National Parks as American Covenants

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We believe that Congress, in establishing the National Park System, created a system of uniquely American *covenants*. Covenants, in the simplest terms, are what the dictionary defines as "binding agreements." National parks are covenants between the different elements of American society. These covenants are part of the "national glue" that binds rich and poor, southerner and northerner, easterner, midwesterner, and westerner. All, without regard to religion (or lack thereof), race, gender, or age, have ownership, right to access, and responsibilities under the covenants that established our national parks. These covenants, even if not fully realized, are part and parcel of the American experience.

Covenants are the essential mechanisms whereby the natural characteristics of our nation's heritage are maintained. As such, they are rightly (if not currently) above and beyond the tussles of political parties and elections. These covenants are bipartisan and even omni-partisan—Republican, Democratic, Libertarian, Socialist, and Independent—all are stakeholders in our national parks. As a goal, preservation of our national heritage transcends party differences in spite of those who would use parks or park resources as political tools to leverage temporary advantage or benefit, to unfairly profit or exploit, or to curry favor from vested interests and the powerful.

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▲ The brilliantly blue waters of Havasu Creek cascading over travertine formations make a striking contrast with red canyon walls, Grand Canyon National Park. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Moreover, national parks are covenants between the previous generation, the current generation, and all future generations. They are essential promises (written into law) that future generations of Americans will have the richness of these special places in an unimpaired state and accessible for their enjoyment. Not only must national parks be passed on unsullied as an inheritance to the generation that follows, but following generations must be prepared to successfully assume their generation's role in caring for and maintaining those national park covenants—ecological, social, and political. These are grave and complex responsibilities, especially in times of rapid environmental and social change.

The ecological covenant

The ecological covenant and the terms for meeting it have been and will continue to be understood differently by each generation. When the first national parks were established, they were understood as places of inspirational scenery that must not be spoiled. The dynamics hidden behind the scenery were only vaguely understood, as the field of ecology was just emerging as a science. Early efforts to maintain that covenant centered on thwarting the extraction of commodities such as timber and minerals, wildlife poaching, and human habitation and development. The ecological covenant was not fully incorporated into park management until much later, after many naive forays into predator control, buffalo ranching, winter feeding of bison and elk, wildfire suppression, suppression of native insects and native plant diseases, fire suppression, vista management, and broad efforts to preserve the scenery as if it were a static facade. Troubles with elk, deer, moose, and bison population boom and bust cycles gradually forced the National Park Service to seek ecologically sound approaches to park management.

One relic of this early thinking was captured in an influential study of National Park Service wildlife issues and wildlife management programs by the Leopold Commission in 1963. Among its many important insights was a vision of national parks managed in such a way as to provide "vignettes of primitive America." That vision was often translated into trying to maintain static facades of special landscapes—and freezing them in time.[1] The concept of managing static vignettes (along with the fake narrative of "primitive America") has been discredited long since. Modern concepts of ecosystem management have been incorporated into the last several versions of the official NPS Management Policies that guide each park manager.

The current policy (as of 2006) states: "Natural resources will be managed to preserve fundamental physical and biological processes, as well as individual species, features, and plant and animal communities. The Service will not attempt to solely preserve individual species (except threatened or endangered species) or individual natural processes; rather, it will try to maintain all the components and processes of naturally evolving park ecosystems, including the natural abundance, diversity, and genetic and ecological integrity of the plant and animal species native to those ecosystems."[2]

Regardless of the burgeoning understanding of systems ecology and of its incorporation into NPS thinking and policies, the "vignettes of primitive America" paradigm had a certain appeal and still echoes in the thoughts of many older park professionals. In the face of climate change and increasing biodiversity loss, this static approach is untenable.

The ecological covenant includes preserving natural processes like fire and natural selection. The latter requires protecting species diversity and at times critical populations so that they themselves sort out ecosystem function. This includes ensuring that natural systems maintain their natural resilience to withstand significant disturbances such as periodic droughts, floods, and storms as well as climate change.

The ecological covenant requires each generation to fulfill its commitment to providing the kinds of protection necessary to confront the full range of challenges of its times. Each age has had its challenges to the covenant—from the need to control the poaching of wildlife and timber (which required enlisting the US Cavalry) through World War II's need for resources, the Great Depression's need to fuel economic recovery and put people to work, and the Cold War arms race's thirst for uranium. Along the way there have been periodic successes not only in protecting park resources but also in reversing declines in air and water quality affecting parks on a regional scale.

▲ Surveying Dinosaur National Monument for monarch butterfly larvae. M. REED / NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Today's challenges include the onslaught of overfishing with new technology and the increasing global quest for protein, fire danger from a long period of misguided fire suppression, prolonged droughts, global trade and the accelerated dispersal of invasive plants and animals (such as the release of Burmese pythons in the Everglades), and the deadly challenges of fences, highways, wind farms, and cell towers that add to the already precarious world of migratory species. Overall, the problem is simply that we are using nature at a rate that far exceeds its ability to renew itself. And at the top of the list of all current challenges is, of course, the joker in the deck—climate change.

Our experience indicates that stewardship by the National Park Service, with the support of preceding generations, has achieved a National Park System that is generally healthy overall, with many units having been restored to conditions better than when they were brought into the system. Developing an understanding of natural system dynamics and restoring habitat health can maximize resilience and will be the best hedge in the face of climate change. Fortunately, if the NPS operates based on its growing understanding of the resources it manages, the National Park System will be on a trajectory compatible with its best defensive strategy for global climate change.

A key challenge accruing over past generations and into the present is the lack of a fully representative assemblage of protected American landscapes. To fulfill the terms of a covenant that passes on the nation's heritage to each succeeding generation, there should be a representative sample of that heritage within the National Park System. The current process for identifying and establishing national parks has been increasingly politically driven over decades, which has affected the kinds of units added to the National Park System. Valiant and patriotic actions and sacrifices have always been necessary to counter the political tendency to establish parks only where it has been easiest and short-term economic gains are not to be had. The result has been an impressive system, but one weighted toward rugged terrain (mountains and glaciers, for example). Other crucial habitats that are more easily developed for economic purposes are underrepresented.

There are a number of breathtaking candidates for inclusion in the National Park System that are both intact and politically feasible to include should there be the political will to try. Yet many park advocates are resigned to the perceived impossibility of adding new national parks (other than small historical sites or those that are culturally or politically significant) because of hostility toward federal land ownership among many citizens, especially (and surprisingly) those otherwise self-identified with strong patriotism.

If our public and our national leadership understood and chose to fully honor the ecological covenant, they would call on the National Academy of Sciences to survey the current representation of America's natural heritage in the National Park System and recommend those natural features and systems necessary to create and pass on a representative and resilient National Park System. This was one proposal of the Second Century Commission in 2009—as well as the more recent *Revisiting Leopold* report of 2011—and it remains an important task for today's leadership.[3]

The ecological covenant also demands that we use all means possible to protect what is already in our National Park System. Most importantly, each generation must follow the precautionary principle and be very careful in taking any action that might lead to irreversible impacts. Again, the NPS Management Policies reflect this fundamental principle: "In cases of uncertainty as to the impacts of activities on park natural resources, the protection of natural resources will predominate. The Service will reduce such uncertainty by facilitating and building a science-based understanding of park resources and the nature and extent of the impacts involved."[4]

Of course not all nationally significant heritage lands can or should be considered for federal management. As yet largely unharnessed for conservation is the latent but widespread power of the willing and committed private owner. There are many property owners who feel and act strongly out of love for nature and its expression on their lands. The land trust movement is an extraordinary testament to private owners' devotion to nature in lands they own, love—and want to see protected. Through conservation easements, different degrees of land protection can be carefully delineated in deed language that binds present and future owners. The actions of willing private land owners as a complement to the protection given by federal, state, local, and nonprofit landholders can make a critical difference in creating a connected landscape that works for all species.

A social covenant

The power of the national park idea is that the unique and irreplaceable lands and waters in national parks are owned by the citizenry—not the federal government, not the bureaucracy, but all of us and our nation's present and future children.

The social covenant of the national parks proffers both great reward and somber responsibility for citizens as owners. The covenant requires responsible

use by the current generation and accountability for the condition of the parks as they are turned over to the next generation of owners.

Relatively few of us are aware of, or in step with, the social covenant of national parks. Remember that most Americans cannot distinguish between a forest ranger and a park ranger if asked. Yet there is a continuing long tradition of awareness, use, and support of national parks by the upper and upper middle classes that goes back to when the first parks were inaccessible to many. The early national parks primarily provided opportunities for access only for those with greater means with a social or cultural proclivity for nature and wild places. The recent development of the National Park System with units in the vicinity of cities and in recreationally popular places has broadened those opportunities for access and thereby broadened the audience for and constituency of national parks. It is particularly important that *all* Americans benefit from the social covenant that national parks represent.

A subtle but potentially insidious threat to the idea of a social covenant may be the apparent erosion of will and vision becoming fashionable with those who see the earth as a large human and sometimes "rambunctious" garden. "Conservation science" means many things to professional ecologists, and recently a new concept of conservation science has been proposed, having as a key goal the improvement of human well-being through management of the environment.[5] This concept recognizes and accepts human domination of the planet and largely dismisses any remaining hope of retaining sanctuaries of pristine nature. With this perspective it becomes fair game for humans to consciously endeavor to shape the earth to their liking while somehow maintaining, of course, the natural processes that allow humans to persist in the first place. This "postmodernist" trend, if applied to wilderness areas and many national parks, will give great comfort to those who would open the floodgate of human demands and uses on the relatively small percentage of unspoiled nature still intact on earth.

▼ Spring green-up and lupines in an oak savanna, Indiana Dunes National Park. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

The biggest threat to the NPS covenant may well be a greater willingness to redefine its terms and goals and lower the bar in search of human comfort and profit as suggested in this "intensive interaction" approach. National parks are the antithesis to this concept, as lands and waters brought under the purview of the Organic Act and the NPS Management Policies will be not only vigilantly protected but also returned to natural conditions—and rescued from human disturbance insofar as realistically possible.

The policy of healing impaired systems is important because it signals an effort to recover an authentic experience of unimpaired nature. The policy of action to maintain or recover natural system integrity may well be the best long-term defense against the overriding influence of human activity. Restoring natural systems by returning extirpated species, controlling or eliminating invasive plants and animals, and reducing air and water pollution builds system resilience and may also be the best response to climate change in national parks.

The NPS management role includes "social stewardship," refereeing among differing and sometimes conflicting social agendas while fulfilling the terms of the ecological covenant. In practical terms, it often means saying no to a wide range of interests and wants. With over 300 million visits per year (representing an estimated 100 million visitors per year), the units of the system also represent a powerful platform for reaching the American public with messages that promote social cohesion—especially an appreciation of the full and accurate context of our national identity. We hope that park visits that provide reliable information on the social covenant can ensure that it is kept.

To meet tomorrow's environmental challenges with a united societal effort, national parks must become much more than vacation destinations. While retaining that popular role, as well as that of providing inspirational and spiritual renewal for so many, national parks can also become central hubs of education, lifelong learning, and community dialog. The mission of the National Park Service may not be achievable without a powerful education effort that teaches visitors and others about ecological sustainability and adherence to the social covenant through which past generations have conveyed unimpaired national parks to this generation. Only serious attention to this can ensure that the social covenant is passed onto future generations. National Park Service management must be much more nuanced than simply caretaking park facilities and refereeing among park uses and users.

A political covenant

The original American idea of a national park, and then of a national park system, was inspired but also naive, vague, and untested as to its staying power in the rough-and-tumble politics of that generation and era (the early twentieth century). To some extent, the same has been true of the politics of every generation of Americans thereafter. In a fashion similar to the challenges that face each generation's ability to keep the parks' ecological and sociological covenant, each generation inherits and shapes its own political atmosphere, which must be supportive of the covenant if parks are to remain protected.

Because it conserves resources in place, the National Park Service lacks the guaranteed support in Congress enjoyed by agencies that control commodities such as timber, grazing leases, mining and mineral leases, hydropower, and municipal and irrigation water supply. Hence, a politically engaged and vocal public constituency for national parks is vital. It is evident in the early writings of National Park Service leaders that building a public constituency by developing visitor facilities and services was a foremost necessity. A committed public constituency reinforces the political will. Even with a high level of public approval of the National Park Service, NPS funding has always been seen by some in Congress as a luxury, and its budget an afterthought when in competition with these other commodity-oriented interests.

Having a legacy of weak budgets and bare central office staffing in Washington puts the National Park Service among the stepchildren of Washington-insider power politics. Roger Kennedy, former NPS director (1993–1997), observed that NPS support is "a mile wide but an inch deep." The implication was that diffuse popular support is often not as effective, vigilant, or focused in DC politics as is concentrated vested-interest pressure.

Yet by making parks accessible to a widening constituency, the Organic Act and its implementation have been largely upheld for a hundred years.

▲ Video production crew sets up near a mangrove in Florida Bay, Everglades National Park. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Indeed, it has been strengthened substantially by some generations through supportive laws such as the Redwoods Act of 1978. That act reiterated the unimpairment standard for measuring success and the principle that no NPS activity can be allowed that would be "in derogation" of park resources and values. Thus Congress has—so far—generally maintained faith with the intent of the Organic Act and been inclined to do so because of the broad, if diffuse, reverence for national parks held by the American public.

This enduring support has slowed the rollercoaster of demands that sometimes parallels the philosophical swings accompanying each new administration and its benefactors. Examples of ongoing political challenges would be certain western states' laying claim to public lands, and government shutdowns that close the national parks to visitors: both have caused bureaucratic and political mayhem. States frequently challenge the Park Service's right to manage wildlife in national parks; they have been largely unsuccessful so far.

In summary, national parks are quintessential expressions of American confidence in the future, and the ecological, social, and political obligations that, combined, create this distinctive American covenant are vital to our nation's future. So far, the mission of national parks has been upheld by each generation. But this can never be assumed.

Endnotes

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