

**THE CHALLENGE:**  
**REVITALIZING**  
**NATURAL RESOURCE STEWARDSHIP**  
**IN THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE**

**NATIONAL PARK SERVICE**  
**DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR**

# THE CHALLENGE

The ideas and operating principles that launched the National Park Service and inspired it for eight decades cannot alone ensure that the integrity of our world-renowned national parks will survive in the next century.

The fledgling National Park Service was charged with the revolutionary notion of preserving public lands for the benefit of all Americans. The National Park Service had to attract visitors and build public support for the parks--so it joined with the railroads to provide access, grand hotels, roads, and trails. This formula worked. The American people fell in love with the national parks, and the idea expanded throughout the world.

The parks survive as superb relicts of natural America, but times have changed. The pristine wildlands that once surrounded the national parks no longer exist. Parks are increasingly crowded, and impaired-- remnants of primitive America in a fragmented landscape. They are threatened by invasions of alien species, pollution from near and far, and incompatible uses of resources in and around the parks.

Although park environments have changed, the laws and policies directing the National Park Service are strong and clear. The American public rightly expects that the National Park Service has the ability to protect and preserve the unique natural heritage entrusted to its care. In order to fulfill this trust and to ensure that the integrity of these majestic, world-renowned parks survives in the coming century, it is time to reconsider the management priorities of the National Park Service. We must re-educate ourselves and the American public about the fundamental natural values of the national parks, whose diversity and beauty affirm and celebrate the American experience. We must realize that the extent to which these values are diminished reflects the extent to which the benefit of the parks for future generations is diminished.

**With such purposes in mind, the National Park Service must confront these challenges:**

- \* **Management processes and organizational arrangements do not clearly reflect the central role of resource preservation in the National Park Service mission.**
- \* **National Park Service priorities--as they are reflected by how we allocate existing funding and staffing--place natural resource preservation in the category of a program, rather than at the level of an agency mission.**
- \* **Most parks lack the expertise and money to manage natural resources in ways that leave parks *unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations*.**<sup>1</sup>
- \* **Park management does not have, and therefore cannot use, the best possible information; thus, our knowledge and understanding of park resources and the threats to them remain limited.**

- \* **Our planning documents do not reflect resource preservation as the primary focus of national park operations.**

The National Park Service must dramatically re-tool to meet these challenges. We must shift our focus and priorities. We must ensure that managers have the best possible information to use in protecting parks. We must broaden the National Park Service culture so that preservation becomes our fundamental concern, while maintaining, if not improving, the outstanding recreational and re-creational experiences embraced by park visitors. We must strengthen the visitors' bond between their park experiences and their understanding of park resources, and never forget that if we can not preserve the resources unimpaired, the enjoyment of future generations is at risk.

This plan outlines the actions that the National Park Service will implement to begin the revitalization of its natural resource management. The **Action Items** are within our existing budget, can be undertaken with the current workforce, and will be accomplished as soon as possible. Immediate actions-- the symbols of commitment to this effort-- will not be nearly as critical as day-to-day endurance and sustained leadership. Hence the plan also identifies **Targets** which will require additional money and staff to accomplish, but are nonetheless essential to transforming the core culture and actions of the National Park Service to those of a science-based and resource-focused organization.

From the momentum thus generated, and from our continued commitment, we will draw together the people, plans, and funds necessary to be successful in protecting parks in the challenging climate of the future. By building our ability to care for the future of the parks themselves, to provide for their protection, we return to the basic source of our ideals, and our strength as public trustees.

## **THE ACTION**

**In order to meet the challenge of preserving park resources unimpaired, the National Park Service must adopt the following principles:**

- I. Resource knowledge must drive decision-making.**
- II. Managers must be accountable for the condition of park resources.**
- III. Bold leadership and a thoroughly trained professional workforce must champion resource stewardship.**
- IV. Budgets must reflect the importance of the resource stewardship mission.**

## **I. RESOURCE KNOWLEDGE MUST DRIVE DECISION-MAKING**

The National Park Service's core mission of preservation requires that resource considerations drive park decision-making. The key to sound decisions is good planning. However, resource issues are frequently subordinated to concerns for visitors and facilities in park-level planning. We must revisit the 1997 National Park Service Strategic Plan, to ensure that the core mission of resource preservation and the procurement of scientifically based information for decision-making is at the heart of every park's annual work plan and base budget.

Resource management planning must guide all National Park Service-supported efforts to understand, restore, maintain, and protect the natural resources of parks. This is not a perfunctory concern: Such planning must be based on--and document--useful, current information about the nature, status, and trends of park resources; and the plans must be used not only as a primary source of information, but also to set the principal directions for management. Moreover, there must be park-wide participation in resource management planning, which will confirm that the core park resource-preservation mission truly drives the strategic and tactical operations of parks, and will manifest how all park divisions contribute to that mission.

The U.S. Geological Survey is the agency that has the primary responsibility for providing the National Park Service with resource knowledge derived from research. In addition, the Service needs to aggressively pursue collaborative relationships with other land management agencies and with universities and the private sector to improve the acquisition of technical assistance and research as a means of facilitating good decision-making.

### **Action Items**

1. Develop science-based standards that measure the degree of impairment to natural resources, and incorporate these standards into all strategic and implementation plans as they are revised.
2. Ensure that all park plans focus on resource stewardship; and that they demonstrate accountability for resource conditions, show clear connections between the National Park Service mission and the proposed actions, and provide operational guidance.
3. Acquire research and technical assistance for stewardship by establishing and expanding agreements with universities and research agencies--in particular the U.S. Geological Survey.
4. Complete the first comprehensive policy directive dealing with wilderness management, ensuring that it reflects the value of wilderness areas as the most pristine (and thus generally the least impaired) natural areas in the national park system.
5. Add science as a major emphasis in the "Guiding Principles" section of the National Park Service Strategic Plan.

## **Targets**

- \* Strategic plans and action plans will be integrated, and based on an adequate understanding of park resources. They will be descriptive of park programs, including Fire, Wilderness, and Integrated Pest Management. Strategic (Government Performance Results Act) plans will include resource conditions and objectives, replacing portions of existing resource management plans.
- \* All parks will have meaningful resource management plans that contain current information on resource conditions. They will also serve as reference documents and threads of continuity in resource stewardship--and as the institutional memories of budget and personnel commitments, and especially of decisions made and actions taken, and their effect on park resources. Interdisciplinary teams will help parks with resource management planning, and ensure that all park disciplines are involved with planning.
- \* Professional peer review of planning and resource management programs will be a normal, required practice. Superintendents will be encouraged and rewarded for demonstrating leadership in resource-based strategic and action planning and management.
- \* A national network of university-based arrangements--such as Cooperative Ecosystem Study Units--will provide a flexible and efficient means of assisting park managers with technical support critical to their success and maintain National Park Service investment in the U.S.G.S. Biological Resources Division.

## **II. MANAGERS MUST BE ACCOUNTABLE FOR THE CONDITION OF PARK RESOURCES**

All of the major goals in the 1997 National Park Service Strategic Plan require the agency to develop better accountability for the resources entrusted to it. The Service needs a clear, simple way to measure and demonstrate its accountability for preserving parks unimpaired. Knowledge of resource conditions, how they change over time, and of the causes of change, must provide the foundation for this accountability.

National Park Service accountability has been most successful when applied to work in which results can be precisely measured, and in which there are predictable consequences for success and failure. We must significantly strengthen our capacity to hold *all* levels of the National Park Service accountable for decisions and actions that affect park resources.

## **Action Items**

1. Hold National Park Service leaders strictly accountable for acquiring knowledge about the condition of resources under their trusteeship, and for the results of their actions that affect resource preservation.
2. Ensure that National Park Service leaders demonstrate the primacy of the stewardship mission in their allocation of staffing and funding, and encourage innovative approaches, given the perennial shortage of staff and funds.
3. Provide the American public with an accurate description of the resources of the National Park System.
4. Document and report the status and trends of each park's resources on an annual basis.

## **Targets**

- \* Park resource programs will be science-based.
- \* Superintendents will determine the effects of park operations on resource conditions by monitoring the vital signs of park resources.
- \* Superintendents will communicate to their neighbors the purpose, the values, and the vulnerabilities of their parks.
- \* Project and operational priorities within existing funding will demonstrate how all programs contribute to natural resource stewardship.
- \* Incentives will exist for integrated management that puts resource values first in every decision and action.
- \* Strong and clear standards for resource preservation will govern all work activities.

## **III. BOLD LEADERSHIP AND A THOROUGHLY TRAINED PROFESSIONAL WORKFORCE MUST CHAMPION RESOURCE STEWARDSHIP**

The best leaders inspire focus and passion. We must nurture this type of leadership in resource stewardship, and highlight our successes as models to emulate. Leadership in parks begins with the superintendent and division chiefs. The primacy of the resource preservation mission requires that a resource professional be a member of the core management team. Successful park

managers must rely heavily on a natural resource professional<sup>2</sup> to bring the best available information to the decision table.

The key to providing managers with the ability to make science-based, resource-focused decisions to protect and restore resources is a professionally trained workforce with the skills to acquire and interpret resource information, and identify, analyze, and solve resource issues. Yet few parks now have the expertise to use scientific findings to conserve resources or translate them into usable information for managers or other staff. Most small parks lack any resource specialists whatsoever.

Yet it will not be enough merely to attract the best resource professionals into the National Park Service. Their disciplines evolve swiftly, and the resource professionals will require frequent subject-matter updating to ensure that park management decisions are based on the most current information. By providing opportunities to improve the executive leadership and management skills of resource professionals, we must develop those individuals who evidence strong aptitude for park management into the best possible future leaders of the National Park Service.

However, resource professionals alone cannot protect the parks. All employees must know about park resources, and understand and value their own roles in resource preservation. In adopting this back-to-basics approach, which encourages every employee to embrace the core mission of resource preservation, the National Park Service must provide training in the values and the fundamentals of scientific resource management for all employees, regardless of discipline or level. We must ensure that interpreters, in particular, are knowledgeable about park resource issues and conditions and can convey the preservation mission to the public.

## **Action Items**

1. Invest in the resource managers already in place, by implementing the *Resources Careers*<sup>3</sup> Initiative as soon as possible, with any necessary funding to follow in the FY 2000 budget.
2. Require that a resource professional be a member of the core management team of every park that has one or more resource professionals in its workforce.
3. Continue to establish positions for senior scientists throughout the National Park Service as research administrators and essential advisors on research and its results.
4. Initiate relationships with appropriate institutions of higher learning to provide future National Park Service leaders with formal post-graduate education in topics that undergird science-based, resource-focused organizations.
5. Analyze the resource stewardship skills needed by all National Park Service employees, and develop a comprehensive training strategy to meet these needs. Begin by re-establishing a natural resources management training course for superintendents.



6. Identify current National Park Service resource preservation success stories and analyze the characteristics that led to their success. Communicate this information throughout the Park Service and interpret it widely to our visitors and the public.

## Targets

- \* Significant progress will be made in staffing parks as needed with resource management professionals, starting with those parks with the greatest need.
- \* Resource professionals will compete for fellowships specifically designed to provide them experience in National Park Service policy and legislative influence at the national level.
- \* Those resource professionals with leadership potential will receive the necessary developmental experiences in management, policy, strategic planning, and operations to qualify them for senior management careers. Many will succeed into superintendencies.
- \* Resource protection and resource education will be the core functions of all park ranger jobs. Park rangers will be vigilant in their knowledge of both the resources they protect and the threats to those resources, as well as be the ambassadors of conservation education to our constituents. Rangers will know their park resources firsthand, understand visitor use patterns, target illegal activities that affect resources, and effectively communicate park values to the public.
- \* Park managers will belong to professional resources societies, such as the Wildlife Society and Natural Areas Association, and will routinely attend and participate in multidisciplinary conferences such as the *George Wright Society* conference on science and resource management.
- \* Resource preservation and values training will be a core developmental and continuing educational experience for every employee.
- \* Managers will effectively use resource information in their strategic and tactical decisions.
- \* Professional resource management jobs will be widely advertised, thereby increasing workforce diversity and encouraging highly motivated and qualified people to join the National Park Service.
- \* The status and trends of National Park System resources will be a regular topic of discussion at meetings of National Park Service leaders.



#### **IV. BUDGETS MUST REFLECT THE IMPORTANCE OF THE RESOURCE STEWARDSHIP MISSION**

Preservation of resources--the core mission of the National Park Service--is not adequately reflected in the annual budget submission to Congress. This results in insufficient funding of natural resource management, and encourages the perception that the National Park Service is primarily interested in recreational tourism in the parks. To achieve adequate funding for resource management, we must take a more holistic approach, and improve the links between our budget and our strategic goals. The chief goal must be to ensure that the impact on park resources is considered in connection with every program or project, and that resource assessment and mitigation funding are an integral part of every budget. Revising the National Park Service's budget in this way will begin to strengthen congressional perceptions of the National Park Service as a resource management agency that provides recreation within the context of preservation.

##### **Action Items**

1. Ensure that by FY 2001 all planning, construction, and maintenance projects provide adequate funding for relevant natural resource requirements.
2. Ensure by FY 2001 that all National Park Service fund sources and initiatives (including Fee Demonstration) having the potential to affect the condition of park resources support the resource stewardship mission.
3. Restructure the National Park Service budget presentation and tracking system by FY 2001 to reflect resource preservation as the Service's core mission.

##### **Targets**

- \* Base operating programs will be sufficient to meet all essential natural resource stewardship goals in every park, including completing basic park inventories and the establishment of vital signs monitoring programs in all parks with natural resources.
- \* Funding sources similar to National Park Service Cyclic Maintenance and Repair/Rehabilitation programs will be available to ensure that park managers accomplish research, inventory, monitoring, restoration, and other projects critical to resource management programs.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The 1916 National Park Service Organic Act stated that "the fundamental purpose of the ... parks ... is to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of same in such manner and by such means as will leave them *unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations*." In 1978, Congress amended the act with direction to protect, manage, and administer units of the park system to preserve their "high public value and integrity," and to prevent the "derogation of the values and purposes for which these areas have been established, except as ... specifically approved by Congress." (16 U.S.C., 1, et seq.)
- <sup>2</sup> The natural resource professional is an employee who is educated, trained, and experienced in the development and application of a science-based resource management program, and who is working in a job series that requires a degree in a natural science field.
- <sup>3</sup> *Resources Careers* is a professional development program defining standardized professional job descriptions, career ladders, and position management tools for the natural and cultural resource management workforce of the National Park Service.