

National parks—preservation vs. use

Suggestions for future stress keeping natural beauty

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U.S. national parks are in a state of flux — and are likely to remain so for some years to come.

The principal question is one of emphasis, whether to expand services available to park visitors or to preserve the park's natural beauties.

In the past few years the stress has been on increasing services. And master plan proposals now under consideration include suggestions to lure hundreds of thousands of visitors to parks with plush new accommodations, posh entertainment and recreational attractions, and easier access to previously untouched areas.

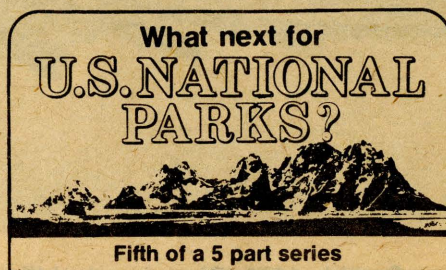
But according to National Park Service (NPS) director Gary Everhardt, from now on, preservation will be the first priority.

Recent Monitor interviews with environmentalists, concessionaires, park visitors, and NPS officials revealed many suggestions on future directions for the national parks:

"Parks should as much as possible be left as natural areas," says Roderick Nash, chairman of environmental studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Professor Nash is in the midst of an international study of parks and wilderness areas, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation.

"People should get their pleasure from natural pursuits—camping and walking," he says. "Eventually, I would like to see the whole employee infrastructure and hotels and motels outside. . . . I wouldn't deny anybody a look. They can always come in on a bus (if

they don't camp or hike). But they should sleep outside in Holiday Inns or Howard Johnsons."



Larry Moss, spokesman for the Sierra Club, would flatly exclude autos from park interiors. And George Gowans, chief of planning for the Park Service, says: "We must move people in innovative ways. We really have three objectives: to relieve the heavy congestion in the most popular parks, to cut down exhaust fumes and dust, and to eliminate cars where they take away from the historic or scenic aspects of the area."

Most people surveyed felt that the park experience is enhanced by direct involvement with nature — hiking, camping, river-running, back packing in the high country. Formal ranger lectures, park center museums, exhibits, and programs should be upstaged by individual encounters with the wilderness.

William Everhart, NPS assistant director, says: "How you see a park is probably more important than what you see. For example, hiking in the back country is superior to a car ride through the Tetons."

And William Dunmire, NPS chief of interpretation, adds: "There is a definite shift in

perception of what a visitor should see — away from facts (historic dates, plant and bird names) to conveying concepts."

Mr. Dunmire predicts that parks of the future will be designed differently. An increasing number of "learning" activities will go on outside of visitor centers. "Exhibits don't have to be in a building. They can be on a trail site or along a roadside. They should be experience-based and experience-focused," he explains.

Another suggestion: Ecological education should be stressed in schools — even before youngsters visit the parks in groups or with their families.

David Ochsner, chief of professional services in the Grand Canyon National Park, calls for more programs to teach visitors how to see parks — particularly better sessions on back-country behavior.

There should be workshops and publicly sponsored programs to bring the underprivileged to national parks, interviewees agree.

Lester Arneberger, superintendent at Yosemite says that his national park has a program for high school students that attracts 150 to 200 of them a week during the school year. But he stresses the need to find ways to accommodate more inner-city and disadvantaged youth. "Now the major use is by the affluent," he admits.

Many of those interviewed felt that comprehensive regional plans should be required for all national parks — bringing in other federal lands and state forests to ensure a balance of protection and enjoyment for a broad geographic area.

Such a regional blueprint — the first of its kind — is now under consideration for the Great Smoky Mountain National Park. Vincent Ellis, just retired superintendent for the Smokies, stresses the importance of regional planning. "It means getting a handle on a region . . . and reducing duplication of [planning] efforts."

And William Everhart calls on Congress to pass a land-use planning bill which would award states for such regional efforts.

Park officials, concerned individuals, and environmentalists alike agreed that the role of citizens groups in park planning should be broadened. Public involvement is now mandated by NPS, but many hard-line environmentalists believe that so-called "open workshops" are weighted toward the views of vested interests rather than the public will. And NPS officials like John Reynolds, head of Yosemite's master plan team — admit that the role of citizens is strictly advisory, i.e., not binding on final decisions.

Another suggestion was the establishment of an effective nationwide reservation and

referral system for park users. NPS Director Gary Everhardt says such a program should be in operation by next summer. "But I think we ought to look beyond the park service's involvement," he adds. "We should be looking at a regional context, maybe a system that could be operated statewide, regionwide, and nationwide. Perhaps it should have the capacity to include parks, forests, and other land-managing agencies with campsite capability."

Other ideas were: raising park entrance fees, requiring permits for back country use, and imposing a fee for ranger walks and interpretive lectures.

Jack O'Brien, interpretive specialist for the Grand Canyon National Park, suggests more fees to limit park use and supplement NPS operating budgets. For example, he would charge hikers \$1 for guided walks and also slap fees on lectures and other special ranger services.

Many environmentalists feel that the concession system should be revamped. Some groups insist on replacing all private concessionaires with public ones. Others would require competition between commercial enterprises operating in a park — or at least establish an antimonopolistic policy.

Director Everhardt recently told joint hearings of the House Governmental Operations and Small Business Committees that the NPS "would strive to establish a regular system of inspection of federal property being used by concessionaires."

A U.S. Department of Interior task force report accuses big business of taking over concessions from smaller operators. It recommends that the NPS make public agreements with concessionaires, make sure public demand is paramount, and place more emphasis on recruiting highly qualified concessionaires.

Yet concessionaires who protest this attitude have a point, too.

Jay S. Stein, president of Yosemite Park & Curry Company (chief concessioner at Yosemite) points out: "National parks are for the people. As preserves for the people, preservation must be balanced with use."

And Don Hummel, chairman of the conference of National Parks Concessionaires, adds: "The parks belong to all the people. To deny use is to make a sham of the whole concept. To restrict use to an elitist few goes counter to our democratic precepts."

What do you the reader think? How would you frame the ideal national park of the future? How would you best achieve a balance between preservation and use? Let us hear from you, and we'll print some of your ideas.

Address your answers to Science Page, Post Office Box 353, Astor Station, Boston, MA 02115.