

Prestigious Commission Urges New NPS Vision

By David J. Simon

The Chairman of an independent commission charged with evaluating National Park research and resource management policies has proposed a new vision for the National Park System to safeguard this vital national and international legacy.

In a report entitled *National Parks: From Vignettes to a Global View*, this prestigious group called for "action on an unprecedented scale" to apply ecosystem management concepts to the parks, bring about a "quantum leap in both the quantity and quality of research" in the parks, achieve a higher degree of professionalization within the NPS, and adopt an expanded NPS educational mission to nurture "a conservation ethic among all segments of society, including those traditionally underrepresented in park constituencies, in order to lead the nation toward an environmentally sane future."

Stating that "a new beginning is now in order," Commission Chairman John Gordon, dean of Yale University's School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, presented the report to Paul Pritchard, president of the National Parks and Conservation Association, and Manuel Lujan, Jr., President Bush's new Secretary of the Interior.

Pritchard stated that "this report should be viewed on its own; not as a replacement for the Leopold Report, but as a statement carefully reassessing and reaffirming the value of park preservation and the integral role research, science, and scholarship play in that preeminent responsibility. Policy is only as sound as the knowledge on which it rests," Pritchard continued, "and effective communication of park purposes and values must be the ultimate goal. I fervently hope that

with the help of a President committed to science and education, together we can move the parks to higher ground."

The Commission reached key conclusions in the following areas:

1. *Ecosystem Management.* Preserving park resources must continue to be the most important task of the Park Service. The parks must be managed under ecosystem concepts that blend natural, cultural, and social sciences and allow natural processes to act, while recognizing that humans dramatically influence park ecosystems, and that both impacts and management transcend arbitrary political boundaries.

2. *Research.* A significant improvement of NPS research programs across all disciplines must be initiated. A Congressional charter for NPS research, a mandate other federal agencies such as the U.S. Forest Service already enjoy, should be enacted. For example, the Park Service has only about 75 field scientists and 46 park historians for its 354 units, and research comprises only about 2 percent of the NPS operating budget, compared to about 10 percent in other land management agencies with similar responsibilities.

3. *Professionalization.* The NPS should pursue long-term goals to raise the standards of park management for all employees. More manpower and expertise is needed within social science, historic architecture, ethnography, and numerous biological disciplines. As resource protection tasks grow more complicated and specialized, the NPS can no longer rely on generalist rangers for all its needs. Career ladders must be made available to resource managers

so they can rise within the hierarchy along with managers with backgrounds in law enforcement and other areas.

4. *Education.* The National Park System and Service have the capacity to impart conservation ethics to the American and world population, reach out to new constituencies, and explain the processes of environmental and cultural change whirling around modern society. Public resources such as the parks can only be preserved with widespread public concern and understanding. As the most popular federal agency and custodian of the nation's most hallowed places, the Park Service has a unique opportunity and responsibility to lead the nation toward environmental solvency and sanity.

Pritchard was optimistic that the report would initiate new discussion on the future role of science and resource protection in the NPS. "The Service cannot preserve park resources if it doesn't know what or how much it has," he said. "I look forward to an honest, dynamic debate whose singular purpose will be to chart the future course of America's greatest invention — its national parks."

The Commission was established by NPCA with the cooperation of NPS to reexamine issues raised in the 1963 Starker Leopold report. While NPCA provided staff and logistical support, the group deliberated independently. Its 17 members included nationally respected authorities from nearly every discipline and resource category of concern to the NPS. The report was released on March 19, 1989 at a one-day symposium on national park policy in Washington, DC.

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