



THE COALITION TO PROTECT AMERICA'S PARKS: AN EARLY HISTORY

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Over the past 15 years, the Coalition to Protect America's National Parks (formerly the Coalition of National Park Service Retirees) has become an increasingly powerful voice for those who care deeply about the well-being and the future of the National Park System. The organization continues to grow and adapt effectively to a changing political, social, and fiscal environment. It continues to proactively identify and address challenges facing the national parks and work to protect park resources. Though some aspects of the Coalition have changed, such as its organizational structure, its fundamental mission has not. It continues to place high priority on the importance of maintaining its credibility and being the voice of experience.

The roots of the Coalition of National Park Service Retirees can be traced to early 2002 when two former U.S. Environmental

Protection Agency (EPA) attorneys founded the Environmental Integrity Project with support from the Rockefeller Family Fund. The Environmental Integrity Project was a Washington, D.C. – based environmental non-profit that advocated more effective enforcement of environmental law. Soon after its creation, the Rockefeller Family Fund formed the Campaign to Protect America's Lands (CPAL) as a non-profit organization focused on educating the public and elected officials about the values of protected areas. It agreed to fund that organization for two years. The Rockefeller Family Fund thus formed CPAL as an additional campaign of the Environmental Integrity Project, for the purpose of "conserving our natural and historical heritage by exposing policies that permit destruction of our parks and public lands for private profit." Richard (Rick) Smith, who had served in six national parks, two National Park Service (NPS) regional offices, as well as NPS headquarters, went to work for CPAL. Slowly he and others came to recognize the need for an organization that would focus specifically on national park areas rather than public lands more generally, as CPAL did.^[1]

The Rockefeller Family Fund then contacted Destry Jarvis, who had been with the National Parks and Conservation Association (NPCA) from 1972 until the fall of 1988, and enlisted Jarvis and others to campaign against President George W. Bush's policies and actions related to the National Parks. The Rockefeller Family Fund commissioned Jarvis to prepare a detailed analysis of the Bush administration's "assaults" on federal lands, particularly lands within the National Park System. After Jarvis presented his report to Rockefeller Family Fund leaders, they decided to publicize its findings. Jarvis recommended that they have knowledgeable and respected NPS retirees hold a national press conference to publicize those findings.^[2]

Jarvis and others understood that while fear of retribution could prevent current NPS employees from speaking out, NPS retirees would be able to speak more freely. They decided to bring several retired NPS officials to Washington, D.C. to hold a press conference to address several policies and actions that would have a negative impact on the NPS and on the parks. In early 2003 Jarvis contacted John W. (Bill) Wade to enlist his support and invite him to participate. During his decades-long

career with the NPS, Wade had served in various positions, to include working as a park ranger in several parks, a park specialist, and superintendent at Shenandoah National Park (NP). Wade agreed to participate in the press conference and invited two fellow NPS retirees to join him: Rick Smith and Mike Finley. Finley had served as a park ranger, law enforcement specialist, superintendent at four parks, and in NPS headquarters in ranger activities and legislative affairs.

The three retirees discussed how best to organize the press conference to ensure that they addressed the major issues and concerns outlined in Jarvis's report, to include the NPS budget and management policies. Smith for example would focus on the administration's attempt to use R.S. 2477 discussed later to claim that old roads inside national park units had been in continual use. This would mean that they could be open to travel, primarily the units in Utah. The press conference would also focus on the Bush administration's Clear Skies Initiative and Competitive Sourcing, also discussed below.[\[3\]](#)

The press conference, held at the National Press Club in Washington on May 19, 2003, proved to be very successful and marked a major milestone in the beginning of what would become the Coalition of National Park Service Retirees (CNPSR). Almost immediately people began to ask the organizers and the participants how they too could become involved. Indeed, Jarvis, Smith, Wade, and others were a little surprised by the number of people seeking to join their effort and quickly discussed how to build on the momentum from the press conference. In those first months, these leaders and organizers continued to receive phone calls from current NPS members at all levels. Sometimes these employees would make the Coalition aware of threats to the parks and park resources. This practice continues to this day. The coalition continues to get information from some inside the NPS. [\[4\]](#)

In addition to the press conference, the Rockefeller Family Fund wanted to send a formal letter to President Bush and Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton expressing their concerns about the administration's current policies and actions and asking them to end their attacks on the NPS and the park system. Wade and

the other leaders prepared a letter to Bush and Norton dated May 19, 2003, referencing specific concerns about the following initiatives: sacrificing the public interest for private profits; allowing oil and gas drilling in or near NPS units, paving large portions of national parks, and “cutting park professionals ‘out of the loop in protecting park air quality.” They formally requested that Bush and Norton reconsider these initiatives. [5]

Finley, Smith, and Wade ultimately signed the final letter to President Bush along with more than a dozen other retired NPS officials. More specifically, the letter went forward with 28 signers and was accompanied by a press release. As media outlets around the country began to publicize the letter, more retirees continued to contact Finley, Wade, and Smith asking to have their names added to the letter. The letter was released to the media and was well publicized. It was released again in July 2003, this time with more than 60 signers. The small group involved with the press conference and Bush letter was so impressed by the scope and intensity of the response from other retirees that they quickly began discussing the idea of creating an organization made up of NPS retirees.[6]

The original idea then for the Coalition was to have an organization of NPS retirees that would challenge President Bush, Secretary Norton, and NPS Director Fran Mainella on some of their decisions and policies that were having a negative impact on the parks and on the National Park System. From 2003 to 2005 the Rockefeller Family Fund continued to fund the Coalition through a series of grants. The Coalition used the Wilderness Society to administer those grant funds until the Coalition later incorporated.

Initially the supporters used the term “Coalition of Concerned NPS Retirees” to identify themselves. They resisted becoming a formal “organization” with “members” and did not want to be seen simply as another conservation or environmental group. Rather they saw themselves as a group of concerned professionals who had retired from the NPS and maintained a concern for park natural and cultural resources. Very early on, the founders agreed that the Coalition would be an advocacy organization for the NPS, not a union for NPS employees. They

would get involved only in precedent setting issues, such as outsourcing and snowmobile use. They would later decide to remove the word “concerned” from their name because they realized that no one would join the group if they were not already “concerned,” so the word was redundant.[7]

Bill Wade, Rick Gale, Jerry Rogers, and Maureen Finnerty were among the Coalition’s strongest advocates early on. Though they worked with the National Parks and Conservation Association (NPCA), they did not want the media or the public to regard them as just another conservation group. From the beginning, the founders wanted to function as, and be recognized as, the unique “voice of experience” in NPS and national park related matters. They also understood the need to remain independent and not align too closely with other organizations.

The Coalition founders determined that the organization’s primary role would be protecting the parks and advocating for NPS programs. They also sought to keep the membership strong and have that membership reflect the diverse perspectives and opinions within the NPS, though they might not have been as successful in this as they would have liked. The original mission laid out by the early organizers continues to guide the Coalition today. As Jarvis later pointed out, who was better positioned to comment on the management of the parks than those who had firsthand experience managing parks, as opposed to other advocacy groups. The Coalition could speak with credibility and authority on the issues and remains distinct from other non-governmental organizations. It received current information faster and can more readily analyze the impact of government policies and actions.[8]

The CPAL immediately supported the retirees’ new organization and would continue to provide support to the Coalition until it ceased to operate in 2006. CPAL was willing to provide funding for its activities and was able to access the media through a public relations firm that it had under contract. Rob Arnberger, Rick Gale, Rick Smith, and Bill Wade acted as an advisory team in coordinating activities both for the Coalition and for CPAL activities.[9]

Having Bush as President, Norton as Interior Secretary, and Mainella as NPS Director made the Coalition founders aware of the need for a strong voice to protect the parks. The NPCA was already speaking out but they had no experience actually managing any public lands. This was a big difference. The NPCA did not “speak the language,” said Smith. The Coalition also worked with Wilderness Society, Association of National Park Rangers, and other groups on a variety of activities, but it was always careful to maintain its separate identity.^[10]

Jarvis, Wade, and Smith shared their contacts and aggressively recruited new Coalition members in those early months. The membership quickly grew from 25 to 50 and continued to grow. Attracting new members proved to be an easy task. Though as we have seen, it began as a small group of individuals who knew each other, others quickly joined in. The leaders realized they needed to take steps to make sure the organization could meet the expectations of these new members. Wade took the lead on this.

In early 2003, Arnberger was still an NPS employee, serving as regional director for its Alaska Region. He had been involved in some early conversations about establishing an organization of NPS retirees, but he was not yet convinced that an advocacy group made up of NPS retirees would have much impact. When Wade, Smith, and Finley gave their press conference, however, Arnberger secretly applauded their efforts but initially was somewhat pessimistic about the impact of such an organization. As time passed and he became increasingly concerned about the current leadership of the NPS, his confidence in the Coalition’s leadership and actions grew. Within a couple weeks of retiring and moving to Tucson, Arizona, the Coalition asked him to represent the retirees at a media event related to threats to the National Park System, and he would become a major figure in the organization.^[11]

Employee Survey and A Call to Action

In its first 18 months, the Coalition grew into an organization of more than 360 members. Its membership had become increasingly diverse in professional experience and seniority. More important, through its actions it had established

credibility among current and former NPS employees. Political leaders in the Interior department and the Park Service increasingly found themselves in the position of having to refute the Coalition's criticisms. Current NPS employees were increasingly contacting the Coalition to provide "insider" information. The Coalition also became more successful at accessing critical information that often challenged or refuted policy, decisions, and actions by the Department of the Interior (DOI) and NPS political leaders. It had served as a conduit for releasing such information publicly when appropriate.[\[12\]](#)

More specifically, in those first 18 months, the Coalition held three major press conferences, issued a number of press releases, and established a website to keep the public informed. It organized and managed four public hearings in the West. It provided a forum for discussion and gave retirees a powerful voice. In addition, Congress had acknowledged the Coalition by inviting its representatives to contribute language for proposed legislation and to testify on Capitol Hill.

Peter Altman, who the Rockefeller Family Fund had hired as executive director of CPAL, came up with the idea of conducting a survey to highlight the current challenges within the NPS. The Coalition participated in developing and administering a CPAL-funded NPS Employee Survey conducted in October 2003. This was a professionally administered and statistically valid survey of NPS employees reflecting their views on how the NPS was being managed. Wade spoke at a press conference at the National Press Club on November 13, 2003, releasing the results of the survey.[\[13\]](#)

Eight percent of the permanent NPS workforce responded to the survey, making it statistically valid. The responses revealed that by a large margin employee morale within the NPS was the lowest it had been in decades and perhaps since the creation of the agency. Factors contributing to the low morale were underappreciation of employees, overworked employees (due to understaffing), the belief that leaders were not fulfilling the NPS mission, and a feeling that leaders were "selling out" to special interests instead of making decisions and taking actions based on professional experience and scientific

justifications.[\[14\]](#)

In addition, on September 21, 2004 the Coalition published a report titled *A Call to Action: Saving Our National Park System*. Although the report did not get the significant media coverage that the survey did, it was distributed in Congress and to a number of administration officials and provided a framework for future action. The Coalition drew on this key document later in its report *America's National Parks: A Call to Conscience*. Arnberger, Wade, and Smith were the primary authors of this piece.

The Call to Action opened with a powerful statement that parks were in peril, noting, "At no time in the past has the fate of the National Park Service and System been so threatened." The report heavily referenced the August 25, 1916 Organic Act establishing the NPS, as well as the amendment known as the General Authorities Act of 1970 and another amendment called the General Authorities Act of 1978. The paper called for constant vigilance in the face of frequent attempts to rewrite the law through policy and administrative procedure and an excellent grounding in the mission of the NPS and its legal foundations. Though one Interior official insisted that the Organic Act required that parks be managed so that park resources were "on an equal plane" with providing recreational opportunities and visitor enjoyment, the paper argued that there was no "equal plane" between protecting park resources and providing recreational opportunities.[\[15\]](#)

A Call to Action laid out a five-step program to reinvigorate the management of the National Park System and return to the bipartisan support politically that had characterized the oversight of that System. It looked to Congress and the administration to evaluate these recommendations and take action. The five recommendations included a call for an annual recurring operational budget increase for the NPS of at least the \$600 million needed to restore the NPS's ability to manage daily operations. It also called for convening a non-partisan "National Parks Blue Ribbon Commission" to determine the most effective organizational model for managing the National Park System and make recommendations to the President and

Congress. Another nonpartisan panel of technical experts should determine the true budget and personnel needs of the NPS and report its findings to the Blue Ribbon Commission. Based on the recommendations of the Commission and panel they should craft a bold multi-year Keeping the Promises plan for the NPS Centennial in 2016.[\[16\]](#)

Meanwhile, the Coalition kept up its pressure on the Bush administration. It sent additional letters to Director Mainella in late December 2003 and early January 2004 as well as another letter to President Bush dated January 24, 2004. Its representatives made additional visits to members of Congress during the week of January 19, 2004, focusing primarily on the NPS Organic Act and its amendments. Meanwhile individual Coalition members sent letters to various Congressional representatives.[\[17\]](#)

EARLY ISSUES

The Coalition worked diligently to combat what it maintained was the Bush administration's weakening of the NPS mission through its efforts to redefine that mission and rewrite existing NPS management policies. It also fought the administration's assault on National Park values to include noise and air pollution, particularly through the use of snowmobiles inside the parks and Bush administration Clear Skies policies. The administration had pushed to allow personal watercraft for the first time, "sacrificing the solitude for which are national parks are treasured." Another example was Secretary Norton's actions contradicting the evidence presented to DOI by NPS scientists successfully petitioning UNESCO to remove Yellowstone and Great Smoky national parks from the list of endangered World Heritage Sites.[\[18\]](#)

Snowmobile use in the parks

A number of advocacy groups, including the Coalition, became increasingly concerned when they learned that the Bush administration was holding up the implementation of the previous Clinton administration's "winter use" rule. Various conservation groups approached Mike Finley for help organizing a campaign. Finley put Bill Wade in contact with Jon

Catton who became a key advisor on the snowmobile issue. They began speaking with former NPS directors and park superintendents and later wrote a letter to President Bush signed by some former NPS directors and former Yellowstone National Park superintendents. They argued that the snowmobile issue was emblematic of how the administration regarded park resources and science. It demonstrated what could happen in other parks if snowmobile use was allowed in Yellowstone NP.^[19]

Despite overwhelming public sentiment and strong scientific analysis supporting the Bill Clinton administration's phase-out of snowmobile use in Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks, the Bush administration in response to pressure from the International Snowmobile Manufacturers Association had reopened the parks to their use. Yet, studies conducted over a ten-year period had confirmed that snowmobile use contributed to air pollution, which was harmful to park employees and visitors, and that the noise pollution from the snowmobiles threatened the nation's last surviving wild buffalo herd.

The preferred alternative, the Coalition argued, was to replace snowmobiles with snow coaches, a more efficient and less polluting form of transportation. Secretary Norton ignored that scientific evidence and the more than 350,000 public comments that the department received, with 80 percent of them favoring the ban. She conducted a supplemental environmental impact statement (EIS) during which the public overwhelmingly continued to favor the ban. Yet the administration approved the continued use of snowmobiles.

The Coalition provided formal comment on the supplemental EIS for Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks on the snowmobile issue on October 8, 2003. In December 2003 a Federal District Court found that DOI's decision to allow this continued use to be without scientific merit and ordered that the Clinton rules be restored. A second Federal District Court voided the Clinton rules. The administration followed this favorable ruling and restored snowmobile use in the park.

The battle however continued. In 2005 Smith testified on behalf

of the Coalition that despite repeated scientific evidence that snowmobiles disturbed the natural quiet of Yellowstone, adversely affected wildlife populations and posed threats to visitor and employee health, and despite the responses of hundreds of thousands of Americans during the EIS process that snowmobile use should be phased out, snowmobiles were still permitted in Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks because of DOI political appointees. “The insistence on their continued use devalues science and demonstrates their contempt for public option,” said Smith in 2005 testimony before a House Subcommittee. [\[20\]](#)

Privatization and Outsourcing

In addition to combatting snowmobile use, the Coalition turned its attention to the issues of privatization and outsourcing. Secretary Norton and Director Mainella aggressively pursued the Bush administration’s “competitive sourcing” initiative, despite widespread opposition in Congress and repeated warnings from park officials that additional competitive sourcing (the NPS already outsourced concession, public health, and some visitor information operations) would seriously compromise the Park Service’s ability to perform its three core functions: protect resources, provide for quality visitor services, and maintain productive relations with surrounding communities. The administration was targeting maintenance and resources/management/research employees in its outsourcing efforts.

By not designating the NPS’s professional science and resources management positions as “inherently governmental” as the other DOI bureaus had done, the Coalition argued, the administration was attempting to outsource many NPS critical functions, including biological science and archaeological survey and assessment activities, which would replace NPS employees with private contractors. The Coalition pointed out that outsourcing focused on whether a particular job could be done more economically by a non-government entity, but it failed to place any value on the expertise and institutional knowledge of NPS professionals. As a result, shifting duties to private industry could actually increase costs over retaining NPS

employees because of the loss in productivity and training time. Privatization would also further open national park management to private influence, rather than retaining direct government oversight.

In addition, the Coalition argued, the scientist and resources management specialists were the ones who furnished park managers with the resource information they needed to make thoughtful decisions. The quality of this information was enhanced by the institutional knowledge of the NPS specialists. Private contractors could not duplicate this expertise.[\[21\]](#)

In September 2001, DOI released “A Plan for Citizen Centered Governance, Adding Customer Value by Linking Accountability, Modernization, and Integration,” a plan by Secretary Norton to implement the Bush administration’s government-wide reforms, including competitive outsourcing. The process required federal agencies, including the NPS, to determine whether each employee’s job could and should be contracted out to the private sector. The target for the department was to privatize 3,000 positions by the end of 2003, to include identifying 1,700 positions within the NPS for privatization.

More specifically, Norton proposed that 900 NPS career professional positions be converted into private sector jobs by September 30, 2004. An additional 808 NPS career positions would be studied for private sector conversion and then employees would have to compete against private sector bidders. The types of jobs identified for privatizing included biology and forestry technicians, archeologists, architects, ecologists, engineers, resource management specialists, maintenance works, clerical staff, supply clerks, visitor use assistants, fee collectors, mechanics, and water treatment plant operators.[\[22\]](#)

The Coalition maintained that corporate interests had advocated transferring responsibilities for and access to the National Park System to a privately-based system, serving the public last. Under the guise of “partnerships” the administration had been pursuing policies that would advance private enterprise, special interests, and corporate profits related to the parks. The administration had been pushing out

long-time park experts, particularly management, science, and maintenance employees, and replacing them with private contractors under the “competitive sourcing initiative.” The Coalition conceded that private contractors had a limited role in the parks, such as operating concession stands and managing lodging services, but noted that “true protection of this resource comes from dedicated individuals with a wide array of talents and a long history of commitment to the cause of our national parks.”[23]

Unlike contractors, the Coalition noted, NPS career employees remained in their positions because of their dedication to the NPS mission. It also pointed out that career NPS employees often undertook multiple tasks, something contractors would not do. The NPS, they said, had already contracted out more jobs than most other federal agencies. Finally, the Coalition noted that cuts in NPS operations budget had already resulted in large reductions in seasonal employees.

Privatizing NPS positions and functions, the Coalition said, would compromise the integrity of the NPS natural and cultural resource decisions, reduce the quality of its educational and interpretive services, and discourage the use of volunteers. The NPS would lose its reserve of multi-skilled maintenance workers and have a negative impact on visitor relations.[24]

The *Call to Action* stated, “The disturbing trend to ‘corporate’ or ‘privatize’ national stewardship responsibilities of our most sacred places conspires against the inherent responsibility of our nation to care for these places through an established government on behalf of the American people, not a selected few. Increasing collaboration, partnering, and contracting out of these inherently governmental functions is increasingly becoming a subterfuge for our national failure to meet the financial and leadership responsibilities our government must exercise on behalf of our citizens and their national patrimony.” The paper went on to state that the role of environmental stewardship and implement core resource protection missions was increasingly being systematically diminished across the national park system deferring more often to the economic impact on communities and special interest groups. “The

threats to our special places are as real today as they were a hundred years ago.”

The Coalition called on the Nation to reaffirm its commitment to the fundamental principles and purpose of the NPS. It called on national leadership to authorize a national commission to determine what the true personnel and budget needs of the NPS were and to identify and evaluate the potential obstacles to success. The Coalition recommended developing a multiyear revitalization plan, similar to the Park Service’s Mission 66 program decades earlier, culminating in 2016, the NPS centennial.[\[25\]](#)

Management Policies

The Coalition faced serious challenges to the mission and vision it had laid out. One of the most significant threats was the Bush administration’s effort to rewrite the existing NPS management policies. Coalition members warned that Interior officials were in effect trying to change the mission of the NPS. “Clearly they are attempting to increase various types of access to parks and to build support for increased recreational uses of parks,” they wrote. The NPS Organic Act provided that the NPS mission was to conserve the scenery, natural and historical objects, and the wildlife in the parks and to provide for public enjoyment in a way that would leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations. However, the Bush administration held a different view of that mission. Assistant Secretary of the Interior Lynn Scarlett for example stated that the statute required that parks were managed “to both protect the resources of the park, and, on an equal plane with that, provide recreational opportunities and visitor enjoyment of the parks.” Moreover, NPS and DOI insiders indicated that the department’s leadership was poised to make a major overhaul of the NPS 2001 Management Policies, which were considered to be the legal interpretation of the Organic Act. It believed these revised policies would reduce the priority placed on protecting resources and water-down or eliminate language prohibiting impairment of park resources and values.[\[26\]](#)

In 2005 Coalition members began to hear through sources inside the NPS that a senior Interior official was proposing a

rewrite of the NPS 2001 management policies. Deputy Secretary of Interior for Fish and Wildlife Paul Hoffman, a former leader of the Cody, Wyoming, Chamber of Congress and friend of Vice President Dick Cheney, began to quietly rewrite NPS management policies. This process would, Smith warned, “radically alter” the way the NPS managed park resources. When the Coalition got ahold of Hoffman’s red-lined version of the policies it reviewed them carefully and compiled significant comments. This draft revealed that the rewrite was far worse than they had imagined. The revised version included language that anything managed in the park would become a “purpose.” In this instance the effort that the Coalition founders had placed on establishing network of supporters proved particularly beneficial. Current NPS employees leaked word of this effort to the Coalition. Having an effective public relations mechanism in place proved to be particularly important for the Coalition when the management policy issue surfaced. Rogers and Wade held a press conference to publicize this secretive planning effort.[\[27\]](#)

The Coalition found the process the DOI and NPS were using particularly disturbing in that the NPS subject matter specialists and even the superintendents who were responsible for implementing the policies would not see the proposed changes until the public did. By contrast, previous policy modifications went through a full field review. Fewer than 50 NPS employees had seen the various drafts. No one outside a select group would have seen the Hoffman redline version if the Coalition had not leaked it to the press and to their former colleagues still with the NPS. “This is no way to conduct business in an era that demands transparency from its government agencies,” Smith testified at a Congressional subcommittee hearing.

Although Director Mainella minimized the extent of the revisions, the Coalition members wanted to assure themselves that in this rewrite the administration was not attempting to alter the long-standing tradition that such rewrites be designed simply to update the current policies rather than fundamentally alter the mission of the NPS.[\[28\]](#)

Under Wade’s leadership as Board Chair at the time, they began

a campaign to bury this effort. They sent individual chapters of the rewrite to Coalition members or to current employees for their review and to highlight the changes. They also secured the email addresses of all NPS superintendents and sent them emails detailing the most egregious departures from the 2001 management policies. They alerted the press and the environmental community of the rewrite that was underway testified before Congress on the planned changes. The public reaction was, said Smith, “swift and furious.”[\[29\]](#)

Wade, Kristen Brengel who worked for the Wilderness Society at the time the Coalition was created, and others marked up Hoffman’s draft and wrote a press release to inform the public about the rewrite. The NPCA initially was reluctant to engage the issue so Brengel advised Wade to have the Coalition send it out rather than wait on other organizations to join in. Although it was a technical policy document, she later pointed out, the Coalition was able to explain the issue to the public in a way they could understand. An editorial in the *New York Times* came out. She noted that every step the Coalition took reflected a great deal of careful thought and consultation with its partners.

The small team of NPS employees who had been appointed to oversee the rewrite ultimately concluded that improving the Hoffman version was an impossible task and began a complete new rewrite that resulted in the 2006 Management Policies, leaving most of the 2001 policies intact. The Coalition and its partners ultimately won this fight. Hoffman finally had to pull back his version of the management policies. NPS employees ended up writing the version that exists today. Some maintain that if the Coalition had not responded so forcefully, Hoffman would not have withdrawn his version. The outcome could have been very different.[\[30\]](#)

Air Quality and Clear Skies Initiative

In addition to the snowmobile and management policies concerns, the Coalition focused on the administration’s actions outside park boundaries, which were having a negative impact on the parks. The members argued that the administration was conducting a wholesale assault on vital federal environmental laws and regulations, to include rolling back the 1978 Clean Air

Act and promoting the Clear Skies Initiative, the passage of a Healthy Forests Initiative, the reinstatement of the R.S. 2477 rule mentioned earlier to allow private entities to claim public land for roads, the effort to undermine the Endangered Species Act, and the effort to bypass the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to make it less effective in minimizing environmental impacts and protecting resources.

The 1978 Clean Air Act amendments classified National Parks and Monuments as "Class 1" areas, where the most pristine air in the nation was to be maintained or restored by strict regulation of sources of that air pollution. The amendments also set the standard for protecting national parks and monuments so as to prevent significant deterioration of air quality nationwide.

In his January 23, 2003 State of the Union address, President Bush announced that he had sent Congress Clear Skies Initiative legislation mandating a 70 percent cut in air pollution from power pollutants. This legislation proposed a cap and trade program to establish limits on emissions for sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide, and mercury from power plant emissions. However, the Coalition noted that the proposed standard was weaker than the current law and other regulations. Moreover, the Bush proposal failed to regulate carbon dioxide emissions.

Director Mainella claimed that the air quality inside the parks was better than it had been ten years earlier and that some parks had "pristine air quality." The Coalition quickly responded that the goal of the Clean Air Act was for all national parks to have pristine air quality and even Mainella did not claim that this was the case in all park units. The Bush administration proposals would only make things worse.

As noted, under the 1978 Clean Air Act amendments, national parks were supposed to be protected to a higher standard than public health and welfare. Yet, the Coalition argued, the Bush administration proposals would allow many of the areas around national parks to be polluted down to the public health and welfare standard.[\[31\]](#)

The Coalition called on the Bush administration to drop the

Clear Skies proposal and strengthen haze and interstate air quality rules. It argued that in Great Smoky Mountain, Shenandoah, Grand Canyon national parks and other park units protecting air quality was as important as maintaining the environment on the ground. Smog and other pollutants destroyed plant and animal life and obscured the views for visitors. NPS managers were cut out of the development of the Bush policies and power plants were being built near Yellowstone and other parks without any NPS input.[\[32\]](#)

The Coalition observed that Norton and Mainella had promoted the President's Clear Skies Initiative, even though it would seriously affect the NPS's ability to comment on additional pollution sources near the airsheds of park units. The Clear Skies Initiative would scale back the Clean Air Act's existing limits on power plant pollution and rely on voluntary reductions of carbon monoxide emissions. In another example, DOI withdrew its objections to the construction of a power plant near Yellowstone NP despite evidence of the negative impact on air quality in the park.

The Bush administration revived controversial "wise use" policies from the Reagan administration when James Watt was Secretary of the Interior to erode the protection of the parks. Throughout the American West and in Alaska, the Bush administration was reinterpreting a 137-year-old mining law known as (revised statute) R.S. 2477 to invite states and counties to make legal claims that long-abandoned trails and roads on federal lands should be opened up. In addition to inviting local jurisdictions to make these claims, the administration had established a new process to facilitate the approval of such claims and had signaled its intent to open up these long-closed "roads" regardless of the negative impact on the public lands. Secretary Norton was working with state governments to facilitate R.S. 2477 claims across federal lands, many of which would fall within the boundaries of NPS units.

In addition, the Coalition challenged the Bush administration for promoting the acceleration of energy development, sometimes within two miles of park units and in areas that had been considered for wilderness designation or inclusion in

expanded park plans. Exploration leases had been sold adjacent to the Dinosaur National Monument boundary in Colorado. The administration had allowed the expansion of oil extraction in Padre Island National Seashore in Texas, in the midst of nesting areas for the endangered Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle. The administration had made oil and gas development an "overriding mandate" for federal land managers across a wide area of the West.[33]

Budget and Staffing Cuts

The Coalition complained that the Bush administration had exacerbated what the Coalition called the "starvation diet" that the National Park System had been on when it came to budget and staff. It also claimed that the administration was misleading the American public about the health of the parks and its financial support for them. It disputed the administration's claim that Bush was reducing the maintenance backlog. Rather, the administration had discouraged public disclosure of the necessity to close visitor centers and cut visitor services and resource protection, calling them "service level adjustments." It had hidden the budget realities from the media and at the public at a time when parks were struggling to maintain the status quo.

The Coalition rejected Mainella's and Norton's claim that the NPS budget included more money per acre, per employee, and per visitor than ever before. This, said Smith, was only true because they had reduced the number of employees, the number of park visitors had dropped, and at the same time the acreage of the National Park System had remained relatively static. Meanwhile, its members were hearing reports from current park employees about the reductions in visitor center hours, elimination of interpretive and environmental education programs, reduction in resources management activities, and curtailment in resources protection programs.[34]

Coalition leaders charged that the Bush administration had misled the public about funding issues affecting the National Park System, both in terms of park operations and the deferred maintenance problem. The Coalition had conducted a survey of selected parks to verify Director Mainella's testimony before

the House Appropriations Committee assuring the members that the parks would remain open, the resources protected, and “outstanding visitor services provided.” She added that the NPS had more funds per acre, per employee, and per person “than any time in our history” and that the number of full time employees was up 4 percent. The Coalition’s survey revealed a different picture. As of March 31, 2004, it found, there were 16,930 permanent employees. This was a 1 percent decrease from the 17,035 permanent employees as of September 30, 2003. The study also revealed that nearly 85 percent of the park units received less funding in 2004 than in 2003. In addition, the “discretionary budget” in parks (the money available after all the fixed costs were provided for) was shrinking at an even greater rate, primarily because of the increasing costs of employee salaries and benefits.[35]

The Coalition Evolves

After its first two years, the Coalition began to develop the organizational structure that it has today. In 2005 CPAL went out of commission as originally planned. The Coalition received several grants from the Turner Foundation, which allowed it to contract with a public relations firm. Having a public relations firm gave the Coalition the ability to reach more retirees and gave it greater visibility with the American public. Holding frequent press conferences, it received very positive media coverage. At one point the Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors provided the Coalition with a \$150,000 grant over a two-year period from an anonymous donor.[36]

As we have seen, the Coalition functioned very informally in those early years with Smith, Wade, Arnberger, Gale, and a few others providing leadership. They now concluded that they needed a more formal organizational structure, to include for example having a board of directors, a president, and bylaws. The Coalition decided to incorporate in accordance with section 501(c)(3) of the IRS code for the purpose of informing and educating the public, the media, non-governmental organizations, elected officials and government agencies about issues related to the NPS and the National Park System. It would do so to advance the central mission of the NPS as

defined by the agency's 1916 Organic Act. The Coalition of National Park Service Retirees formally incorporated in 2006 in Arizona, and on June 1, 2007 the IRS approved its request for non-profit status.[\[37\]](#)

The Coalition ratified its bylaws on May 25, 2006. The bylaws stated that the principal purpose of the Coalition was to inform and educate the public, the media, non-governmental organizations, elected officials, and governmental agencies about issues related to the National Park System and the NPS. Membership would be open to anyone who had held a salaried position with the NPS at any time and who supported the purposes and objectives of the organization. The principal governing body for the organization would be an executive council, led by a chair, with no fewer than seven duly elected or appointed members. The executive council could elect or appoint an executive director to manage the day-to-day operations. The initial executive council consisted of Wade, Arnberger, Rogers, Smith, Don Castleberry, Maureen Finnerty, Denny Huffman, Abby Miller, and William Supernaugh.[\[38\]](#)

As noted earlier, the early Coalition leaders thought of themselves as the "voices of experience." The Coalition founders had carried their contacts, commitments, and issues of concern into retirement and built on them. They believed that as experienced NPS retirees they could provide a clear voice and objective perspective based solely on the health of the park system. They believed that unlike other groups the Coalition could speak from experience, free of partisanship and politics. Thus, when the Coalition incorporated, it highlighted this "voices of experience" element to distinguish itself from other advocacy groups. At the time all of the members were still retirees from the NPS. As they named their newly incorporated organization they added the phrase "voices of experience" so that people realized how unique they were and the experience perspective they brought to bear. The information that the Coalition received and the positions it took on some of these issues sometimes put it in conflict with some current senior leaders in the very organization they had served for their entire careers, the NPS.

Coalition members began to hold annual meetings to discuss the goals for the coming year and fundraising. They decided to adopt more of an advocacy approach rather than an adversarial approach, which ultimately proved effective. As Arnberger explained, this meant that the Coalition would continue to criticize policies and actions that it found harmful, but it would also provide support for good decisions and seek to build trust among the current NPS leadership. It decided to focus more on being an advocate for certain fundamental principles and be more supportive of the NPS when appropriate. This, he said, changed the tenor of how the Coalition was perceived. It was a “critical” transition for the Coalition, he explained, because it helped prepare the Coalition for the challenges it faces today. Others, however, are quick to point out that the line between “adversarial” and “advocacy” is not always clearly defined, and sometimes the Coalition had to place itself in an adversarial role.[\[39\]](#)

With the new organizational structure in place, the Coalition continued to grow. By 2008 the Coalition had 690 members, to include five former NPS directors or deputy directors, 23 former regional directors or deputy regional directors, 28 former associate or assistant directors at the national or regional office level, 150 former park superintendents or assistant superintendents, as well as a number of division chiefs and supervisors and employees at the park level.[\[40\]](#)

As they thought about organizational structure, the leaders also came to realize that they would be more effective if they sharpened their focus and defined the key issues more clearly. Rogers’s wife Nancy Burgas led the Coalition’s executive council in a session at Bernalillo, New Mexico, where they produced the beginnings of a strategic plan for the organization. Arnberger, Wade, and Rogers began to develop a 30 to 40-page document identifying what they believed were the most important issues that the parks were facing: the continued erosion of the NPS mission and flawed leadership. They spent months preparing this document, sharing it at times with Congressional staffers.

The strategic plan would become a key document. It ultimately gave the organization greater credibility and demonstrated

that its members were thoughtful, experienced individuals who cared deeply about the NPS and the parks. It played a key role in generating the “organizational energy” and fresh ideas that made the organization successful. The executive council would be diligent in executing the plan and periodically updating it to keep it current. The plan would go through various iterations from 2005 to 2009. Though some concede that the plan not always as concise and clear as it could have been, it provided an effective framework for the organization from 2005 to 2012.[\[41\]](#)

As the Coalition refined its organizational structure and developed its strategic plan, members realized that with the NPS centennial approaching they had an opportunity to help shape the future of the NPS. They believed that a second century of America’s national parks could only be assured by a deliberate effort to reaffirm the agency’s original principles and mission. The Coalition called for the establishment of a non-partisan National Park Service Centennial Commission to lead the nation in a meaningful dialog about the role and importance of national parks in our society and national life. This commission would develop a report or reports on the current status of the National Park System and the issues it faced, as well as the challenges it would face in the new century.

Under the direction of the commission, a single study panel, or series of study panels, would be authorized to examine in greater detail such issues as future challenges and constraints, organizational requirements for the new century, governance models, long-term strategic management considerations, and other topics. The panel or panels would then make recommendations to the commission on issues it should examine and report on. The Coalition would later drop this initiative because park advocate Loran Frasier had begun to make progress with the NPCA in establishing a centennial commission.

Related to this the Coalition sought to establish an institute where NPS retirees, and later academic scholars, would write papers on a variety of park-related topics. The concept of a

Centennial Institute for National Parks Studies was developed. The Coalition worked with former Director George Hartzog to expand this idea, and the Hartzog Institute was established at Clemson University. After Mr. Hartzog's death in 2008 this Institute was changed in concept and name, and the Coalition withdrew its support. Coalition members continued to work on a framework for an institute that would communicate broadly and widely about the value of parks. The Park Institute of America was formally established in March, 2016, at Duke University. It is an independent 501 (c)(3) organization but will closely collaborate with the Nicholas School of the Environment at Duke. The Coalition will not run this institute, but will serve as a significant resource to it. Work is underway to make the institute operational by raising money and building a board.[\[42\]](#)

Conclusion

For the past fifteen years, the fundamental mission and vision of the Coalition have remained constant. The group continues to help expose administration actions that are harmful to the NPS and the national parks. Being able to identify and respond quickly to potential threats has been key to its effectiveness. The Coalition has maintained and built upon the reputation it established early on for being both responsive and credible. As its members point out, there are larger advocacy groups such as the Sierra Club or NPCA, but the Coalition has had an impact well beyond its size.

Members maintain that one of the Coalition's greatest successes was its role in the management policy fight during the Bush administration and ultimately stopping DOI's efforts to dismantle the existing NPS management policies. If DOI's management policy revisions had gone through, Wade explained, the impact on park management would have been "disastrous." He also pointed to the Coalition's success in enlightening the public with the "experienced perspective" that it provided. Public education remains a key component for the Coalition and a major contribution. In addition to management policies, over the years the Coalition has helped address a number of more specific threats to parks, such as winter use issues at Yellowstone NP. Wade and those other early leaders

believed there would always be a place for the Coalition they envisioned because of its unique make up. It would always have an enduring capability, the ability to shine light on key issues affecting the National Park System and to serve as a strong advocate for the parks.^[43]

A number of the Coalition's leaders and long-time members express great pride in their work and point to its positive impact. It has maintained "reasonably good" relations with the NPS, said Smith, challenging the NPS when appropriate and at other times commending the NPS for its actions. It is well-positioned to meet future challenges, Arnberger explained, and has become more a more proactive organization. It has established the credibility they need to secure the necessary support and funding.

Indeed, one of the Coalition's great strengths continues to be the active involvement of individuals who speak from their own experience with the NPS, but leaders also recognize the need to maintain and build on the early momentum of the organization, which is not always easy. Rogers added that there was also a need to maintain the interest of the media, Congress, and the general public, something the Coalition continues to do. Keeping the organization in the public eye and influencing the park-related public discourse in a positive way, he concluded, remains its most important task. Rogers observed that the important challenge today was to be bold and courageous and to think about the future.^[44]

Though Jarvis and others take a very positive view of the future of the Coalition and its contributions they also recognize the challenges ahead, such as providing sufficient organizational support for the increasing membership and effective fund raising. With nearly 1,600 members now, it has grown so large that it is hard to manage the organization on a volunteer basis. In recent years it hired an executive director, which allowed it to select a chair who resides outside the Washington, D.C. area. Smith, Jarvis, and other members maintain that the role of the Coalition has become even more critical today as it continues to speak out. Indeed, Jarvis noted, its role has become even more important today with the current administration's

announcement of the new infrastructure plan and its proposed reorganization. Noting that this critical time when parks are being threatened, Jarvis observed that he would like to see the Coalition continue to grow and have a fulltime presence in Washington, D.C.

Another major challenge for the Coalition today is how to respond effectively to the current administration's policies and measures affecting national parks and the NPS and how to support friends at other agencies such as the Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service who face similar threats. Some Coalition leaders see this as a more perilous and challenging time than the Bush/Norton/Mainella period and call for continued vigilance. The focus of the current administration has been primarily on national monuments until now, Smith noted, but could expand more broadly to the NPS. Yet he remains confident that the current Coalition leadership is aware of the threat and prepared to deal with it.[\[45\]](#)

Brengel agreed that the Coalition continues to have an important impact, especially with the challenges presented by the current administration. She pointed to the mass resignations among the National Park Advisory Board and deferred park maintenance, as well as other challenges and issues. Brengel conceded that the Coalition needed additional funding and staff to keep up with the number of issues facing the parks and NPS. She pointed out though that as a way of compensating for the small staff and limited funds, the NPCA could play an important role in helping the Coalition identify the key issues, so that it does not have to cover everything with its limited resources. The advocacy of the Coalition, she said, was "potent and well executed." It knew what would resonate with the public and served as an "honest broker." The members could speak about park issues with expertise. They were very respectful of current NPS managers but also willing to point out to those managers where they were falling short.[\[46\]](#)

Within the last few years, the Coalition has opened its membership to individuals who have not yet or did not retire from the NPS. They recognized that by restricting membership to only those who had retired from the NPS they were

excluding potential members who had valuable experience and expertise. It has focused more on increasing its membership and has been more successful at recruiting new members. By giving it a new name, it was announcing that it was open to current employees. Over time retirees can lose their institutional contacts. The effectiveness of the voices of experience, Arnberger pointed out, in part relied on the currency of that experience.^[47]

Related to this, the organization also adopted a name change from Coalition of National Park Service Retirees to Coalition to Protect America's Parks. They realized that the original name did not convey the message that the organization was current, that it was simply an alumni organization. The carefully chosen name they believed would help remind people of the importance of the parks and the guiding principles. Coalition leaders recognize the need to stay tied to the original purpose of the parks and carry these principles forward. The continued success of the organization, they explain, depended on reaffirming the mission and maintaining currency, connecting the past with present experience.

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^[1]Rick Smith interview, Jan 9, 2018; Bill Wade interv.. Aug 24, 2017. All interviews were conducted by the author.

^[2] Coalition of National Park Service Retirees (CNPSR), 10th Anniversary Newsletter, Nov 2013, Coalition to Protect America's National Parks (CPANP) files; Destry Jarvis interv., Feb 6, 2018; Wade interv. Many of the documents cited below can be found on the CPANP web site.

^[3] Wade interv.; Jarvis interv.; Smith interv.; "The Coalition of Concerned Park Service Retirees," n.d.; CPANP files, Fact Sheet, 2004 – 0118.

- [4] Jerry Rogers interv., Feb 26, 2018; Smith interv.; Jarvis interv.; Wade interv.; Rob Arnberger interv., Jan 26, 2018.
- [5] Smith interv.; Wade interv.; see CPANP files, CPAL: reference and other documents.
- [6] CNPSR, 10th Anniversary Newsletter; Wade interv.
- [7] Smith interv.; Wade interv.; Arnberger interv.
- [8] Smith interv.; Wade interv.; Jarvis interv.
- [9] Coalition of Concerned National Park Service Retirees: Background, n.d., CPANP files; CNPSR, 10th Anniversary Newsletter.
- [10] Smith interv.
- [11] Jarvis interv.; Smith interv.; Arnberger interv.
- [12] Coalition of National Park Service Retirees Significant Accomplishments and Achievements, May 2003-Nov 2004, CPANP files: annual reports and accomplishments.
- [13] Wade interv.; Coalition of Concerned National Park Service Retirees: Background, CPANP files: fact sheets (pre-2008).
- [14] "A Time-Honored Mission – Now Violated, National Parks in Crisis: *A Report by the Coalition of Concerned National Park Service Retirees*," n.d.
- [15] "Promises to Keep: A Call to Action Saving Our National Parks."
- [16] Statement of Richard B. Smith, Flagstaff Hearing, Oct 13, 2005, House Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy and Human Resources.
- [17] Coalition of Concerned National Park Service Retirees: Background.
- [18] "A Time-Honored Mission – Now Violated."
- [19] Kristen Brengel interv., Mar 16, 2018.

[20] Smith Statement, Flagstaff Hearing.

[21] "A Time-Honored Mission – Now Violated."

[22] Fact Sheet: "Parks for the People or Policy for the Lowest Bidder?: The Bush Administration Plan to Privatize the National Park Service," Campaign to Protect America's Lands.

[23] "Top Issues Facing the National Parks, 2004."

[24] Fact Sheet: "Parks for the People..."

[25] "Promises to Keep: A Call to Action."

[26] "A Time-Honored Mission – Now Violated."

[27] Rogers interv.; Smith Interv.; Smith Statement, Flagstaff Hearing.

[28] Smith interv.; CNPSR, 10th Anniversary Newsletter.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Brengel interv; Smith interv.

[31] Fact Sheet: *"Dirty Skies" Initiative Pollutes Parks,*" n.d.

[32] Top Issues Facing the National Parks, CPANP files: 2004-0718; "Talking Points for Founders Day, 2003," CPANP.

[33] "A Time-Honored Mission – Now Violated."

[34] Smith Statement, Flagstaff Hearing.

[35] "A Time-Honored Mission – Now Violated."

[36] Wade interv.

[37] Wade interv.; Rogers interv.; Arnberger interv.; CNPSR, 10th Anniversary Newsletter; Articles of Incorporation of Coalition of National Park Service Retirees, Inc., n.d., CPANP files.

[38] "Bylaws of the Coalition to Protect America's Parks," Ratified May 25, 2006, Amended Jun 22, 2015; Articles of Incorporation.

[39] Arnberger interv.; Rogers interv.

[40] Coalition of National Park Service Retirees, Annual Report, 2007-2008.

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[42] "The NPS Centennial Commission: Recommendations by the Coalition of National Park Service Retirees," Aug 25, 2006, CPANP files; Rogers interv.

[43] Jarvis interv.; Rogers interv.; Smith interv.; Wade interv.

[44] Smith interv.; Arnberger interv.; Rogers interv.

[45] Jarvis interv.; Smith interv.; Wade interv.

[46] Brengel interv.

[47] Arnberger interv.

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