

CONSERVATION IN THE NATIONAL PARKS

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INTRODUCTION

Along the highway leading from Hoover Dam to Kingman, Arizona is a barren bit of desert. So desolate does the region look to the traveler unfamiliar with the desert scene that he often feels a sense of insecurity, and vaguely wishes that he could see something reassuringly green. It is with a real feeling of appreciation that he finally sees a large, lone Joshua-tree growing along the side of the road--a tree so large that it casts enough shade for both him and his car. There are no others close by the road, although a few stunted trees may be seen in the distance near the mountains. So he pulls off the road and into the shade, there to relax for a few minutes and marvel over the fact that even this tiny bit of shelter effectively lessens the sun's heat.

Probably this traveler never asks himself how the tree happened to be there--it is enough just to have it to appreciate. He would, without doubt, be much interested to learn that the highway was originally scheduled to be built right over the spot where the tree stood--but was moved a few feet to one side so that the only tree in miles could be retained.

Here, then, is found a simple example of conservation in operation. The tire-worn surface of the desert beneath the Joshua-tree offers eloquent testimony today as to how important this act of preservation has been.

In a real sense, the National Parks have been and are today to the national scene about what the Joshua-tree is to the local scene. In that lonely spot along the highway there is no real substitute for the Joshua-tree--it is the finest of its kind and thus warrants protection. True, others may be found in the nearby region of some size, but they do not stand apart like this one. Our National Parks and Monuments have similar values. They are the finest of their kind--and they must be protected against all pressures that would destroy or alter them.

The National Park Service has always been associated with the word "conservation." Ever since the germ of an idea developed into the first National Park, the Service has prided itself on being a pioneer in the field. All of which bring up the question, "Just what is conservation?" The word means different things to different people. When a forester thinks of conservation, he can be expected to think in terms of utilizing our forest products--the logging of mature trees, the harvesting of wildlife through hunting, and the preservation of these values through the control of fire and insect damage. The mining engineer may think of it in terms of mineral resources and how they are used. The reclamation engineer will likely visualize it as water conservation and lands. A refuge manager will probably think about adequately protected wildlife resources in which the refuge plays a prominent part. Conservation societies of various interests, and educators may have still different feelings.

Many definitions have been suggested through the years to try to explain the meaning of conservation. It has been defined as "A state of harmony between man and the land;" "Wise use of our natural resources;"

"Operating our resources for the greatest good over the long run," and many others. There can be no doubt that the engineer, the refuge manager, the forester--each is convinced that his agency is making "wise use of our natural resources." And so they are.

It would be very helpful if some concise definition could be offered which adequately sums up what is meant by conservation in the National Parks. Perhaps a portion of the Act of 1916, which established the National Park Service, comes as close as any to giving us a workable definition. It states, in part, that the purpose of the National Park System is "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." In the National Parks, and other areas of the National Park System, all things are protected. It is a basic policy to preserve nature as God created it, and, through carefully planned development, research, and interpretation, make the natural scene available for continuing public use without appreciably altering it or using it up.

It is a type of conservation that is often difficult to explain, especially to anyone who has always thought of natural resources in terms of how man can convert them into usable materials. It seems probable that Richard L. Pollett had something of this in mind when he said: "The wealth of a nation is in its soil, its water, its forests and the things they produce and reproduce. When all the gifts of nature that can be commercialized have been converted into dollars and cents, this will be a poor place to live." It is the effort to keep from converting "all the gifts of nature" into dollars and cents that sets the National Park System so very definitely apart in the national conservation picture. Conservation then, in the National Parks, has a special meaning all its own.

Conservation within our National Parks and other areas within the National Park System includes a vast assortment of subjects. It takes in everything in the biological field (mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, fishes, all invertebrates, and all members of the plant family), things geological (rock formations, minerals, fossils, water, soils), the recorded history of our country, and remains of human prehistory (Indian ruins, artifacts, etc.). It even includes the protection of the aesthetic (appreciation of the beautiful) and inspirational aspects of our areas for those people who come to simply rest and drink in the many satisfying views a park has to offer.

HISTORY OF NATIONAL PARK IDEA

The establishment of a National Park did not just happen because one person had a new idea. Over a hundred years ago an area in Arkansas was found to contain hot water springs of medical value. To protect them, Congress in 1832 set aside a 4-square-mile area which included the springs and called it the Hot Springs Reservation. This was something new; an unusual natural feature had been set aside for public use. Later on this

area was to become Hot Springs National Park in 1921. The idea was beginning to form, but it hadn't developed as yet.

However, in 1864 an event took place which showed that the idea of a National Park was rapidly growing. For several years the beauties of Yosemite Valley and the wonders of the great sequoia trees at nearby Mariposa Grove were in danger of being severely damaged and perhaps lost. To try to avert this threat, Senator John Conness of California introduced a bill in Congress on March 28, 1864 to give both Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of Big Trees to the State of California "upon the express conditions that the premises shall be held for public use, resort and recreation, shall be held inalienable for all time." The intent was clear. Here were two areas of unusual beauty and importance that were being set aside for all time, to be retained unchanged, for public use and enjoyment. However, this was a State area and not yet pictured as being of outstanding national importance. But, there could be no doubt--this was a giant step toward the idea of creating a National Park.

Let us now move on six more years to 1870. For many years prior to this date, there had been stories coming out of the Wyoming wilderness about a fabulous land of natural wonders that included such things as boiling waters, spouting geysers, spectacular canyons and immense waterfalls. As far back as 1807, a man by the name of John Colter (a scout with the Lewis and Clark expedition) wandered into northwestern Wyoming and returned telling stories of its steaming valleys and vast lakes. No one believed him, however, and so his stories were mostly forgotten. Years later new tales cropped up, this time told by a fur trapper by the name of Jim Bridger. At first Bridger's stories seemed so unbelievable that they were shrugged off as being a product of a good imagination. However, several were published in newspapers and rather widely read.

To determine once and for all the truth about these stories, an expedition was organized in 1870 to go into this fabled country and see what was there. Under the leadership of three men, General Washburn, Lieutenant Doone, and Mr. Langford, a party entered the region and saw the wonders of what is now known as the Yellowstone country. So impressed were they that, at the suggestion of a member of the expedition by the name of Cornelius Hedges, they decided to petition Congress to set aside the area as a great National Park. This Congress did, and in 1872 the first National Park was born -- The idea that had been slowly developing through the years became a reality.

Following the creation of Yellowstone National Park, it was not long until others were established. Such famous areas as Yosemite, Sequoia, Mount Rainier, and Crater Lake were designated by law as National Parks. In 1916 Congress established the National Park Service to administer all these areas, and our present day system of National Parks and National Monuments came into being.

CONSERVATION POLICIES

In order to protect the natural, historical and archeological features of our National Parks and National Monuments, a number of

regulations and policies had to be developed. In the field of geology, it was soon decided that no one should be allowed to destroy the scenic values of an area by mining, prospecting, the removal of minerals and rock specimens, or the taking of fossils. Through the years these objectives have been difficult to achieve. There is always someone who thinks of each park or monument as a likely spot for valuable minerals and wants to try his hand at prospecting. Rock and mineral collectors often look with envy upon some of the specimens that are in plain sight, while fossil collectors have difficulty refraining from taking well-preserved bones, casts of tracks, petrified wood and the like.

The preservation of the plants and animals poses even more difficult problems. However, through the years the following policies have been followed:

1. Hunting and Trapping

The hunting, trapping, or molesting of any of the wildlife in the parks is prohibited. While ranger patrols have largely eliminated the hunter and trapper from the scene, the molesting of animals is of common occurrence. There are numerous records of visitors teasing the park animals, or bothering them in one way or another. Sometimes injury to the visitor follows, as happened when a mother bear in one of the parks finally became angry when visitors tried to keep her away from her cubs. Needless to say the separation did not last long, as she simply charged the group of people and scattered them.

2. Feeding of Wildlife

Visitors are asked not to feed the animals in the park. In some instances such food may not be considered harmful to the animal. Peanuts aren't especially detrimental to the health of a bird or a squirrel, but a deer's stomach was never intended to digest candy. In one park a mother deer was observed to eat a total of 23 candy bars in one morning! Feeding a mother deer when she has fawns hidden out will likely reduce the amount of milk she can supply them, and they suffer malnutrition. Often feeding may actually be harmful to the animal, causing it to become thin and an easy prey to disease. It also develops unnatural habits among the animals, and the visitor no longer sees them in a natural situation.

3. Predators

The larger predators, such as the mountain lion, bear, wolf and coyote, are given complete protection. These animals, while hunted outside the parks, are considered to be an important part of the fauna and are not molested. Without their acting as natural controls, the numbers of deer and small mammals would become too great for the food available. Thus the predators are a vital part of proper wildlife management in the park.

4. Reptiles

Many visitors consider all reptiles objectionable and believe they should be killed. It is the policy of the National Park Service

to protect all reptiles, except in those instances when such poisonous snakes as the rattlesnake, copperhead or water-moccasin are found around areas used by visitors. Under such situations they must be removed in the interest of visitor safety. All other forms are considered beneficial and an important part of nature's scheme of things.

5. Other Forms of Animal Life

It sometimes seems strange to think of protecting beetles, butterflies and the like, but they are all important in the wildlife picture. Visitors may also fish by following the game regulations of the State in which the park is located and obtaining a fishing license where required. This is the only form of wildlife that may be removed from the park without a permit to collect.

6. Forests

There is to be no cutting of any tree except where necessary to do so. During the construction of a road, while a forest fire is burning, or when an insect infestation occurs, it may be necessary to cut trees. However, logging is not allowed. The value of the forest in the park is for the sheer enjoyment of visitors, for watershed protection, and as a home for wildlife. The trees are a part of the natural scene.

7. Other Plants

Neither flowers nor shrubs shall be destroyed. There is always a temptation to pick a bouquet of flowers, but one has only to think what would happen if ~~everyone~~ visiting a park should pick a flower (with more than a million visitors per year in several areas) to see what would become of the colorful flower fields if this were allowed. In spite of this, vast numbers of flowers are needlessly destroyed each year by visitors leaving the trails and wandering through the flower fields. Small flowers, especially, are easy to grind under foot.

8. Water.

Streams must not be contaminated or made ugly by the dumping of trash, garbage and other materials into them. The reasons are quite apparent, but often people fail to pay attention to them. A stream or lake with tin cans scattered all along its banks and in the water has lost much of its beauty and the water has been contaminated for drinking purposes.

9. Archeological Materials

Early Indian objects and village sites are protected against those who would remove or destroy any part of them. This is vital if we are to conserve such things for future generations, as these artifacts are irreplaceable. Once gone, they are lost for all time. In spite of such laws, there are instances every year where someone tries to remove some object of value or do a bit of digging in the hope of acquiring a valuable piece of jewelry or pottery.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

In recent years, there has been a great population increase in our country. This has been accompanied by a tremendous increase in the number of visitors coming to the National Parks and National Monuments. It is anticipated that as many as 80 million people per year will be visiting these areas within the next few years. Thus the problem of how to conserve the wonderful scenic areas, the plant and animal life and retain some semblance of wilderness is facing all who are interested in seeing them protected. Campgrounds are overcrowded and firewood is no longer readily available for campers. The failure of hikers to stay on established trails in causing great destruction of the fragile flower fields in several parks. Even the giant sequoias are suffering from so many people walking around them, packing the ground so tightly that the tree roots find it difficult to breathe. Wildlife also suffers, and roadside bums are seen in many areas where bears and deer beg for handouts. With the increase of visitor-pressures, the inevitable litterbug has also come with his thoughtless scattering of paper, cans, bottles and other debris over the park. Vandalism is a growing problem, and the deliberate destruction of public facilities and park features is a matter of great concern. More people also mean more manmade forest fires. The various areas have had to devise new and better methods of controlling fire and also of educating visitors in the use of fire.

If efforts to conserve these wonderful wilderness areas are to succeed, it will be necessary that everyone do his or her share. It is to the young people in the schools, and to their teachers, that the nation must look for aid. Legislation, rules and regulations, and an active conservation program in the parks are all helpful, but the most important factor will be the feelings of those who want to see a priceless heritage protected for the future. Only an appreciative public can, in the long run, guarantee the continued existence of these crown jewels of scenic and historic America as we see them today.

It was the writer, Van Dyke, who said: "Natural beauty and wonder are priceless heirlooms which God has bestowed upon our nation. How shall we escape the contempt of the coming generations if we suffer this irreplaceable heritage to be wasted?"

RECOMMENDED READING

Steve Mather of the National Parks. By Robert Shankland.

Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1951.

The National Parks, What They Mean to You and Me. By Freeman Tilden.

Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1951.

Interpreting Our Heritage. By Freeman Tilden.

University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1957.

The National Park Story in Pictures. By Isabelle F. Story.

United States Government Printing Office,
Washington, D. C. 1957

Glimpses of Historical Areas East of the Mississippi River.

United States Government Printing Office,
Washington, D. C. 1937.

Guide to Scenic Playgrounds and Historic Shrines of the United States and Canada. National Geographic Magazine, Washington, D. C. May 1958.

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