



One National Park System—If You Can Keep It

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On several occasions I have written about the US national park system functioning as a coherent, complementary, and interdependent network. Congress underscored the value of such a network in the 1970 General Authorities Act¹ when it declared that national parks “derive increased national dignity and recognition ... through their inclusion jointly with each other in one national park system preserved and managed for the benefit and inspiration of all the people of the United States.” Unfortunately, there are forces at work pulling at the seams of the system, weakening its unity and collective character, and ultimately detracting from its shared “dignity and recognition.” One of the most important of these forces is, simply, money—or lack thereof. It is a bitter irony that Congress, having vested the National Park Service (NPS) with the responsibility for such a unitary system, has yet to furnish it with the necessary resources to make this worthy goal a reality.

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Park operating budgets are not now keeping up with costs, and have not been for many years. For as long as I can remember, there has been a slow but steady erosion of staffing levels, visitor services, and facilities maintenance. Every park is affected, but the cumulative damage is most acutely felt where budgets are smaller to start with—the more modest-sized parks. The biggest and most visited parks in the system are usually better positioned to offset cuts with more revenue sources, including entrance fees, and in many cases also have the support of robust non-profit conservancies. I have profiled the notable work of several of these organizations in recent Letters from Woodstock, including Yosemite Conservancy, Friends of Acadia, and Golden Gate National Park Conservancy.² The long-term trend is clear—there is an ever-widening gap between resources available to the largest parks and what is available to all the other parks in the system.

In this letter, I am focusing on the “bread and butter” of park operations: funding of annual maintenance, those regularly recurring or “cyclic” tasks like painting buildings, repairing roofs, pruning trees, or paving roads. This kind of maintenance must be undertaken on a schedule, like changing the oil in your car.³ This work is also referred to as *preventive maintenance*, because it keeps park features from deteriorating to the point where they will require a major investment to finally get them repaired. For example, if you don’t fix a small roof leak when first detected, water will eventually do considerable damage to a building, even rendering it unusable. So, what started as a relatively small repair, if passed over, can spiral into a major rehabilitation project—into what is known as *deferred maintenance*.

The annual funding for regular preventive maintenance has not kept up with park needs. Not surprisingly, a system-wide backlog of deferred maintenance projects has swelled, now estimated at close to \$23 billion, including many costly infrastructure repairs. To its credit, in recent years, Congress has spent several billion dollars aimed at chipping away at some of this deferred maintenance

backlog.⁴ But alas, a concurrent investment, aimed at more adequately funding the annual preventive maintenance work, has not been made.⁵

To make matters worse, recent changes in the way the National Park Service (NPS) divides its existing preventive maintenance funding between parks may be making it even more difficult, particularly for smaller parks, to address their regular cyclic needs. I will use this 33rd Letter from Woodstock to shine a light on these changes, for I fear they may be inadvertently accelerating the trend, and further stressing the cohesion of the system.⁶

In the past, cyclic projects submitted by all parks would be considered together and then subjected to a rigorous evaluation process, funding the system’s most urgent needs. Now the pool of available funds is divided up based on a park’s relative size and allotted to individual park managers to spend. While at first blush this may sound fair, actually it is problematic on several levels. Many smaller parks, for instance, are receiving only 50 to 80 thousand dollars a year, not nearly enough money for most cyclic repair projects. Even if there is enough for a small contract, only the largest parks have the required contract officers and project managers on their staffs to oversee the work, forcing smaller parks to go through larger ones for contract administration. This adds a layer of complexity that can be difficult to navigate.



In some cases, I was told by one park superintendent, smaller parks, lacking these staff positions, were unable to spend their funding allotment, only to have larger parks sweep up any unobligated monies at the end of the fiscal year for their own contracts. I am reminded of an NPS colleague who characterized such behavior as “big dogs at the bowl.” It was even proposed that the largest parks act as a kind of mortgage broker, “loaning” money and staff to smaller park units, presumably at terms to be negotiated. The potential entanglements of such a lending scheme are mind boggling. Fortunately, it appears this idea has been shelved—at least for now.

All this has been justified in the name of efficiency and there are certainly some efficiencies that have been realized. Park staffs do not have to spend so much time drafting project justifications, various committees are no longer convened to evaluate stacks of proposed projects, and no park will end up totally empty-handed in any given fiscal year.



However, as the saying goes, with “every tub on its own bottom” the comparative needs of multiple parks are not being considered together. With project review committees no longer being convened annually to set priorities, subject-matter specialists and facility managers from various parks and offices do not have a reason to periodically get together. Consequently, they are not learning as much about issues and challenges facing parks other than their own, and they miss opportunities to share best practices and innovations with their peers.



One fervently hopes that someday we will have a Congress that, mindful of the ideal set forth in the General Authorities Act, substantially increases operational funding, including for cyclic maintenance, for all parks. No one wants to see a “Darwinian” future for our national parks, sliding toward a bifurcated and unevenly cared-for system where there are only a few dozen parks getting by and hundreds of others falling farther and farther behind. One hopes as well that NPS sets priorities in ways that further encourage and facilitate national parks functioning “jointly with each other in one national park system.”



As I write this letter, less than 100 days before a national election, we face a more immediate threat to our system of national parks. Just one example is the commitment found in the Heritage Foundation’s *Agenda 2025* to repeal the 1906 Antiquities Act. *Agenda 2025*, avowedly a blueprint for a second Trump administration, would eliminate this legislative cornerstone of the national park system that has been used for establishing almost a quarter of all US national parks.⁷ In recent years, the Antiquities Act has provided an essential pathway for building a 21st century national park system more representative of all Americans. National monuments have been established that mark the nation’s long and arduous struggle for freedom, equality, and human rights. With repeal of the Antiquities law, this pathway will be closed. This is but one example of a broad assault planned on the public sector and the so called “administrative state,” and on most democratic institutions underpinning our republic, from voting rights to public schools.⁸

During the debate over the US Constitution, Benjamin Franklin was reportedly asked, “Well, Doctor, what have we got, a republic or a monarchy?” “A republic,” Franklin replied, “if you can keep it.”⁹ Our national park system, among the republic’s great achievements, will share its fate. If we can keep our republic, we have a good chance of keeping *one national park system*, and continuing the work to make it better.

Endnotes

1. An Act to Improve the Administration of the National Park System by the Secretary of the Interior, and to Clarify the Authorities Applicable to the System, and for Other Purposes, 1970 (84 Stat. 825), https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/anps/anps_7a.htm.
2. I am forgoing a discussion of private philanthropy; I have covered this subject in previous letters that referenced large park conservancy projects such as *Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy’s* Presidio Tunnel Tops, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8jb0x386>, and ambitious employee housing initiatives launched by *Yosemite Conservancy* and *Friends of Acadia* <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4q5618rk>.
3. As we transition to electric vehicles I realize that this analogy is losing its relevancy, but hopefully the point is still clear!
4. For example, through the Great American Outdoors Act (2020), Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (2021), and Inflation Reduction Act (2022).
5. I am also forgoing a more detailed discussion of chronic operating shortfalls. Organizations such as the National Parks and Conservation Association, <https://www.npca.org/issues/ensuring-park-funding>, and the Coalition for America’s National Parks, <https://protectnps.org/?s=budget>, have carefully documented the erosion of park operating budgets.
6. According to its webpage <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/infrastructure/deferred-maintenance.htm>, NPS tracks more than “71,000 assets, including historic structures, roads, bridges, trails, campgrounds, and utility systems”—a massive undertaking.
7. The 1906 Antiquities Act has enabled 16 US presidents to preserve outstanding sites of historic, natural or scientific interest as national monuments. National parks such as Grand Canyon, Olympic, Acadia, and Grand Teton were established first as national monuments under the act.
8. See Heritage Foundation’s *Agenda 2025*, https://static.project2025.org/2025_MandateForLeadership_FULL.pdf.
9. <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/constitutionalconvention-september17.htm>.



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