

Projecting America's Best Ideals: International Engagement and the National Park Service

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IMAGINE A MAJESTIC MOUNTAIN, and rangers leading a group of children through an alpine meadow. They stop to point out orchids and other plants at their feet, and name the birds flying overhead. They tell stories of others who came before on the land. The scene is familiar, and you may have pictured flat hats, arrowhead patches, and a typical scene in any of a number of US national parks. However, I was describing a field trip of a century ago, in Switzerland. The only Americans were visitors,¹ and the “rangers” were Swiss guides. This visit is often cited as an inspiration for our familiar concept of the American ranger naturalist, a figure held in the public imagination as the personification of the National Park Service.² Like many inventions, our national park system is a combination of homegrown innovation and borrowed ideas. In fact, the formation of the National Park Service itself drew on the Dominion Parks Branch in Canada (now Parks Canada), established in 1911 as the world's first national park agency. From the advent of Yellowstone and Yosemite to the present day, America's national parks have both provided example to—and taken inspiration from—protected areas around the world.

The National Park Service earned a reputation as a leader in international parks development and management, particularly in the middle of its first century, hosting the first World Parks Congress, spearheading the World Heritage Convention, providing extensive training to international park professionals. However, that international engagement has declined, perhaps because the value back to America, its parks, and the National Park Service was underappreciated.

The National Park Service was almost 50 years old when the United States hosted the first World Parks Congress in 1962.³ A half-century later, the global parks movement has expanded exponentially, both in number of areas nominally protected, and in innovation of

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management and governance. Throughout that time, America's involvement in the international parks movement has taken many forms, and its influence and engagement has waxed and waned with the times.

I will steadfastly avoid any discussion of the national parks as “America's best idea”—either in the sense of whether America has an exclusive claim, or the question of primacy of national parks among America's many great ideas. But certainly our national parks represent some of America's best *ideals*. Conserving for future generations, open to all for learning and enjoyment, telling the stories of history—good and bad—these are ideals that show America at its best, to ourselves and to the world.

Unfortunately, beginning in the 1980s the National Park Service's international role ebbed to an all-time low. Will it re-emerge in the agency's second century?

A tradition of international engagement

The National Park Service has assisted park creation and management efforts overseas almost from its beginning in 1916. During the 1930s, the Park Service sent a delegation to South America, leading to the Inter-American Convention on Nature Protection and Wildlife Preservation, signed by the US and 16 Latin American nations—a treaty calling for the establishment and extension of national parks and nature areas.

In 1936, our organization's namesake, George Melendez Wright, served on a commission to plan international parks and reserves along the border with Mexico. In fact, he and Roger Toll, superintendent at Yellowstone, were traveling from a binational meeting at Big Bend National Park when they were struck and killed by an oncoming car.

During the 1940s, the United States responded to requests for parks assistance in several countries, and was engaged in the rebuilding of national parks in Japan after World War II. In 1954, the Agricultural Trade Development and Assistance Act famously established the Food for Peace program, but also authorized the use of external currency for parks projects overseas.

The World Parks Congress in 1962 was part of a formalized effort to institutionalize NPS international programs, including the precursor to the Office of International Affairs. The Park Service sent staff on long-term assignments of two years or more to assist planning and development of national parks in Kenya, Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Jordan, and developed master plans for protected areas in Turkey and India.

In parallel with bilateral assistance, the National Park Service provided leadership in strategic global conservation initiatives, including creation of the World Heritage program and initiatives to professionalize and systematize parks management through the World Commission on Protected Areas. In 1965, NPS initiated an influential training program, the International Seminar on Administration of National Parks and Equivalent Reserves, which trained hundreds of park professionals through the 1980s.

Beginning in 1967, the National Park Service began to cooperate with the Peace Corps, initially training volunteers on their way to Africa, and later for Latin America and other regions. In 1972, the US hosted the Second World Parks Congress at Yellowstone, an event that may be seen as the apex of international engagement for the Park Service. A concurrent proposal to create a dozen NPS teams to advise international park programs was not real-

ized. In the mid-1970s, internal briefings pointed to a “huge imbalance” in NPS assistance overseas, asserting that US parks gained little in the exchange. By the 1980s, the Park Service was beginning to limit its international involvement to meeting its obligations under treaties and bilateral agreements.

Of course, the National Park Service never completely abandoned the international stage. Since 2000, the Park Service has hosted the first World Protected Area Leaders Forum, participated in the World Heritage program as a non-voting member, established a few sister park relationships, continued the International Volunteers program, and done other good things through its Office of International Affairs. And, significantly, individual staff have engaged in one-off programs of their own initiative, or those of other organizations. But few would argue that the National Park Service has participated in international programs at a level consistent with its previous reputation for leadership in park management.

“The field cannot be seen from within the field”

This famous quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson eloquently states why it is sometimes necessary to step outside the confines of one’s usual arena in order to maintain clarity of vision. The mission of the agency needs innovation and creativity flowing in to adapt to ever-changing management challenges. Such innovation and creativity can be found outside as well as within.

Perspective. International engagement provides perspective on domestic management issues, both at the field level and among leadership. Both time and distance can provide perspective, but only distance can lend fresh viewpoints today. For example, 150 years after the start of the Civil War there is still great resistance in some quarters to discussing slavery as the primary cause of the war. Yet we have no difficulty agreeing on the root causes of this year’s revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya. The same principle applies to protected area management.

The first environmental book published in the US is a great historical example of the benefits of geographic perspective. George Perkins Marsh, first US ambassador to Italy, wrote *Man and Nature* in 1864 based on the desertification he saw around the Mediterranean, recognizing that the “action of man” in his native Vermont—then 80% deforested—could have the same devastating effect on the environment. It is tempting to speculate whether he would have seen the problem so clearly had he never left New England, though of course we may never know.

Keeping pace with new trends and innovations. Engaging internationally opens up access to decades of applied research in alternative park management strategies, and alerts us to emerging trends and issues that have not yet reached our shores. In the previous era, the prevailing presumption, on the part of managers if not participants, was that the National Park Service international programs were for the benefit of our partners in other countries, that is, that the bulk of the exchange would be in the direction of the US imparting its expertise and experience to others. *In the second century of the National Park Service, that balance will shift, with the agency gaining at least as much as it gives.*

A major trend in conservation globally in the past decade has been a proliferation in the diversity and extent of governance models for protected areas. Increasingly, countries are rec-

ognizing the existing protection of resources through indigenous and community conserved areas (ICCAs), and the potential for increasing conservation success by sharing or devolving management authority. Similarly, private protected areas have grown in number, scope, size and legitimacy, including in the United States. Unlike here, however, other countries are beginning to integrate both ICCAs and private protected areas formally into their national conservation strategies and official protected areas systems.

Another significant trend to watch, this one negative, is the discussion of protected area downsizing, downgrading, and degazetting (PADDD; “degazettement” means to decommission, or remove official authorization).⁴ The subject is anathema to our traditional concepts of parks in this country, and has enormous disruptive potential. However, discussion of the decommissioning of protected areas is growing in many quarters.

Relevancy, recruitment, and renewal. As discussed in previous Centennial Essays, the National Park Service continues to grapple with issues of relevancy and diversity. Though the problem has long been recognized, and many intentional fixes have tried and failed, the NPS workforce continues to be largely homogeneous and out of sync with American demographic change. International programs provide one opportunity to address these problems by exposing staff to different cultures and worldviews in ways that may not be possible at home. For example, an international experience may be in a country where a different culture and worldview is the majority and dominant population. Short visits provide some exposure, and longer-term assignments might go deeper into a different culture and bring home new approaches to parks and conservation problems. This is not to say that specific lessons learned could be applied directly to a US park context. Latin American cultures and attitudes are in themselves diverse, for example, and quite distinct from Latino societies in the US. But exposure to parks work in other countries, or hosting peers from other cultures, can contribute to enhancing cultural sensibilities and awareness within the Park Service.

Working for the National Park Service can be demanding and challenging. Studies show that workplace satisfaction in NPS is low, though staff are dedicated to their work and proud to wear the uniform. Many of the rewards are intrinsic. I can attest that the same is often true of international conservation work. Like the Peace Corps slogan, it is “the toughest job you’ll ever love.” What better recruitment tool than to have a pathway to employment in the National Park Service that leads through an international experience, either through the Peace Corps or other means? Or what better in-service training than to step away from one’s own socioeconomic context and develop new problem-solving skills?

Opportunities at hand

The current NPS director, Jonathan B. Jarvis, began his tenure in 2009 by traveling to global conservation conferences in Canada and Mexico. His message can be summed up in three words, “We’re back!” The United States has re-engaged in the World Heritage Convention, serving formally on the World Heritage Committee, refreshing the tentative list of candidate sites, and listing a new site for the first time in 15 years. The second cohort of the National Parks Institute (a 12-day executive seminar open to protected area leaders from around the world) is preparing to convene next spring. All of these events are salutary. But much more

than that needs to be done to restore the National Park Service to its previous position of full engagement in the global protected area community.

Continue and revitalize existing programs. The first step is to maintain what is working. The Office of International Affairs has come through the desert with a cluster of programs that should be maintained. Chief among these is the World Heritage program, which continues to grow and mature, moving past merely naming new sites to assisting UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization), IUCN (the International Union for the Conservation of Nature) and ICOMOS (the International Council of Monuments and Sites) in fulfilling the mission: to encourage the protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritage around the world considered to be of outstanding universal value to humanity.

Likewise the sister parks program should be continued and supported. To date it has depended largely on the ingenuity and creativity of individual staff, usually superintendents, to maintain activity. The program is very much in need of dedicated support. Similarly, the International Volunteers in Parks Program annually brings over 100 individuals from around the world to the parks, and should continue.

Global Protected Areas Program. IUCN is the only conservation organization in the world that is constituted of governmental and nongovernmental members. As such it provides unique opportunities for collaboration on common conservation issues and threats of global scale. Though the National Park Service has never ceased to be a member of IUCN, it is only very recently beginning to become more active in IUCN networks such as the World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA).

Engaging in WCPA provides a conduit for the National Park Service to participate in achieving the goals of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). Though the United States is not a signatory and is not bound by the convention, the WCPA program of work is now closely aligned with the CBD.

The World Protected Areas Leadership Forum, a joint venture of NPS and WCPA, aimed at the top leadership of park systems, has met nearly annually since 2000, a rare example of US initiative in this period. It should be complemented with programs that reach deeper into the ranks of the Park Service.

The World Parks Congress is the major global forum for establishing the agenda for protected areas. Held every decade, the Fifth World Parks Congress was convened in South Africa in 2003. With 3,000 delegates from 154 countries, it was the largest parks conference ever convened. Yet only a handful of delegates were officially representing the US National Park Service. A single university sent more people than the agency.

The next World Parks Congress, scheduled for 2014, will set the framework for cooperation on parks and protected areas for the next decade. It is in the interests of NPS to be engaged in setting and informing that agenda, an opportunity to look ahead at new challenges. For example, in 2003 climate change was hardly on the agenda, as hard as that is to believe just eight years later. In 2014, climate change may eclipse biodiversity conservation as the main threat around which programs and funding are organized. Or will a new threat appear that we have not yet detected?

Revive the World Conference on Cultural Parks. The First World Conference on Cultural Parks was an outgrowth of the World Heritage Convention adopted in 1972. The National Park Service hosted the meeting at Mesa Verde National Park, a World Heritage site, in 1984.⁵ There has never been a second world conference with precisely the same theme. Part of the reason lies in the limited inclusion of cultural resource discussion in the program of the World Parks Congress, reflecting a diminution of the perceived divide between natural parks and cultural sites. (A similar integration of natural and cultural resource sessions in our own George Wright Society biennial conferences has generated much positive feedback.) However, historical parks and sites are still largely excluded from the World Parks Congress. A major conference dedicated to cultural parks would have much to offer the field, and hosting it in the United States would send a strong signal of support to the cultural resource staff of the National Park Service.

Peace Corps. Two years ago I was in Peru on a project and visited Huascarán National Park, one of the crown jewels of the Peruvian protected area system. At the visitor center near Lake Llanganuco, I noticed a small monument. It caught my eye because the names were not Peruvian, and one of them carried the same surname as my mother-in-law! Cory Slaymaker had contributed to the creation of the park as a Peace Corps volunteer and then returned in 1972 to become its first director. (I later learned that the plaque is a *monumento a los caídos*, a monument to the fallen. Tragically, Slaymaker and a colleague, Michael Rourke, died in a mountaineering accident just one year after the park was established.)

The 1970s were a high point in Peace Corps activity in parks and protected areas. Many mistakes were made in attempting to apply the US “model” of national parks directly in very different social, economic, and political contexts. Many of the areas established in this period resulted in “paper parks,” officially designated but with little or no real protection on the ground. Huascarán stands as an exception and a reminder that a more concerted, organized program, guided by the National Park Service, might have corrected initial mistakes and adapted the model to local conditions. This would have both improved management effectiveness in the host countries *and* benefited US parks through the transfer of acquired adaptive management expertise.

I am particularly informed as to the potential of a renewed NPS/Peace Corps relationship. I served as a volunteer from 1979 to 1984, in three countries, helping to establish new systems of parks and reserves in two of them. Though these programs were largely successful, I worked in near total isolation. I can only imagine how much more we might have achieved had I, and others like me, had access to the expertise of the National Park Service in designing and implementing projects and, most importantly, helping to train our host country counterparts. In short, there is much to be gained in reviving and institutionalizing a relationship with the Peace Corps on parks and protected area establishment and management.

“Parks Corps.” In addition to partnering with the Peace Corps to train and mentor volunteers, I can imagine a set of National Park Service employees who are trained and enabled to assist with strategic protected area development projects, and to respond to park management emergencies worldwide. There is some precedent in the role the National Park Service played in development of Japan’s parks after World War II, also in the long-term advisors placed in Saudi Arabia and Sri Lanka in the 1980s, and even the ongoing Beringia shared

heritage program. The Park Service responds to requests for technical assistance, but to date this has been largely on an *ad hoc* basis. A “Parks Corps” would provide in-service training to NPS staff while tapping their expertise. It could also take advantage of the experience of NPS retirees. The idea of developing a “Parks Corps” is ambitious to be sure, but this level of engagement would provide an invaluable service to meeting park challenges, foreign and domestic, and a decidedly positive contribution to America’s diplomatic posture.

A particular challenge, but one with potentially great impact, is presented in the special case of transboundary protected areas in theaters of conflict, either active or potential. When I first visited Central and Eastern Europe in 1988, the most protected area on the continent was a continuous corridor running from the Baltic to the Adriatic. Though Churchill’s dramatic label of “Iron Curtain” evokes images of razor wire, high walls and human despair, much of this no-man’s land was actually wide and verdant, and a *de facto* refuge for flora and fauna. A few of these areas remain protected as parks and reserves, but the European Green-belt initiative to protect it all comes too late to save most of it from development. Imagine if the global community had been prepared to respond with a broad vision of protection when the Berlin Wall came down in 1989? And what a legacy it might have been had the National Park Service played a role in healing the great Cold War wound across Europe. Will we be prepared, when the moment of opportunity comes, to help preserve the Korean DMZ (Demilitarized Zone) as a crane sanctuary and final legacy of that conflict?

Engagement over exceptionalism. Though famously credited with the advent of the national park idea, a concept of a *system* of protected areas may prove to be the most enduring American contribution to the global conservation movement. American park professionals led the drive to encourage other countries to develop national park system plans, yet ironically system planning is not part of the NPS vernacular and many observers doubt whether the collection of US national parks is truly a system, at least in comparison with other countries. IUCN has developed a systemization of protected area management categories, a *lingua franca* designed to sort through the bewildering array of park names (national park, national monument, national historical park, national heritage area, to name just a few of the dozens of examples in the US alone) as a first step toward a comparative analysis of effectiveness. The IUCN categories were developed and refined with the input of NPS and other US land management agencies, yet the US is perhaps the only country in the world where park staff are unfamiliar with the category system; most are not even aware the system exists, let alone where their park fits in the typology. Recently, governance has been added to management objectives in the category system, with timely lessons for NPS as it engages with diverse communities and attempts to be more effective at large landscape scales.

“Working around the world, and for America’s future”

In its report, the National Parks Second Century Commission addressed the issue of international engagement in a section titled “Working around the world, and for America’s future”:

The National Park Service has a long history of international engagement. Early Park Service leaders believed strongly in the global duty of the Service to help other countries develop and manage their own parks. They also understood that the Service had much to learn from con-

ervation agencies around the world. Ironically, while the Park Service has given up much of this role, the need for international engagement by the Park Service has never been more urgent. US national parks share responsibility for protection of critical habitats for migratory species, mitigation of transboundary air and water pollution, and the preservation of World Heritage sites. The commission recommends renewed international engagement by the National Park Service, in partnership with the State Department.

The Second Century Commission recommended that “the National Park Service should renew and revitalize its commitment and capacity to engage internationally.”²⁶ The key words here are *commitment* and *capacity*. Unfortunately, the commission did not make a recommendation to Congress on this topic. While commitment is being renewed under current NPS leadership, that commitment will always be subject to change without a more clear and consistent mandate. *International cooperation must move from the fringes of NPS programs to a core, strategic element of the Park Service’s work to achieve its mission.* The best way to institutionalize international engagement of the National Park Service is through clear legislative authority.

In this time of budget constraints and economic austerity, it would be easy to dismiss any question of expanding National Park Service international engagement as an untimely additional expense. But a thoughtful, strategic approach could open up partnerships while contributing to mission effectiveness. The Second Century Commission report specifically mentions partnership with the State Department, and for good reason:

The diplomatic value of parks and places of cultural and natural heritage should not be overlooked. Sometimes the course of relations among nations leads to a vicious cycle of alienation. Nations that differ profoundly on only a few major issues may become so negatively-focused that they create greater and greater differences, demonizing one another and risking enmity and warfare. When nations reach a point where they cannot or will not talk with one another about profound differences, they sometimes can talk about more nearly universal values such as cultural heritage, parks, or nature.⁷

Symbolic of the best of America, the potential role of the National Park Service in soft diplomacy has historically been undervalued. Our country committed \$34 billion in total overseas economic assistance last year, less than one-quarter of one percent of GDP (and of course a tiny fraction of defense appropriations). Strategic partnerships with the Department of State, through the US Agency for International Development, the Peace Corps, and other agencies, would pay dividends at home and abroad. And, though it would require great leadership and vision, a partnership with the Department of Defense on transboundary protected areas along borders of potential or active conflict is worth exploring. The potential is not limited to transboundary areas, of course. A case in point: Guantánamo Bay is arguably the most protected marine area in the world; an unintended consequence of the outpost is an important refuge of marine biodiversity. But it may not always be so. Here again the National Park Service could prepare now to rehabilitate the name of Guantánamo by protecting the bay as a reserve when the opportunity presents itself.

Conclusion

The primary mandate of the *National Park Service* is—and should be—to serve the American people. But our society is connected to a global community in increasingly obvious, immediate, and intimate ways. National Park Service programs and policy should reflect that reality. In an interconnected world, the Park Service will be better equipped to serve America by keeping an ear to, and a hand in, related work outside our borders.

The Sixth World Parks Congress in 2014 will in some sense mark the golden anniversary of the global protected areas movement. It would be a fitting opportunity to demonstrate National Park Service commitment to international engagement on the eve of its second century. A strategy is needed now to re-engage in meaningful ways. A legislative mandate could provide the authority, and a recognition of its value to soft diplomacy could provide the means.

Our national system of parks and related programs is one of the most positive reflections of our society that the nation can project out to the rest of the world. For over a century, the advent of national parks has been a cherished symbol of American creativity, stewardship, and leadership recognized around the globe. Collaborating internationally to fulfill their promise and potential will reap benefits at home and burnish America's reputation abroad.

Endnotes

1. The Americans were Charles and Mary Goethe, once hailed as “The father and mother of the National Park Service’s interpretive program.” A controversial figure today, Charles Goethe was the founder of Sacramento State College, but also of the Eugenics Society of Northern California.
2. Statement of Jonathan B. Jarvis, Director, National Park Service, before the US House of Representatives, Subcommittee on National Parks, Forest and Public Lands, Natural Resources Committee, concerning Building on America’s best idea: The next century of the national park system. May 25, 2010.
3. At the time it was called the “First World Conference on National Parks.” The name was the same for the second, at Yellowstone in 1972, but was changed to “Third World Congress on National Parks” for the conference held at Denpasar, Bali, Indonesia, in 1982. The fourth congress (Caracas, Venezuela, 1992) added “and Protected Areas” to the name. The more succinct “World Parks Congress” was used for the last conference (Durban, South Africa, 2003) and is expected to be repeated in 2014.
4. Mascia, Michael B., and S. Pailler. 2010. Protected area downgrading, downsizing, and degazettement (PADDD) and its conservation implications. *Conservation Letters* 4 (1): 9–20.
5. World Conferences Collection, National Park Service History Collection, RG 7.
6. National Parks Second Century Commission. 2009. *Advancing the National Park Idea: National Parks Second Century Commission Report*. Washington, D.C.: National Parks Conservation Association.
7. National Parks Second Century Commission, Cultural Resource and Historic Preservation Committee, 2009. A different past in a different future: Cultural Resource and Historic Preservation Committee report. In *Advancing the National Park Idea: National*

Parks Second Century Commission Committee Reports. Washington, DC: National Parks Conservation Association, 19–37.

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