

Politics as it Relates to Research and Resource Management in National Parks*

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An often forgotten and overlooked element in doing research and resource management in national parks is politics and its influence on the results and outcome of these two extremely important programs. It is very clear to me that our resource management problems are becoming more complex than ever before and the public and politicians are more involved in all research and resource management actions that are undertaken in our national parks. It is also apparent that we can't afford to be doing research for "research's sake," it must be applied and related to management needs. Instead of our resource management needs becoming easier, they are becoming much more difficult to accomplish than they were 10-20 years ago. The political climate continues to affect our mission to restore these national treasures to the way they were prior to European man's presence.

Politics as it relates to resource management and research has several factors which need to be considered by both our scientists and managers. Before discussing these factors, I'd like to offer my definition of politics as it relates to these programs.

"Politics in research and resource management is the art of building a constituency for overall park management and support for research and resource management actions."

What I mean by this is, that the public needs to be constantly and consistently dealt with and consulted about the purpose and importance of our national parks. An excellent public relations program is necessary to sell the park and all its management programs. This needs to be done on all levels (local, regional, state, national and international). Once the public becomes aware and understands our mission, it becomes easier to accomplish our research and resource management objectives. The factors that need to be considered in any research and resource management actions are as follows:

Must have scientific and professional consensus as to facts (management without knowledge is a dangerous policy).

Both the scientist and manager need to consult with peers in the local communities to seek concurrence and support. It may be necessary to consider a scientific committee to provide additional advice and support. This, of course, depends on the magnitude of the problem at hand.

Superintendents need grassroots support from local towns and counties, and support from regional, state and national levels if necessary.

This depends upon the sensitivity of the problems. For example, if one were to remove exotic rats from

an area, the public would not necessarily become aroused, or even care, since not many people see rats as beneficial. On the contrary, if you were to propose removal of sheep, burros, or perhaps rabbits at Easter time, you could have a real public relations problem confronting you. This is where that support and that scientific advisory committee will help. Again, it depends on the sensitivity and popularity of the non-endemic plant or animal to be eradicated. A manager or scientist can never have too much public support in the carrying out of resource management actions.

Managers and researchers need to be well organized (they should have clear objectives, good strategy, good flow of information so people who need to know are kept informed).

Once you are well organized with a clear set of objectives and strategy, this information needs to be communicated to the public and especially to any special interest groups. In some cases those persons who you know will definitely oppose your actions need to be communicated with head-on. It's surprising that sometimes you can reach a satisfactory understanding, but at other times you may not. However, you must not get discouraged even though they continue to disagree; you must continue with an action proposed as long as you have met all of the legal requirements, i.e., Congressional mandates, NEPA, and NPS policies, etc.

I also feel it's important to realize that people and groups, including your own staff, may not receive the information in the same way. Therefore, plan your presentations for the diversity of audiences with whom you need to communicate. Try to meet with the most concerned and interested groups on their turf so they are more relaxed and don't feel threatened. It also indirectly tells them you really care and honestly want their support and understanding.

Special efforts are necessary in soliciting support from influential people and respected scientists.

Scientists and managers in parks know there are key persons who are influential in the universities, natural history museums and the surrounding communities. A special effort is needed to solicit their total support prior to communicating your proposed resource management actions to the general public. It's surprising how much help these people can be in selling your program. Even more importantly, these people can offer an incredible amount of good advice and come to your aid with support should you need it during the actual manipulative resource management actions. Again, it can also be useful to bring these influential people into an organized advisory committee to help you in the planning process.

Define your vocabulary so it's well understood – don't get the public unduly alarmed by using terminology they don't understand.

Managers and scientists must realize the information they wish to get out to the public will need to be prepared in different terminology for different interest groups. The vocabulary you use to talk to a group of scientists will not be the same as that prepared for the local chapter of the National Rifleman's Association. It is also important that you analyze the phrases we use, such as "Management Alternatives," "Planning Concepts," etc. These types of phrases are confusing.

It has been my experience that in the public's mind, all of the alternatives and any concepts presented are the plan. We need to make it clear as to what our recommendations are without clouding the issues with all the alternatives we considered. Other words to be aware of in resource management actions are "eradication" or "elimination" – it's much better to use "control techniques."

Managers need to know the problem first-hand; touching and feeling it lends credibility.

This is probably one of the most important factors to be considered by managers. They need to get out in the field and see the problem and understand it fully by teaching and feeling it before taking any action. This will help to build support with the scientists and the public as well.

Politics may dictate a piecemeal approach to solving the problem.

Often times, the magnitude and complexity of the problem and the political environment may be such that the research and resource management actions will have to be planned to take place over a long period of time or when the political climate becomes more conducive to NPS objectives. Examples would be the phasing out of commercial fishing or hunting within a park. These are sensitive issues. First, the research must be done and the data collected must clearly demonstrate the degrading effects to the natural ecosystem that these activities are having. The second step may be to make a recommendation to phase out commercial fishing in one small study area that can be used to compare other areas with, eventually leading to total elimination over a long period (a grandfather clause). This is especially true when other agencies or jurisdictions are present.

Be committed and have guts.

Once the necessary scientific data have been collected and the legal requirements met (NEPA, EPA, Legislation, etc.) concerning a research and resource management problem, the manager needs to implement the plan. You will not always have total support, but a manager should be committed to carry it out. According to NPS policy and legislation, it is against the law not to take a resource management action especially when that action involves an exotic species having a dramatic impact on the resources for which the park was established. A further word of advice would be to avoid making the problem larger than it really is. Get started doing something and be persistent.

All of the above factors involve a great deal of effective timing and politics and must be considered in every step of the resource management and research programs in the preservation and protection of our national parks.

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