
historical research

By Edwin C. Bearss

National Park Service historians and scientists don't communicate much – certainly not as much as they should. Although historians (here encompassing all professionals focusing on the human past, including those with other official titles) and scientists represent the basic disciplines underlying the National Park System, how many are aware of what their counterparts are doing? Can historians be more useful to scientists, and vice versa? Can the two disciplines, with better coordination, increase their value to management?

This column, which I hope will become a regular feature in *Park Science*, is intended as one small step toward improving our communication and coordination. It is the brainchild of Alaska's Bill Brown, who hails from the historian ranks (he's pretty historic himself) but who has an affinity for natural concerns heretofore rare among our breed. Bill proposed that I, as chief historian, kick it off and then circulate the byline among our talented cadre of regional historians.

thereby "broadening the appeal of *Park Science* and the horizons of historians as well."

Let me begin, then, by reviewing some recent, current, and planned research ventures in which history and natural science come together most evidently.

Last year, Gordon C. Olson, a ranger at Antietam National Battlefield, completed a 300-page master's thesis titled "A History of Natural Resources Management within the National Park Service." Keyed to the administrations of successive NPS directors, Olsen's thesis traces the place of science and natural resources management in the organization and outlines major trends and developments in these fields.

In 1985 R. Gerald Wright of the University of Idaho's College of Forestry, Wildlife and Range Sciences received a research grant from Eastern National Park and Monument Association for a history of wildlife management in the national parks. Intended for book publication, Wright's research is organized into chapters with such headings as "The Introduction of Science into Park Management," "Park Management and the Ecosystem Concept," "Sport Hunting and Poaching Pressures on Parks," and so forth. As of June 1987 the history was about two-thirds complete.

Alston Chase's *Playing God in Yellowstone* has been much criticized for its portrayal of natural resources management in our flagship park. Partially in response, Harry A. Butowsky of the WASO History Division, with support from the Senior Scientist's office, has embarked upon a fresh study of some of the more controversial issues addressed by Chase and others. Butowsky's history will emphasize Yellowstone but will touch upon other such critical parks as Everglades, Great Smoky Mountains, and Yosemite. Completion is scheduled for 1988.

As I write, Associate Director Gene Hester has just approved and funded a North Atlantic Region proposal titled "Inventory and Conservation of Genetic Resources of Historically Significant Fruit Trees in the National Park System," to be carried out during the next two years by the University of Massachusetts. The researchers will produce a computer-based inventory of historic orchards in the System, identify and collect specimens of any unique genetic material found, and recommend management actions to conserve and propagate such material. In recent years we in cultural resources management have become increasingly concerned about the conservation of historic landscapes, so we especially welcome this project and look forward to cooperating on it.

Historians and scientists may use different vocabularies, but most of the time we speak the same language. Let's keep in touch!