
superintendent's corner

**By John E. Cook, Superintendent,
Great Smoky Mountains NP**

At Great Smoky Mountains National Park, we believe there is an urgent need to place greater emphasis on reducing adverse impacts on park resources. In a modern setting of technology and change, we are taking some unprecedented steps to address this need.

Many more people are visiting the park than ever before, hiking into the backcountry, camping overnight, and creating impacts obviously detrimental to the Smoky Mountains ecosystem. A myriad of exotic plant and animal species is adversely affecting the park's natural and cultural resources. External forces are at work, damaging the park environment in ways we do not yet fully comprehend.

To meet these real and potential threats to park values we have established an integrated research and resources management unit under the supervision of an assistant superintendent for resources management and science. This comprehensive unit includes two newly formed divisions. The divisions of administration, maintenance, interpretation and ranger activities have been retained under the supervision of an assistant superintendent for management and operations.

This revised organizational format is designed to form a cohesive and integrated program for full protection of the park's natural and cultural resources. It will assure constant attention to these most important responsibilities. As the Director pointed out in a speech to the Association of National Park Rangers, "The park ranger, resource specialist, maintenance personnel, scientist, and interpreter must function as a well oiled machine if we are to fulfill our proper mandates." Ranger and maintenance personnel will continue to be implementers. Scientists will gather information and analyze it, and they must provide me with alternative courses of action to deal with problems identified. The resource specialist will be the facilitator and act as liaison between the scientist and management. It is the interpreter's job to sell the program to the various publics.

Paramount in dealing with the mitigation of adverse impacts is a management plan, whose ingredients and priorities are arrived at jointly. The park's reorganization actions will permit better communication between researchers and resource managers, who share in the identification of resource problems. They will jointly agree on information needed before corrective measures can begin. But these two groups will still be only part of the team dealing with resource problems. Field rangers, maintenance personnel and interpreters must be strong supporters and participants in the total package.

Resource management strategies in the General Management Plan are the principal projects needed to combat threats to the park's ecosystem and to human life and safety. The document for dealing with these projects is the Resource Management Plan. Project statements are prepared for each resource related problem. The specific actions to be taken are identified. Actions are carefully assessed. Any that are controversial will be reviewed by the public before implementing. Typical resource management actions are as follows:

The park's Fraser fir forest has been heavily infested by the balsam wooly aphid and numerous trees killed. In order to preserve a few of the species in the highly visual sensitive area of Clingmans Dome, spraying operations are being conducted on a twice annual basis. Early monitoring indicates success in controlling the insects in this area. A somewhat unique aspect of our program is the melding of both natural and historic resource management. Cades Cove is well populated with turn-of-the-century pioneer structures, including homes, outbuildings, churches and a grist mill. This 2,000 acre area is kept in a meadowlike condition as a backdrop to these remnants of 19th century pioneer life. Cattle raising and haying activities performed to maintain the meadow condition provide, artificially, a good habitat for deer. Turkey, black bear, fish and other aquatic life also are affected. The new division is prepared to deal with these conflicts and others associated with this challenging relationship.

It has been evident for a long time that visitor impacts have created unnatural ecosystem changes; changes that must be minimized as much as possible. For example, people camping in the backcountry come in close contact with black bears. Frequent contact results in bears panhandling for food. The new division is applying principles of management derived from information compiled from people/bear social relationship studies. Progress is being made to reduce confrontation, injuries, property damage, and to retain the animals' natural character.

It is with great pride and expectation that we move forward with this newly organized research and resource management unit. It is made up of talented individuals, dedicated to furthering the interests of the National Park Service and to the pursuit of scientific truths and their applications in the preservation of the natural and cultural resources of the System.