The National Park Service: DOI or Independent Status?

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ABSTRACT / Over the course of the last two decades there has been a recurring theme among proponents of the National Park Service mission that politics has undermined the day-to-day goals of the Service. With the increased politicization of the Park Service, two recent proposals have called for removal of the NPS from the Department of the Interior and call for it to become an independent body along the lines of other government entities such as the Smithsonian Institution. This article reviews these proposals and suggests that in the long run removal from the Department of the Interior will not solve the problems of the NPS and may well accelerate them.

Since its inception in 1916, the National Park Service has served as an expression of the will of Government and the American people to:

- conserve the scenery and the historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such a manner and by such a means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations [16 U.S.C. 1, 39 Stat. 535]

The intention "to provide for the enjoyment of the same" in the Park Service Organic Act and the expressed mandate that the parks should be the "public pleasuring grounds" for "all the people" (16 U.S.C. 21, 17 Stat. 32) has made the National Park Service a model for the rest of the world (Pritchard 1985), creating a positive public image of the "ranger on horseback—part naturalist, part policeman, part resource manager, and even part educator" (Foresta 1984). A review of the last 20 years, however, suggests that while the declared mission of the Park Service has not changed, the de facto policies of the National Park Service have been as responsive to politics as much as to agency-developed natural resource and visitor management policies. As a result of the intrusion of politics into the day-to-day operations of the National Park Service, many believe that special interests, pork-barrel politics, and ideology have dramatically hindered the effectiveness of the National Park Service. Furthermore, the growth in the staffs of political appointees, especially at the assistant secretary level, has led to influential policymakers who escape most congressional, professional, and public scrutiny.

This study addresses one response to this politicization, namely that the National Park Service (NPS) be removed from the Department of the Interior (DOI) and be reestablished as an independent agency. The result, proponents of this idea contend, is that by providing administrative independence for the Park Service, sound policies made by Park Service professionals, versus politics motivated by the self-interest of congressmen and the president and their appointees, will return the Park Service to its original mission. Many still believe that the current National Park Service is entirely adequate because of its generally positive public image and the positive experiences—individuals enjoy in parks. In contrast, others argue political meddling has severely hampered the Park Service.

This article will explore two closely aligned alternatives that call for an independent National Park Service proposed by those who feel politics is at the core of the problems facing the Park Service. Both these proposals were initially put forth in 1988. The first was submitted to the 100th Congress by Representative Bruce Vento (D-Minnesota) but did not pass both the House and Senate. The Vento proposal in a somewhat modified form was resubmitted to the 101st Congress and is considered here. The second proposal came from the National Parks and Conservation Association, a special interest group focusing solely on National Park issues (NPCA 1988a,b). In this study we begin by discussing how political actions have affected the National Park Service as reflected in the pertinent literature, thereby providing evidence of the logic attending to such calls for independence. Second, a review and a brief discussion of both the Vento and NPCA proposals is put forward. Last, a discussion related to the National Park Service will address whether reconfiguring the service as an independent agency will solve the problems it faces as an agency within the larger Department of the Interior.

Politics and the National Park Service

Many students of the politics of the National Park Service view the citizen activism and environmental
movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, when many of the actions of park professionals and government officials in general were called into question by the public, as the genesis of the contemporary political environment relating to the National Park Service. In the wake of World War II, when Americans took to the roads with new cars and postwar affluence, national parks were often their chosen destinations. As a result, awareness of national parks was greatly heightened and the stage was set for conservation issues to become part of the American social and political mainstream (Cahn 1969, Nash 1973). Politics and the national parks are not, however, new to each other. Horace M. Albright, the second director of the National Park Service, recalled many of the disputes that occurred after passage of the Organic Act creating the National Park Service in 1916. He points how some congressmen felt that, once established, parks would run on some invisible inertia rather than public funds. Beyond this, monumental battles between Western interests seeking water rights and water-power rights to national parks lands, after the passage of the Federal Power Act in 1920, serve as examples of early struggles between the Park Service and competing interests (Albright 1985).

Nor is presidential intrusion a recent phenomenon, as evidenced by the impact that the appointment of Albert Fall as Secretary of the Interior under President Harding had on the park system (Albright 1985). The extant literature also notes that the development of parks has almost “always [been] politically rough” (Garrison 1983, Runte 1979). Recognizing this, how might contemporary “politics” attendant to the National Park Service be any different than those previously faced by the service and its directors?

Contemporary students of the Park Service argue that the political environment changed dramatically on January 1, 1973, when one of Richard Nixon’s campaign advance men, Ronald Walker, took over the directorship from George B. Hartzog, Jr. (Hartzog 1988a, Wirth 1980). For the first time, an appointee with no experience in the parks, who was also politically motivated, was the steward of our national natural resource and historic treasures. Many argue that what characterizes the difference between Walker and his predecessors was a shift from the “old Park Service” to a new era, one where links to the White House and fealty, versus merit and demonstrated competence in the Park Service, became prerequisites to the directorship (Everhart 1983).

Walker was a well-meaning individual, but his inability to manage an organization the size of the National Park Service, coupled with the imprudent action of awarding a reservation system contract to a personal friend with no experience in large reservation systems, not only hurt the morale of the service, but made a strong case against making another political choice for director. However, the suggestion that the National Park Service was somehow instantly politicized by the nonprofessionals after Walker is largely without merit. After Walker, three park superintendents in succession (Gary Everhardt, William J. Whalen and Russell Dickenson) served as director. Each was faced with problems that undoubtedly led to their removal. In a period marked by budget constraints, expansion of the park system without adequate resources, and the growth and professionalization of the environmental movement, we might be well advised to ask if all the problems of the Park Service were related to politics.

We argue that indeed politics have played a role, but that nonexecutive threats have been more rooted in special interests. For example, beyond the idea of politics via appointments, the environmental movement had reached into the political mainstream by the 1970s. The National Park Service was also impacted. Ronald A. Foresta notes how “From the mid-1960s onward, the relationship of the Park Service to national preservation organizations was very different from that of any preceding era, and much of the difference was due to the increased strength of these organizations” (Foresta 1984). In this period the citizen activist movement joined the long-established, but not always politically empowered, national conservation movement (Nienaber and others 1976). Such enthusiasm saw the Sierra Club, a predominantly California group with only 3500 members at the end of World War II, membership grow to 30,000 nationwide by 1965, and again doubling to over 60,000 by the mid-seventies (Foresta 1984).

The rise in the strength and professionalism of environmental interest groups changed considerably the political relationship between the Park Service and conservation groups. Where the Park Service had been a dominating partner in the relationship up through the 1950s, the influx of an activist generation into the Audubon Society and the Wilderness Society, among many others, resulted in the Park Service sometimes being worlds apart from the representatives of a large segment of the “public interest.” Moreover, decline in faith in government brought about by Watergate and the new political cause of “bureaucrat bashing,” found the National Park Service facing a new influx of environmental professionals suspicious of both government and business and who aggressively challenged the Park Service policies about resource management and park planning. The “amicable alliance” between