

Previous Reviews of the National Park Service and the National Park System

Janet A. McDonnell

Background

The National Park Service and its partners periodically conduct studies and reports to assess the current state and future of the national park system and other NPS programs. A critical review of five major studies conducted since 1980 can tell us much about the challenges the National Park Service and the parks have faced—and continue to face—as products of the contemporary political, social, cultural, and economic environment. Though varied in scope and form, the studies all struggled with questions about the importance of the national parks and what the authors believed were the enduring fundamental values the parks represented. Their major findings and recommendations were remarkably similar. Yet none of the studies that looked comprehensively at the National Park Service as a whole resulted in the fundamental, enduring changes they saw as critical to achieving the NPS mission.

The first of these studies began in 1980, when Congress directed the Service to conduct a major review of the condition of its parks. The resulting report, *State of the Parks - 1980: A Report to Congress*, reflected the growing emphasis on an ecological and scientific approach to park management that had begun in the 1960s and 1970s. It highlighted the damage caused by both external and internal threats. NPS efforts to document the damage and manage the resources, it concluded, were inadequate. Alarmed by the national press attention the report received, senior NPS and Interior department officials attempted to minimize its findings. The report made specific proposals for improving natural resource management but contained no firm commitment that the Service would act on these proposals. In its January 1981 formal response to Congress the Service agreed to identify the most critical threats and give them priority for funding, complete a resource management plan for each park, and implement a greatly expanded training program.

That same month President Ronald Reagan took office, calling for government austerity and conservative retrenchment. His secretary of the interior, James G. Watt, shifted emphasis from wildlife and wilderness protection and preservation to recreational development. With no support from the administration, by 1982 NPS leaders abandoned the reporting procedures recommended in the report. The report did prompt the agency to develop training courses in the 1980s to educate employees in ecological management principles and environmental laws, but this effort declined by the end of the decade. It also encouraged increases in funding and staffing for scientific research and natural resource management.

A few years later The Conservation Foundation undertook a comprehensive, three-year study focused primarily on land use issues. A multidisciplinary team visited 60 parks and interviewed hundreds of individuals. *National Parks for a New Generation: Visions, Realities, Prospects* (1985) presented a critical portrait of the current state of the parks and made specific recommendations for the future. It cautioned that the cumulative impact of heavy visitor use, deferred maintenance, and outside threats would “seriously damage parks unless checked.” The 1980s, it explained, were “not a time of great expectations” for much needed management innovations. Officials had placed more emphasis on reducing federal expenditures than on promoting park stewardship. Still, public expectations were rising, leading the report authors to recommend a ten-year \$50 million comprehensive program to protect park resources, focusing special attention on historic and cultural resources and on a campaign to combat external pressures on the parks, including the backlog of privately owned lands within park boundaries.

Parks for a New Generation challenged NPS leaders to advance a “broad and dynamic” vision that reflected the size and diversity of the park system, defining vision in terms of the individual visitor experience. “Preserving park resources more nearly unimpaired may ultimately depend on more widespread respect, by an increasingly crowded and developed nation, for the visitor experiences that are less and less available outside the national parks,” the report concluded. The report also envisioned new and expanded roles for the private sector. “In communicating to a wider audience the experiences of awe, solitude, adventure, communion, repose, and reinvigoration to be found in national parks, the conservation community can aid the continuing evolution of the park ideal to help preserve the parks for this and future generations.”

Also in the 1980s the National Parks Conservation Association undertook its own initiative to assess the condition of the parks and develop a comprehensive national park system plan. The results of this effort were released in 1988: *Investing in Park Futures, A Blueprint for Tomorrow*, a nine-volume compendium including a total of 147 recommendations on almost all aspects of the National Park Service’s activities. The plan reported that resource protection was not adequate and that protection should be elevated to central importance in the NPS agenda. Science and research should be given a higher priority, it concluded, and serve as the foundation for policy decisions. Visitor numbers and impacts should be scientifically monitored and controlled. Concessions policy should be reformed. Park boundaries should be adjusted, and new areas should be added to the system. Personnel policies should be changed to improve employee career paths and provide better training for resource management.

The NPCA plan emphasized education, inspiration, and resource protection over recreation, infrastructure, and facility development. Many of the findings and recommendations repeated themes that had been identified before and would continue to be repeated in subsequent assessments. However, in some circles

the report was not enthusiastically received, given its message that park resources were not being adequately protected. In his history of NPCA, *Guardians of the Parks*, John C. Miles notes that this was a message that everyone needed to hear, but did not necessarily want to hear. Many of these points had been made by the National Park Service itself early in the 1980s. The NPCA plan documented that little had been done to address the problems, but the recommendations came out at a time when the political climate was conservative and not amenable to dramatic changes in policy direction.

The problems identified in these studies persisted, as the National Park Service struggled with the increasing complexity of the park system and programs, serious fiscal constraints, and inadequate organizational structures. In October 1991 the Park Service convened a 75th Anniversary Symposium in Vail, Colorado, to chart the agency's course for the 21st century, focusing on four areas of NPS policy and management: organizational renewal, park use and enjoyment, environmental leadership, and resource stewardship. Six strategic objectives framed the work: resource stewardship and protection, access and enjoyment, education and interpretation, proactive leadership, science and research, and professionalism.

Echoing earlier studies, *National Parks for the 21st Century: The Vail Agenda* (1992) found that the budget had failed to keep pace with visitation and pointed to the immediate need for a massive investment in the parks. Topics included external threats, improving cooperation with universities and managers of neighboring public or private lands, public environmental and history education, increasing and professionalizing NPS staff, increasing funding for science and natural resource management, and securing a legislative mandate for scientific research in the parks. All were problems that the Service had previously been reluctant to address, and although the report prompted some agency restructuring, the executive branch and agency leaders continued to demonstrate little enthusiasm for major change.

A few years after Vail, NPS historian Richard West Sellars published *Preserving Nature in the National Parks* (1997). This carefully crafted history of NPS natural resource management revealed that the Service had been negligent in the extreme when it came to pursuing a core function of its mission—preserving natural resources unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations. Unlike the earlier reports, *Preserving Nature* inspired a substantial institutional response. In August 1999 the NPS leadership announced a major initiative, the Natural Resource Challenge, to substantially improve the way the Service managed the natural resources under its care. The Service appealed to Congress and within the first few years of the challenge, had garnered an increase of \$76 million in base funding for natural resource management and research in the parks. Since its inception, the challenge program has substantially increased the role of science in decision making, revitalized and expanded natural resource programs,

strengthened partnerships with the scientific community, and enhanced the sharing of knowledge with educational institutions.

Also in 1999 the NPS director asked the National Park System Advisory Board to address the complex mission of the National Park Service and to make recommendations for the future. More succinct and focused than previous reports, *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century* built its case upon the Service's founding mission: to ensure that these places would never be impaired and would be available to "inspire and inform future generations." It called on leaders "to re-examine the 'enjoyment equals support' equation" and to enhance the public's understanding of and appreciation for the importance of resource protection. The board sought to take a "fresh look" at the National Park Service within the existing social, political, and economic context and to identify ways that the agency could better serve the American public. Parks, it warned, could no longer be thought of "as islands with little or no connection, cultural or ecological, to their surroundings."

The board recommended that the Park Service increase its commitment to education; encourage the study and public discussion of the American past and link park sites to the broader themes of American history; focus more attention on the conservation of natural systems and biodiversity; adopt and advance the principles of sustainability; actively explore and emphasize the connections between native cultures and the parks; encourage collaboration among park and recreation systems from the local to the federal level to promote a widely accessible outdoor recreation network; and develop a more diverse workforce. These recommendations reflected the impact of the large number of cultural and historic sites that had come into the park system during the 1990s and the mounting pressure on park boundaries. The study encouraged the Service to reaffirm the meaning and value of parks, conservation, and recreation, and to expand the learning and research occurring in parks. Expressing a refined and expansive vision for the National Park Service, the report concluded that the nation's system of parks has a high civic purpose: "By caring for the parks and conveying the park ethic, we care for ourselves and act on behalf of the future."

Challenges and Opportunities

The studies repeatedly highlighted the need to improve resource stewardship and how that need related to education, leadership and management, threats from outside park boundaries, and the role of science. Why did these studies and reports keep revisiting many of the same issues? Why were the problems and concerns identified in the reports not addressed more forcefully? The answer is not entirely clear; however, certain challenges become evident when reviewing these studies as a group.

Failure to Secure Support and Funding

A recurring theme was lack of adequate funding. Certainly budget constraints and inadequate political support were factors. Yet with few exceptions the reports failed to identify costs associated with their recommendations. In his critique of the Vail Agenda, NPS participant Bill Brown observed that by failing to include specific actions and cost figures for implementing its recommendations, the report remained "a wish list." Except for *Preserving Nature*, none of the reports called for or sparked a major campaign to secure additional funds to meet those costs.

None of the reassessment efforts appealed directly to the American public for support.

None of the efforts actively enlisted leadership or grassroots support within the National Park Service, itself. Service leaders seem to have absorbed the reports and made modest changes, but then retreated to traditional behavioral patterns. Most of the studies did not include a requirement for accountability.

Addressing the Fundamental Question of Mission

All of these assessments attempted to address the fundamental question of what the national parks should be and should mean to a rapidly changing society. In referring to the park ideal and park values, most articulated a vision and mission for the National Park Service and the national park system based on assumptions made in 1916 at the founding of the National Park Service. Most envisioned a National Park Service future based solely on the Organic Act mandate to care for the parks and provide for visitor enjoyment of those natural and cultural wonders.

Seventy-five years after the establishment of the Service, the Vail Agenda posed an additional question: "Why would a nation want a system of national parks?" Recognizing that the Service's purposes had significantly evolved since 1916 to include broad environmental and cultural leadership responsibilities as well as functions external to parks, Vail sought to envision a role for the Service beyond park boundaries. While correctly emphasizing resource stewardship as the agency's primary responsibility, its recommendations broke ground beyond its predecessors, particularly in the areas of education, science and research, leadership, and professionalism. Vail's emphasis on promoting parks' contributions to the "nation's values, character, and experience" presaged the broader vision for the Service embraced in the Advisory Board's report a decade later.

The 2001 Advisory Board report sharpened the ideas proposed in Vail, with a vision that reached well beyond park boundaries and created an enhanced educational role for the agency. By caring for parks, the report concluded, we care for ourselves; success is marked not only by well-tended parks, but by sharing broadly the environmental and cultural stories the parks represent. "The

larger purpose of this mission," the report proclaimed, "is to build a citizenry that is committed to conserving its heritage and its home on earth."

With this conclusion *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century* reflected an increasingly accepted vision for the National Park Service: that the preservation of park resources is not the end of the Service's work, but the beginning. This vision is tied to contemporary understandings of reality. The NPS mission has grown well beyond what founders Stephen Mather and Horace Albright envisioned; it has become much more complex than preserving and managing parks. The Service now has responsibility for managing a broad range of programs, and its legislative mandate has grown to include clean air and water, protection of archeological resources, historic preservation, endangered species, wild and scenic rivers, and environmental protection. The national park system has expanded from a collection of the great scenic parks to involvement in civic and social pursuits. As the mission has grown in complexity, so too has the enormity of the issues the Service must face. Yet the change and growth have also created a new context of opportunity, one in which boldness, creativity, and a new set of skills will be required.

Janet A. McDonnell, PhD, currently works as a senior historian with the Department of Defense. From 2000 to 2007, she served as bureau historian for the National Park Service where she managed the Park Service's administrative history and oral history programs. Previously, she worked for thirteen years as a staff historian for the headquarters of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. While with the National Park Service, she published *The National Park Service: Responding to the September 11 Terrorist Attacks* and three oral histories with former Service directors. She also published a number of books and historical reports for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, to include *After Desert Storm: the U.S. Army and the Reconstruction of Kuwait* and *Supporting the Troops: the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the Persian Gulf War*. Finally, reflecting her earlier background and continuing interest in Native American history, she published *Dispossession of the American Indian: Indian Land Policy, 1887-1934*.