

National Parks and the Problems of our Environment

Raymond F. Dasmann, The Conservation Foundation
Washington, D. C.

Speech prepared for Environmental Management Seminar,
Mather Training Center, National Park Service, Harpers
Ferry, February 19, 1969.

Rather than speak to you entirely in generalities today, I would prefer to start in with one of the national parks about which I know a little, thanks to the cooperation I have received from the National Park Service over the past several years--Everglades National Park. I think that in many ways Everglades stands as a model for the problems that the national parks are going to encounter everywhere, just as I feel that the State of Florida is a model for the environmental problems that other states will face increasingly as time goes by. The reasons for this are several: Florida, and in particular southern Florida, represents an environment that is comparatively simple in a physical sense, although it is unusually complex biologically. The environmental issues there are easy to bring into sharp focus, a process that is more difficult in other areas. The natural values of southern Florida are relatively easy to visualize. Few areas in the United States have as many unique and endangered species and habitats. Few have such high recreational and aesthetic assets. Very few areas in the United States have a higher population growth rate, a higher pressure of people upon resources, and consequently as many severe environmental conflicts.

I do not want to dwell on the Everglades water problem, since all of us have heard a great deal about it in recent years. However, it does show the relationship between the National Park Service, various other Federal agencies, the State of Florida, and the county and city governments of the region--all of which have some claim upon or jurisdiction over the water supply. The National Park Service has worked hard to get a workable compromise agreement under which the park will receive enough water to survive. Thus far, all has been working out fairly well under the new agreement, but this has been a year of water surplus. There is no guarantee that the park will not suffer when the next severe water crisis comes along, regardless of what is agreed upon now.

However, scarcely had an agreement over the Everglades water problem developed, before a new and unexpected menace appeared on the horizon, that of the Miami jetport. One wonders why this was new and unexpected? What is there in our planning process that allowed the Dade County Port Authority to present the National Park Service, and the conservation minded people of the nation, with a fait accompli? We were told, essentially, that the jetport will go in a particular

spot and it is now too late to argue about it. We have been told that our activities are limited to alleviating the damage. Most of us could surely find a better place for a jetport than the edge of Everglades National Park, and we wonder why these other potential sites were rejected. We wonder also why we are building a jetport for super-sonic transports before we have any opportunity to agree that SST's should be allowed to come in and land within the continental United States.

The National Park Service, like most Federal agencies, is short of money. Yet, in Everglades, as in most national parks, there are major inholdings of private land, of such a size that the integrity of the park as a whole is threatened. These exist after twenty years of Federal control over Everglades. One wonders if Congress is largely unaware of the magnitude of this inholding problem? Surely Congress was not playing games when it authorized Everglades National Park? The creation of Biscayne National Monument last year also must have been accompanied by a serious intention of putting up the money to buy the Biscayne lands? Perhaps it is up to you in the Park Service to begin to force this issue, to stop pretending that you have a park where you don't have.

South of Everglades National Park, across Florida Bay, lie the Great White Heron and Key Deer refuges, administered by the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife, but closely allied in ecology and function to the national park. These look very good on the map, but who owns them, and who controls their development? Unfortunately, ownership is mixed and effective control over land use does not really exist. Not long ago there was a proposal to develop Tarpon Belly Key as a "shrimp farm." Some saw this as a first step toward real estate development. It was stopped. However, the entire Great White Heron Refuge is threatened by an extension of the Intracoastal Waterway through the middle of the refuge. This could as easily go around the refuge, but the Corps of Engineers wants to go through, and the developers will be pleased to see all of those little islands brought close to the main boat highway to Key West.

South of the Park also is the most remarkable little island left in Florida--Lignum Vitae Key. It is privately owned. Because of some unfortunate compromise agreement during the establishment of the park, it was left just outside the park boundary. Actually, when the park was established in 1947, Lignum Vitae was not so remarkable. There were other islands, much of Key Largo for example, that still supported beautiful examples of mature tropical hardwood forest. But now these have largely been destroyed and only Lignum Vitae Key (200-plus acres in size and costing over a million dollars) is left.

There are no equal tropical hammocks in the new Biscayne National Monument, and none as good inland on the Florida mainland. There is only Lignum Vitae, and the owners of it are fighting hard to have it opened to development. Does the Park Service have any responsibility here?

Northwest of Everglades National Park are the 10,000 Islands. Once they included an island that was a biological treasure--Marco Island. Now that is developed and gone. But they still include other smaller gems. Their entire complex is a national asset not to be matched elsewhere. On the map part of these are within the boundaries of Everglades National Park. Actually, few of them are owned by the Federal government. The rest are now up for sale to any developer who would like to try his hand with them. Only the tough fight that the Florida state government is fighting over bulkheading, dredging and filling, and the establishment of state aquatic reserves, is protecting them at the present time.

Everglades National Park has more than its share of rare, endangered, or none-too-numerous species of animal and plant life. Some of these species are getting their share of publicity, if not protection--the alligator is an example. Others, however, are not. The crocodile survives only in very small numbers and presumably only within the park area of Florida Bay. Nobody seems much concerned. When I visited Biscayne National Monument, Dr. Frank Craighead was worried about whether or not the only known stand of Sargent's Palm remaining in the wild, on Elliott Key, still survived. It seemed likely that the scoundrels who bulldozed a strip wide enough for a superhighway down the full length of that key had finished off these palms in the process. We were unable to look for them at that time. What is the present status of the Florida manatee? How well is the Florida panther doing? How are things going for the various species of tree snails, unique to that area? There are many such questions to which we seem to lack answers. Even for the better known bird species there is great reason to feel uneasy. The wood stork, for example, breeds in the park and in Corkscrew Swamp, and seems to be secure enough on its breeding grounds. But when it leaves these sanctuaries and heads north, how well is it protected? The future of the stork, and of most of the park birds, cannot be guaranteed within the boundaries of the park. Their future is tied up with the future of all of Florida. Nesting in the park in greater numbers than anywhere else in the Eastern United States are the bald eagle and the osprey. But trickling in with the park water supply, and sifting down with each rain are pesticides from the agricultural lands. We know that these can finish off the park birds, if their residue become sufficiently abundant. What can we do about it?

How then does the Park Service manage and protect Everglades National Park? Is it enough to retire inside its boundaries and make rules and regulations for park use? Obviously not. The supervisors of Everglades realized long ago that they had to come out fighting into the local community if the park were to survive. The future of Everglades is the same as the future of southern Florida. Virtually every decision made about population and environment in southern Florida affects Everglades National Park. I suspect that every one of our national parks is in the same position, although few are so hard pressed.

How does the National Park Service fight city hall and the state house? I will not presume to tell you. I have seen some of your people in operation, and although I do not know their devious secrets, I do know they are highly effective. You have an advantage. The people are usually behind you when the chips are down. When the issues are clear cut, Congress does usually back you up. But you still have one asset that is as yet not fully exploited and that is the park visitor. I will not criticize your interpretive service, since I think it does an excellent job of explaining the values of the park to the visitor. However, I believe that you are not yet taking advantage of the chance to show the visitor how the park relates to his community and how his community relates to the park. I don't think you are making it at all clear how the national park fits into the total struggle for the human environment in which each citizen has a stake. I won't try to describe how this should be done, since you have the experts.

Virtually every environmental problem that the United States faces today impinges in one way or another upon the national parks, and a park such as Everglades gets more than its share because in Florida most of these problems are more critical and more urgent than elsewhere. All of the environmental problems are your problems.

The population issue is illustrative. It is not just a problem for India, or Peru or El Salvador, it is a national park problem. For example, in Florida, how big should Miami grow? Should there be a major metropolis centering on the Naples region along the southwest Gulf Coast of Florida? Where should growth occur? Where must it not occur? How dense, how high, how deep will populations be allowed to become in urban areas? How do you control local growth, regional growth, state growth? How do you siphon off growth and attract people elsewhere? What happens to human health, physical and mental, and to human behavior in high density areas? In overcrowded areas?

These are, after all, basic questions for the survival of national parks. Time is growing desperately short, but in most places these questions are not even being asked, let alone answered. Many assume

that the profit motive of individuals, tested in the market place, will provide the right answers to these questions. This assumption has been proven absurd.

In a paper that I presented (in absentia) to the Canadian National Parks Conference last fall I discussed a problem that is particularly disturbing to me and yet seems blandly undisturbing to many others. This has to do with projections of population growth and projections of the consequent growth of recreational demand, along with the conclusions drawn from these with reference to national parks. Many have commented in the past how population growth projections tend to become self-fulfilling prophecies. The projection is made, plans are made to accommodate the assumed growth, development proceeds on the basis of plans and projections, and in the process all who have invested in development, public or private, develop a stake in population growth. Growth becomes almost inevitable, and if it is growth that should not have been permitted, or development that should not have taken place, the results can be disastrous.

There are major contradictions in our forecasts for the future. On the one hand we admit that with our present level of population and technology we have developed an environmental crisis, that the long-run survival of mankind may well be in the balance. On the other hand we predict a doubling of 2035, and so on up to 50 billion people or more crammed on the planet somehow. Being unable to manage our own technology at home, we are busily spreading it in an uncontrolled form around the globe, thus guaranteeing that even with no population growth our present predicament will be compounded. Obviously those who speak about technology and growth and the great prospects for the 21st century are not really communicating with those who are talking about an environmental crisis now, or they have some naive faith in the omnipotence of science and technology to find a way out of all of our crises.

Our cities are now unmanageable and their people are threatening to shut them down, burn them down, or both. Yet we are predicting a doubling in size of our cities as though all were well, and the situation were quite under control.

Rather than look at predictions of population growth based on past trends, we had better start figuring ways to change those trends and get our growth rate down to something approaching zero. Otherwise we are in the position of passengers in a leaky boat calculating how fast it will fill with water. If we started bailing we might get to shore. I believe it is the duty of those who understand the picture to put every possible road block in the way of future growth, to do everything possible for our existing population to live in harmony with its environment, to live on earth without destroying it. We have not yet found that way.

The people charged with protecting our national parks have a special responsibility in all of this. You have in your hands the custodianship of the finest and the last remnants of wild America. There can be no equivalent areas, there are no more. If you lose the Everglades you will find nothing to replace it. The geneticists will invent no new species to replace the Florida manatee. If you soak the Channel Islands in oil and destroy their biota, you can't substitute something equally as good. You have been charged with keeping these irreplaceable natural areas in an unimpaired state for the future. That is your first job. The business of providing a "pleasuring ground" for people is entirely secondary, and somehow you must get this concept through to the general public, the Congress, the Bureau of the Budget, and even to the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation.

I would like to suggest that a new set of yardsticks be devised to measure progress in the national parks. These will be yardsticks marked off in negatives. Each year the park that builds or improves the fewest roads to accommodate the least number of people will get highest marks. Prizes should be given for the number of new campgrounds that were not built, for the numbers of people accommodated outside the boundaries of Yellowstone and Yosemite and not in Yosemite Valley or Yellowstone Village. Quality of national park experience for those people proved capable of appreciating a national park might be a substitute for the measurement of number of visitor days. I am straying of course from reality, but not far from it. New approaches to national park management, if the parks are to be maintained as the finest pieces of wild America, must be in the direction of quality of park experience rather than quantity of park use. The public must surely mean what it says when it votes through Congress to preserve the redwoods, or to save Islandia or keep the Grand Canyon unimpaired. I think the public will back you in measures designed to protect and preserve the parks, even if they mean that park use will be restricted.

However, if the public is to understand the role of national parks, then the national park role in its region, its state, and the nation as a whole must be defined. The park must be fitted into the regional plan, the recreation plan, the total land-use plan. Those functions that cannot be properly accommodated within the park must be accommodated elsewhere.

To return to Everglades. We know that the park cannot survive unless it is fitted into the water planning for all of southern Florida. Furthermore, we know that the park does not contain all of the priceless bits of environment in southern Florida that are in need of preservation. The National Park Service, since it cannot purchase and preserve all of the 10,000 Islands, Lignum Vitae Key, the various unusual tropical hammocks that remain outside the park in Dade, Monroe, Collier county and northward, representative areas of the

Big Cypress Swamp, etc., must at a minimum work with other Federal agencies, the State of Florida, and the various local governments, to help define and come up with feasible schemes for protecting and preserving the unique environments outside the park. You cannot simply write off these areas and let them go. The future of the national park will be increasingly endangered, and the future of those species that are only part-time residents of the park will be imperiled unless you care equally for the future of these outside areas.

Apart from areas that are to be preserved for their unique natural values, the responsibility for preserving Everglades includes a responsibility for providing adequate recreational opportunities for those who seek the mass recreation, or those types of recreation, that the park cannot provide without impairment of the natural environment. For example, whoever designed the Everglades Park freeway from Homestead to Flamingo did no service to the national park. Admittedly it is handy if you are late for a meeting at Flamingo and in a big hurry to get there and get away again. But it provides for a form of park use which is inappropriate. Flamingo becomes simply a launching place for boats, and the highway provides quick access to it for those who want only to roar off with their tackle and beer into Florida Bay or the Gulf. I suspect that most who use the road see little of the park and appreciate less. Furthermore the very existence of this straight road gives ideas to those public road people who are thinking of a quick, new route to Key West. Mass recreational boating could be accommodated elsewhere than in the national park.

Somehow the Department of the Interior has to bridge the gap that separates it from the Bureau of Public Roads in the Department of Transportation, and get into road planning way back before the road becomes a dotted line on a map. For example, on the map showing the comprehensive plan for Collier County there is a dotted line showing a proposed highway that runs from Naples and Everglades City south through the 10,000 Islands and the mangrove wilderness of the national park and on out to that mecca of road planners, Key West. The time to kill a road is before it becomes a dotted line on anybody's plan. Once it gets on the map, people begin to accept it as a reality. Somebody should have killed I-75 long before it dotted its transverse path across the Everglades to connect the dotted jetport with Miami, and in the process provide still another dotted dike against the southward flow of Okeechobee water. It may be too late to kill it now. When it goes in, to join with Alligator Alley in dissecting the Everglades, the wilderness north of the park will cease to exist.

Planning for development, for housing, industry, and the development of mass recreational facilities, for roads and highways, in the areas outside the park must be a matter of concern to the park. The

Park Service must be built into this planning at an early stage, either directly or through indirect representation. The activities of the Gulf-American land company, for example, finished off any hope for a national monument in the Big Cypress country. Their destructive clearing, drainage, and road building in the vast area that they obtained in Collier County is a matter of direct concern to the National Park, since it affects the 10,000 Island estuaries and is of great importance to the survival of park wildlife. The type of land-use planning and development that goes in around the proposed jetport north of the park is of such vital concern to the survival of the park, that active liaison must be established immediately with all who are responsible for the planning and development. Thus I am saying that the Park Service must assume some responsibility for seeing that effective regional planning be done in all of southern Florida.

The National Park Service lacks money and all of its people are overworked. Yet you must take on responsibility for the total environment. How do you accomplish this? I don't think that it is impossible, because you have allies in great numbers whom you are scarcely using at the present time. I refer to all of the various kinds of citizen's organizations interested in the human environment. These include not only the old-line conservation organizations, but all of those who are interested in city planning, recreation, pollution problems, and other environmental issues. These groups are not yet nearly as effective as they might become, because they are not yet united. But they are beginning to unite. In Florida, for example, representatives of most of the major conservation groups have come together to form the Florida Conservation Foundation. This new organization will have at first an information role, keeping all of the members informed about the major environmental issues, helping through this to mobilize political strength on issues that require action. Eventually, I trust it will develop a role in coordination and in long-range planning for environmental action. It can become a major force, if its membership is broadened sufficiently. In the Rocky Mountain states a similar organization has developed. Others are forming elsewhere in the United States.

If the National Park Service will provide accurate information to such groups, and if it will hold leadership seminars on the important environmental issues, then considerable progress can be made that has not been possible under the chaotic conditions that have prevailed among conservation organizations in the past.

Perhaps on this positive note I should end this presentation, but I would like to re-emphasize one point that I made earlier. Future

generations will look back on what we have been doing in the closing decades of the twentieth century and give the highest place in history to those who have managed to keep some options open for them, to leave some decisions for them to make. The park with the fewest roads, trails, and campgrounds will be the most precious in the 21st Century America.

