The Roots of National Park Management

Evolving perceptions of the Park Service's mandate

Early directors of the National Park Service Mather (left) and Albright (right) relax with newspaper editor Reynolds. All photos courtesy of USDI National Park Service/HFC.

By Richard West Sellars

(The USDA Forest Service is generally considered to have its origins in utilitarianism and the USDI National Park Service in preservation. However, this characterization is not exactly correct. Indeed, partly because of its own deep-rooted utilitarian orientation, the Park Service today confronts pressures on a variety of environmental issues. An understanding of the historical mandate for national parks, the Park Service's implementation, and the mandate's reinterpretation in recent decades has relevance for all public land managers.—Ed.)

The national parks were once the vanguard of nature preservation, both in the United States and throughout the world. The majestic lands set aside beginning in 1872 "for the benefit and enjoyment of the people" marked a significant departure from long-established public land policies of rampant resource consumption. In 1916, Congress created the National Park Service to oversee these special places; yet today, 75 years later, many observers see the parks as critical natural areas threatened by profound ecological degradation. That America's most precious and protected landscapes have become an environmental issue of grave concern calls into question the very goals and visions of the National Park Service founders, who secured establishment of the Park Service—but whose ideals and energetic promotion propelled park management along a course destined to collide with later environmental thinking.

Establishing a Mandate

Early this century, the various national parks (then all located in the West) lacked central, coordinated management. They were administered by the Department of the Interior, which assigned most of this responsibility to a "chief clerk" who had other duties as well. Without an office expressly charged to manage the parks, the potential benefits of these outstanding scenic areas seemed unlikely to be realized.

To address these concerns, an aggressive campaign for a national park service began in 1910. None of the campaign's leaders (such as nationally known landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., son of the principal founder of American landscape architecture, or Stephen T. Mather, a borax industry executive who would later serve as first director of the National Park Service) saw the parks primarily as unaltered natural reserves where preservation would be the key concern. Such concepts were philosophically and politically improbable given the utilitarian mind-set of the early 20th century and the common understanding of parks as places for public enjoyment.

These leaders repeatedly promoted the parks not as unaltered reserves but as the country's premier scenic areas, which should be vigorously developed to improve the people's mental and physical well-being and help the national economy. Predictably, their campaign gained strong support from the tourism industry, especially the railroads and the fledgling automobile associations.

Following intensive lobbying and a nationwide publicity campaign, Congress passed the National Park Ser-

vice Act (referred to as the Service's Organic Act), and President Woodrow Wilson signed it into law on August 25, 1916. Central to this act, even then, was its statement of purpose for national parks. The founders believed an overriding mandate was the "essential thing" in the legislation; the parks needed a "Gibraltar," a statement of their "true and high function" in order to defend against those who would damage them. As it appeared in the act, the statement declared the fundamental purpose of the national parks to be "to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."

Despite its ambiguities, especially in regard to potential conflicts between preserving the parks and opening them to public use, this mandate became the Service's touchstone—its chief point of reference for managing parks. And as "unimpaired" set the mandate's only actual standard, it became the principal criterion against which preservation and use of the national parks have ever since been judged.

A Utilitarian Basis

Although the statement of purpose does contain a strong preservation mandate, the founders had little concern for strict biological preservation as it is known today. In fact, from 1910 to late 1915 (i.e., during most of the legislative campaign to establish the Park Service) the statement read that the purpose of the national parks was to promote "public recreation and public health" through use by the people—a utilitarian concept of parks closely dependent upon maintaining their scenic beauty, the basis of their high public value. But, anticipating broad public use of the parks, the founders feared that excessive and unsightly commercial development could degrade the parks and diminish their potential for "the enjoyment of future generations." Thus, in the act's final wording, while the founders sought to encourage public use, they also required that the parks be left "unimpaired" for future generations—they would control development in order to preserve, forever unimpaired, the sublime beauty, dignity, and nobility of national park landscapes.

Development adjacent to national parks affects scenic views and resource quality.

With little thought given to leaving nature truly "unimpaired," the founders simply assumed that most natural features within national park boundaries would be preserved; and they placed their emphasis on tourism—which, at the time the act was passed, posed much less of a threat to parks than it does today. Moreover, nature seemed resilient and unlikely to be seriously harmed by park roads, trails, campgrounds, hotels, and administrative facilities. Surely areas not physically, visibly altered by direct human intervention would remain unimpaired.

Following the statement of purpose, the Organic Act contained other stipulations affecting the management of nature in the parks. These provisions supported public use and enjoyment, and even allowed consumptive use of certain park resources—further evidence that the founders intended "unimpaired" to mean something quite different from the strict preservation of nature. For example, the act authorized leasing in the parks for the development of tourist accommodations, thereby perpetuating the commercial tourism that had been ongoing in all parks, often predating their establishment. The minimal restrictions placed on the leases—twenty years per lease, and not to interfere with the public's free access to natural features—imposed virtually no restraints on the lessors' possibly harmful impacts on the parks.

The act also permitted native animal and plant life to be destroyed if they were "detrimental to the use" of parks. Timber could be disposed of, particularly when necessary to control insect infestations that might affect the appearance of large tracts of scenic forests. And the destruction of predatory animals could continue—already a regular means of protecting the game species more favored by the public.

The act allowed perpetuation of another activity—the grazing of livestock in all parks but Yellowstone when "not detrimental to the primary purpose" of the affected parks. The grazing provision enabled the parks, as Mather testified to Congress, to serve "different interests without difficulty"—under the Organic Act, both ranchers and tourists could use national parks.

The Organic Act contained a final provision that had great potential to affect natural resources in some parks. It reaffirmed an act passed in 1901 authorizing the Secretary of the Interior to permit rights of way in Yosemite, Sequoia, and General Grant (now Kings Canyon) national parks for, among other things, power lines, pipelines, canals, and ditches, as well as for water plants, dams, and reservoirs "to promote irrigation or mining or quarrying, or the manufacturing or cutting of timber." Although Congress withdrew this authority in 1920, the provision demonstrated that—as with livestock grazing—public

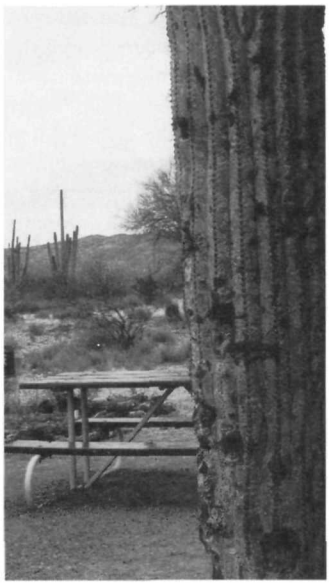
use of the national parks was intended in certain cases to extend beyond recreation and enjoyment of scenery toward strictly consumptive resource uses.

All together, these provisions permitting manipulation of native plants and animals and fostering certain consumptive uses (1) resulted in no significant reversal of natural resource management practices begun in the parks prior to passage of the Organic Act, (2) slanted the Organic Act toward multiple use of the parks' natural resources, and (3) placed substantial qualifications upon what Congress meant when it required the parks to be left "unimpaired."

And rather than altering the direction of natural resource management in the parks, the Organic Act's immediate outcome was administrative and political gains for the national park system. The act enabled the establishment of strong, centralized management for the parks, which focused on the needs of the entire system and promoted the national park idea to Congress and the public. National park leadership was elevated from a clerk's position in the Department of the Interior to a fully visible and aggressive new agency backed by leading proponents of outdoor recreation, tourism, and landscape preservation.

Use and Enjoyment

Once established, the Park Service developed management traditions that reflected the founders' concepts of national parks—and constituted, in effect, the agency's interpretation of what the Organic Act intended for parks. For the first 17 years, the Service was in fact run by two of its founders, Mather and Horace M. Albright—men who, because of their personal involvement in the passage of the act, firmly believed they understood the intent of the Organic Act and its statement of purpose. These first two directors placed particularly heavy emphasis on making the parks more accessible and managing them essentially as scenic recreation areas to ensure continued public use and enjoyment. And their dedication and energetic leadership created a kind of momentum in park management that would accelerate, continuing virtually unchecked for decades—thus fundamentally affecting the condition of the parks and the attitudes and tendencies of the National Park Service itself.



Tourism posed much less of a threat to parks in 1916 than it does today.

In developing its management traditions, the Service made no sustained effort to comprehend the parks in a scientific sense—for example, to understand native populations of flora and fauna and how they interact with their natural environment. Nor did the Park Service truly understand the consequences of its own actions—how, for instance, developing the parks for tourism, introducing nonnative species, or killing predators might seriously alter natural conditions in the parks. Even the earnest efforts of a tiny cadre of National Park Service scientists in the 1930s to shift toward scientific, research-based management lacked adequate strength to overcome the entrenched bureaucratic traditions.

Most important, Congress itself supported the Park Service's operation of parks, and did not insist upon scientific management. And over the years it funded substantial tourism development in the national parks. Congress also increased the Service's responsibilities in recreation matters by creating a diversity of new types of parks intended for intensive public use (such as national parkways, national recreation areas, national seashores, and urban parks) and by mandating that the Park Service become involved in large-scale national and state recreational planning. In effect, Congress sanctioned the Service's management traditions and its interpretation of the Organic Act. Until Congress or the public seriously and consistently challenged the emphasis on tourism and scenic recreational values, it could be assumed that the Service was operating the parks much as had been intended.

A Very Gradual Shift

The Park Service thus remained on a course destined to bring it in sharp conflict with environmentalists who would emerge in the 1960s and '70s. The visions and goals of the early 20th century did not fit the ecological ideals evolving half a century later, when rapidly increasing public use was seen to be wrecking the parks. But the Service—confident of its long-established management traditions—was not prepared to change course quickly when a more environmentally aware public demanded changes.

The environmental era of the '60s and '70s, with its key natural resource legislation (Wilderness Act, National Environmental Policy Act, Endangered Species Act), raised the Service's ecological awareness and moved park management gradually toward a more scientific focus. And during this era, the significant changes in public and congressional attitudes about parks shifted interpretation of the Organic Act in the direction of ecological preservation. Nevertheless, the need to ensure public use and enjoyment of the parks (in the traditional sense) continued as a powerful factor in national park affairs—

securely anchored by the parks' enormous popularity and by the Organic Act's mandate to provide for public enjoyment.

Since Congress had never defined exactly what it meant to keep the parks "unimpaired," the Park Service's mandate in fact remained ambiguous and open to broad

and often divergent interpretation. The mandate fostered the initial emphasis on use and enjoyment, but it also justified more recent efforts to preserve and even restore ecological integrity in parks. It certainly did not exclude close scientific management of the parks when that became a recognized option. But without a clear definition from Congress, proponents of the scientific and recreational points of view were left, in effect, contending over control of the definition of "unimpaired" to determine how national parks would be managed.

Without a Clear Focus

In 1970 and again in 1978, Congress included in national park related legislation provisions that amended the Organic Act. The 1970 amendment stated that the parks "derive increased national dignity and recognition of their superb environmental quality through their inclusion . . . in one national park system preserved and managed for the benefit and inspiration of all of the people." The 1978 provision reaffirmed the Organic Act's statement of pur-

pose, and required the parks to be protected and managed "in light of the high public value and integrity" of the national park system, and in a manner that avoids "derogation of the values and purposes" for which the parks were established. The 1978 provision in particular enhanced the protection of ecological values. But neither amendment defined or prioritized the "values and purposes" of the parks (which ranged from intensive recreational use to scientific preservation) to help resolve the Organic Act's ambiguities. The Organic Act remains the principal reference for national park management; and the Park Service continues to confront the duality of the original mandate to both use and preserve the parks.

(Top) Grazing was allowed on all parks but Yellowstone when not detrimental to their primary purpose. (Bottom) Early management directives emphasized tourism, but public use of national parks takes its toll.

The Park Service continues to confront the duality of the original mandate to both use and preserve the parks

Beginning with the environmental era, the dignity and nobility of the national parks, once seen largely in terms of majestic landscapes, came also to be measured in the precise, objective terms of science. And it has become apparent that, due to human influences from inside and outside park boundaries, the parks' natural resources have increasingly undergone ecological degradation, slipping farther from any semblance of pristine conditions. A Park Service report to Congress in 1980 quantified the pervasive deterioration of the parks' natural resources, citing threats such as encroachment of nonnative species, impact by park visitors, and air and water pollution. The report noted that the threats were causing "significant and demonstrable damage," in many cases irreversible.

Despite the Service's increasing efforts to address these threats, there has been only limited progress in restoring anything like pristine natural conditions. Thus, while the parks continue to be tremendously popular with the American public, the goal of leaving the parks indeed ecologically unimpaired seems more and more unattainable—moving farther out of reach like a distant, receding star. ■

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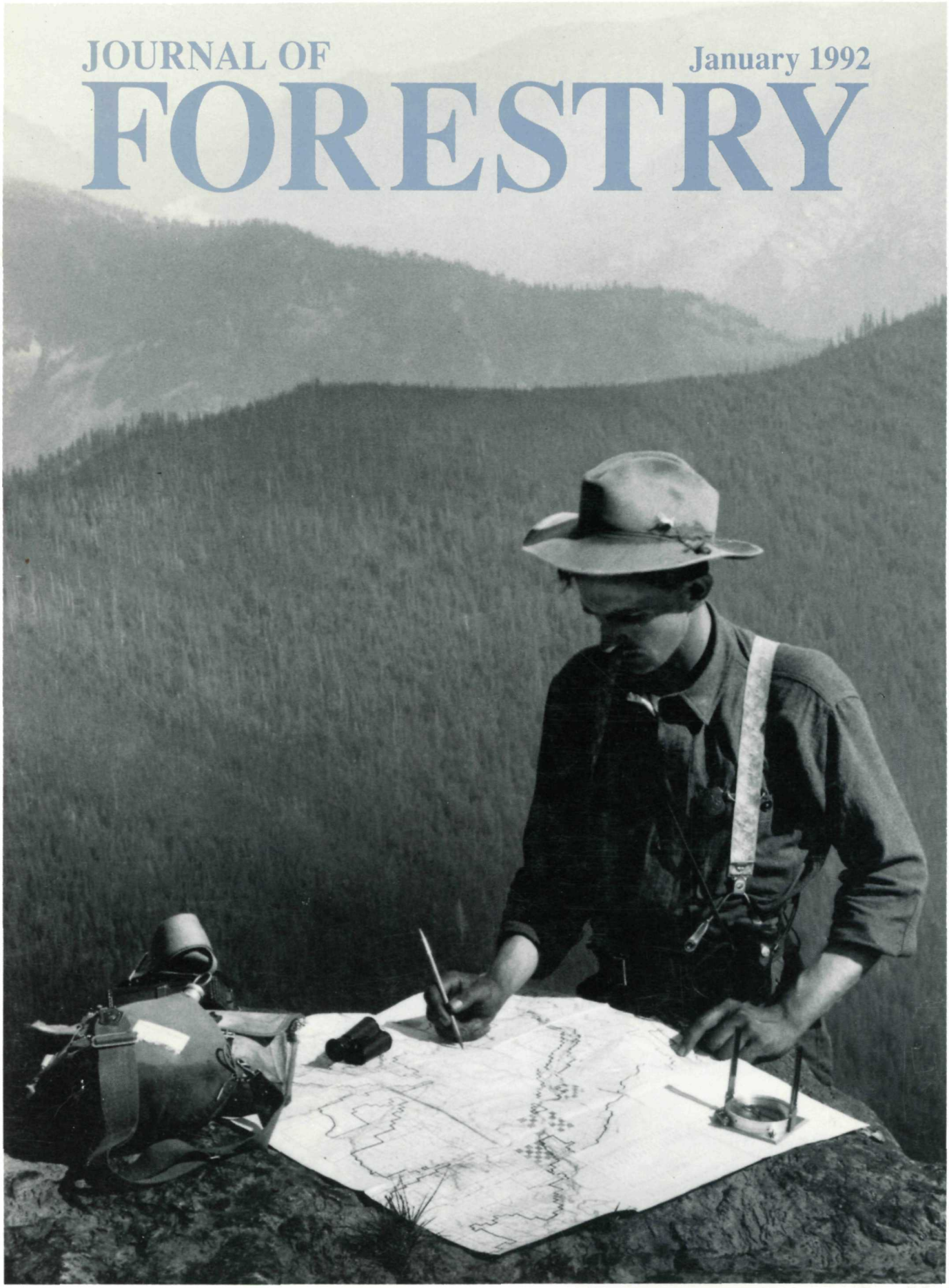

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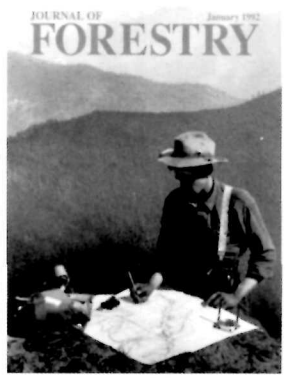

Cover:
Ranger Griffin locates forest fire, by means of a compass, from the top of Mt. Silcox Lookout Station, Montana. Photograph by W.J. Lubken, August 3, 1909. Courtesy of Forest Service Collection, National Agriculture Library.

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