1990, 32). Part of this responsibility is the requirement that wilderness be administered so as to preserve the quality “untrammled by man” (Cordell and Reed 1990, 32). At the same conference, DAVID J. PARSONS and DAVID M. GRABER opined, “Where the term ‘wilderness management’ may appear to some as a contradiction, managing wilderness can no longer be avoided” (1990, 90).

Interestingly, wilderness protection has undergone some of the same controversies as NPS management, i.e. a debate between recreation and less intrusive uses, such as scientific inquiry, preservation of biodiversity, and watershed protection. Researcher JOHN D. PEINE writes, “The most poignant social value of the utilization of science in wilderness areas is that it provides some reference point for assessing the impact of man on our precious planet Earth. Wilderness areas in the next century may be the only places where one can establish that point of reference, and even that potential is in serious jeopardy due to the effects of outside influences on these natural landscapes” (1990, 35).

Interagency Response to Wilderness Management

The Wilderness Act established one National Wilderness Preservation System made up of the wilderness areas managed by four federal land management systems, the NPS, BLM, FWS, and the Forest Service. This requires ever increasing coordination and cooperation among the four agencies (NPS 2001a). The conclusion of a 2001 report by the Pinchot Institute says, “There is a need to forge an integrated and collaborative system across the four wilderness management agencies” (NPS 2001a), also pointing out that, “Local day-to-day management actions may set precedents that could affect wilderness stewardship across all agencies” (NPS 2001a).

Each involved agency has developed different strategies for managing their wilderness, but they are also working together. The Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center and the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute are interagency organizations designed to meet the training and research needs of the four wilderness stewardship agencies (NPS 2000a). But discrepancies also exist in how well the agencies are meeting wilderness goals.

Congressional staffer JAMES BRADLEY sees three changes that agencies need to make to succeed in wilderness management. The first change is to appoint directors of wilderness in their Washington offices. The second change is to redraw management unit boundaries to better serve the needs of wilderness. And the third change is to have full-time professionals running the wilderness programs. He offers these suggestions based on Forest Service management, but they apply to all agencies (1990).

BRADLEY goes on to commend the BLM for some of its management practices. BLM does, in fact, have a wilderness director in Washington, does, in fact, have full-time wilderness positions in its state and district offices, and does have the most professionals in wilderness management of any of the four agencies (1990).

But not all agencies use the same criteria for management. Biodiversity scientist Reed Noss laments that in many National Forest plans wilderness is judged by Recreation Visitor Days, not by values of biodiversity or natural processes. And certainly the NPS has its own way of dealing with wilderness management (1990, 51).

NPS Policy on Wilderness

The Pinchot Institute reports that, “Wilderness will only be sustained through careful thought and planning” (NPS 2001a). The NPS has a policy in place to evaluate all of its landholdings for potential wilderness designation. Those that possess wilderness characteristics will be protected until such a time that the Congress and the President have taken final action on their suitability for designation. Each park containing wilderness will develop and maintain a wilderness plan by which the land will be preserved and managed as wilderness (NPS 2000b).

Management policies clearly state that the following steps will be taken at the park level:

- Assessment of wilderness suitability
- Wilderness studies to create recommendations for Congress
- Wilderness planning
- Wilderness use management

Wilderness planning involves identifying desired future conditions, as well as establishing indicators, standards, conditions, and thresholds beyond which management actions must be taken to mitigate effects (NPS 2000b). The plan will be developed with public involvement and will contain specific, measurable management objectives that address the preservation and management of resources within wilderness (NPS 2000b).

The intent of the Wilderness Act, subsequent scholarship, and NPS policy itself support the idea that wilderness use can only effectively be managed when a plan is in place that does, in fact, identify indicators, standards, conditions, and thresholds. Until then, managers have nothing to measure the impacts of use against and no real way of determining which potential uses will negatively affect the resources.

The value of wilderness to the NPS has evolved since the first NPS wilderness areas were created in 1970—Craters of the Moon National Monument and Petrified Forest National Park. NPS official Jenness Coffee explains that in the early years the values to the NPS were almost purely recreational, and park superintendents were concerned with things like limits, permit systems, and reservations. In the 1980s there was a shift to non-recreational focus—the

role of science, baseline data, biodiversity, and watershed protection. And in the 1990s the NPS adopted a more global view including the preservation of forests as a way to mitigate carbon dioxide. Coffey suggests, "By adopting a more balanced perspective toward wilderness, the NPS has actually come more in line with its mission" (1990, 132).

NPS Action on Wilderness

The NPS Discovery 2000 conference, organized to develop a vision for the NPS into the 21st century, produced a summary document admitting that "the NPS lacks commitment to wilderness at many levels, ranging from park to national. Specific examples abound in lack of wilderness plans, inappropriate tool use, lack of an overall program coordinator, and inadequate funding. These are manifestations of institutional ambivalence, and fundamentally, institutional ignorance of the Wilderness Act" (NPS, 2000a). It is worth restating that 77 National Park sites have designated wilderness areas, but only about 15 have official wilderness management plans (SMITH 2006). The 2000 conference found that "Wilderness planning is not done well within the National Park Service" (NPS 2000a). In the past wilderness plans were tacked on to larger park plans after public involvement had been going on for months. According to park planners, "[this] created strong sentiment among stakeholder groups that the NPS was not taking its wilderness stewardship responsibilities very seriously" (SMITH).

In 2004, The Wilderness Society filed a lawsuit against the Director of the NPS and the Secretary of the Interior for failing to comply with the Wilderness Act and numerous other laws related to wilderness protection. Among other things, The Wilderness Society charged that the Park Service failed to conduct wilderness studies for 39 units of the National Park System, and failed to create wilderness management plans for three-quarters of the units in the system that include designated wilderness. Matt Jenkins, writing for High Country News, called the omissions "spectacular" (2004).

In Death Valley National Park, where over 3.1 million acres of wilderness were designated by Congress in 1994, the Park Service has never prepared a wilderness management plan (Jenkins). Death Valley itself now faces lawsuits over its management of wilderness areas. Death Valley is the largest national park in the lower 48 states. About 90% of the land is designated wilderness. The National Park Service calls it a "vast geologic museum" and says over 1,000 plant types can be found in the park, along with a diversity of wildlife (Tady 2007).

As MEGAN TADY reported in the New Standard, Inyo County, California, where Death Valley is located, filed suit against the US Department of Interior last year "seeking control over four roads in the park, as well as the right to expand the roads into two-lane highways. The routes proposed in the lawsuit run through designated-wilderness areas that the Interior Department has protected from public vehicle use since 1994" (2007). Of at least one road, however, the coalition of citizen groups opposing Inyo County's case say, "there is little or no physical evidence that motor vehicles used much of the alleged 'highway' through this remote area" (TADY). Other roads amount to little more than two-track Jeep roads. The coalition argues that the changes to roads will "degrade habitat, destroy wilderness character, and undermine the natural, cultural and wildlife values and solitude within the National Park" (TADY).

Wilderness simply cannot be managed without wilderness plans in place and wilderness professionals on the ground to manage them. The NPS is finding out the hard way that a lack of proper management results in costly litigation. As well, the wilderness resources themselves suffer without proper plans and staff in place.

Bridging the Gap

Interpretive pioneer Freeman Tilden once said to NPS Director GEORGE HARTZOG, "I have always thought of our service as an institution, more than any other bureau, engaged in a

field of morality – the aim of man to rise above himself, and to choose the option of quality rather than material superfluity” (Sellars 1997, vii). This is a lofty idea – that the NPS is somehow above other agencies. While Tilden can be commended for seeking quality, this quote—and belief—does a disservice to the preservation of resources. If the NPS believes itself to be morally superior to other land management agencies then there can never be meaningful collaboration or a willingness to learn from other agencies.

This attitude is unfortunate in light of JAMES BRADLEY’s praise of the way the BLM has taken the lead in wilderness management (2004). In fact, the NPS would do well to study best management practices of all of the wilderness management agencies. And particularly the NPS should seek to employ more full time wilderness managers instead of relying on non-wilderness professionals to take on wilderness as a collateral duty and seasonal employees who may be extremely dedicated but often lack appropriate management training.

The Pinchot Institute recommends the following actions to help the NPS better meet its wilderness goals:

- Organization among the four wilderness agencies
- Accelerate wilderness planning
- Enhancement of science, education, and training programs
- Creation of stewardship positions and career opportunities
- Accountability for the maintenance and sustainability of the Wilderness System

(NPS 2001a).

Education and training should be part of the solution. Resources such as the Carhart Center exist to bring NPS staff up to the level of being able to plan for and manage wilderness. The 2000 NPS conference suggests that, “We need to educate ourselves so that wilderness is viewed as an opportunity rather than as limiting one’s options. To do this, the National Park Service must commit itself both organizationally and fiscally. The Wilderness Society and the National Parks Conservation Association have offered their help” (NPS 2000a). The NPS must use interagency and non-governmental organization support where their own expertise is lacking.

And as always, there is the question of money. Resource scholar GLENN HAAS says, “Wilderness management requires money, professionals, and programs. ...The amount of resources being allocated to wilderness is miniscule. The reasons for this situation are many, ranging from the lack of wilderness professionalism to agency traditions and Congressional ignorance” (1990, 43). Conventional wisdom would suggest that a lack of money leads to a lack of wilderness professionals. But HAAS seems to say that the opposite is also true; a lack of wilderness professionalism contributes to a lack of funding. This is echoed in JAMES BRADLEY’s experience with Congress. He says, “One reason why it is so difficult [for Congress] to give wilderness more dollars is that the agencies and the Administration are not asking for the dollars” (2004, 140).

And finally, the NPS needs to do a better job of educating the public about the values of wilderness—all the way from recreation to preservation of biodiversity and watersheds to a 21st century understanding of the value of ecosystems to all of humankind. In the *International Journal of Wilderness*, DEBORAH CHAVEZ writes, “We need to educate the country’s diverse population about wilderness. Managers should provide staff training on diversity and involve diverse participants in decision-making. The future of wilderness depends on it” (2000).

CONCLUSIONS

To say the word wilderness is to conjure an image of pristine, natural landscape - “untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain” (FROME, 214).

Not only is wilderness an official legal designation, but it is also a philosophical and spiritual description of the last, best natural area in America. WALLACE STEGNER writes, “If the national park idea is...the best idea America ever had, wilderness preservation is the highest refinement of that idea” (131).

Wilderness, as legally recognized, is a precious resource that land management agencies cannot take for granted. The NPS must take advantage of this gift from Congress, legislation that helps the agency meet its own mandated goals of preservation. 84% of NPS land is managed as wilderness (SMITH)—at least on paper. The challenge for the NPS is to make sure stewardship of this land matches the rhetoric found in management policies.

As the NPS approaches its centennial, the agency should reflect on its mission and the tools it has available to achieve that mission. The NPS does well at including wilderness into its list of priorities and writing policies addressing the importance of wilderness, including the requirement that each park containing wilderness will complete a wilderness management plan every ten years in order to provide “accountability, consistency, and continuity” (NPS 1999, 6) to the National Park Service’s wilderness management program.

The results in the field, unfortunately, do not live up to the intentions presented by management. The NPS has not assigned enough full time wilderness professionals, has not undertaken the creation of comprehensive wilderness plans, has not modeled best management practices of other wilderness management agencies, and has not adequately designated appropriate resources of all kinds to meet the demands of the Wilderness Act.

The NPS, fortunately, has not run out of time to mend this problem. The first and best sign that improvement is possible is that the NPS itself recognizes that there is inconsistency between policy and action. The same 2000 summary document that admitted, “the NPS lacks commitment to wilderness at many levels,” also goes on to express, “The National Park Service should be the premier stewardship agency for wilderness” (NPS 2000a). This should include creating an emotional connection for the public with wilderness, using science to guide stewardship and accountability, and acting on the visionary idea that wilderness is linked to biodiversity and the protection of ecosystems (NPS 2000a). As a premier and beloved land management agency with a strong mandate for preservation, the NPS has a responsibility to be a leader in wilderness stewardship.

In his now famous *Wilderness Letter*, WALLACE STEGNER catalogs the inherent and powerful values of wilderness: its beauty, as genetic banks, a place of spiritual renewal, the birth of awe, the connection with the creatures of the earth, for the “lonely and grand and simple” (115-6). He concludes, “These are some of the things wilderness can do for us. That is the reason we need to put into effect, for its preservation, some other principle than the principles of exploitation or ‘usefulness’ or even recreation. We simply need that wild country available to us, even if we never do more than drive to its edge and look in. For it can be a means of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures, a part of the geography of hope” (116-7).

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