

Beyond the Mission: An Essay On NPS Management

By David A. Haskell

The mission of the National Park Service, as stated by the 1916 Organic Act, has been the focal point of debate and discussion both within the NPS and by agency supporters and critics for several decades. The list of reports and commentary that have been prepared over the past thirty years in particular, repeatedly refer to the "dual mission of the NPS". Discussions have even referred to the Organic Act as being impossibly schizophrenic, a statement of mission that requires the agency to pursue two diametrically opposing goals: To protect park resources, and to provide for public enjoyment. The most recent public mention of this duality of mission can be found in the opening paragraph of the National Research Council Report, *Science in the National Parks* where the dual mission is referred to as "a losing battle". One would think that if a crest was designed for the agency the central feature would be a two headed eagle, a bird that sees all but can never get off the ground.

Presenting the NPS mission in a seemingly new, different, or novel light has been the hallmark of several NPS Directors since the stalwart leadership style of George Hartzog brought the agency the "Parks for People" program. We even momentarily set aside the NPS arrowhead in favor of the Parkscape triangle tie tac and the beloved buffalo gave way to the design of the century, the "You're in good hands with the NPS" badge. Many remember the day when the NPS badge was stripped away from all employees except those with law enforcement authority. We have had some interesting times, all in the name of clarifying the NPS mission.

Perhaps the most intensive mission analysis since the drafting of the Organic Act took place during the National Park Service 75th Anniversary Conference held in Vail Colorado, now known affectionately as the Vail Conference. The report that grew out of this landmark event, "National Parks for the 21st Century" (The Vail Agenda), brought an intense focus on professionalizing the NPS workforce. There was a particularly strong focus on improving the agency's capability to provide a science based resource management program. The message from and to the attendees was clear. In his closing remarks Director Ridenour emphatically stated that the very resources for which the parks were created were at serious risk and that we could no longer allow this to continue. In his words he stated that from now on, if we are to err, we are to err on the side of the resource. The order was clear, we were to protect the resources at all cost.

From the Organic Act of 1916 to the Leopold Report in 1963, and on to the NRC report on Science in the National Parks in 1992, there is general agreement that resource stewardship is the NPS mission. Passive protection can no longer be counted on to assure the continuation of resource integrity in this rapidly changing world.

We can finally put our minds at ease, the dual mission has been reduced to a single mission, resource stewardship, the eagle with the single head can now fly. These recent events have put the minds of many NPS employees at ease, or have they? Is this a complete picture or is something still missing here? What about the last word of the agency title, the National Park **Service**? What about the fact that the NPS is an agency funded by tax dollars in a democratic society where the government is expected to serve the needs of the public? In a manner of thinking, the American people created the parks for their use and enjoyment. Many fallen governments have failed to recognize the stark reality that what the people giveth, the people can taketh away. Governments that are not responsive to the people are eventually replaced. It is easy to lose sight of the fact that the existence of each national park is only one piece of legislation away from being voted out of existence! Does this realization change the mission? I think not, but it should cause us to look beyond the mission and ask ourselves the big question; WHY?

There must be something to consider beyond the mission of the National Park Service. **We must have not only have a mission, there must be a purpose.** When we think of what the NPS is all about, it may be easier to think in terms of both mission and purpose. The mission is what we do, the purpose is why we do it. In war, the mission is to win the battle, to win the war, but the purpose is to bring about peace. The battles are the action. Some of the action is not pleasant but it has to be done. Peace is the human value that is derived from all of the effort and sacrifice. What is achieved is cherished because it has a cost and a great value. In a way this is analogous to the preservation of the natural and cultural heritage of our people.

In the mission and purpose paradigm, the NPS mission is to preserve the natural condition of the national parks, the cultural resources and values of the historic, military, and cultural parks, and the recreational values of the national seashores, lakeshores, rivers, and recreation areas. In most cases, the values to be protected are identified in the enabling legislation for each unit. The purpose for doing so may not be quite so self-evident. Understanding the purpose is not just a philosophical exercise; it is essential to maintaining a focus on how we manage national parks. In order to stay on track in the complex world of today and into the near future, we have continually to ask ourselves, WHY? Answering the why question often produces the most useful rationale for making difficult management decisions. Let's examine the purpose behind the mission.

In the simplest general terms, WHY we engage in the NPS mission is that the National Park Service is a public service agency of the U.S. Government. The Congress has stated via several pieces of legislation that they want the parks to be aggressively managed so that the resources are protected from significant damage. This enlightened public perspective was most eloquently stated in the 1970 Administration of the National Park Service Act (16 USC 1a-1-1c), "These areas, though distinct in character, are united through their inter-related purposes and resources into one National Park System as cumulative expressions of a single national heritage... Individually and collectively, these areas derive increased national dignity and recognition of their superb environmental quality through their inclusion jointly in one national park system preserved and managed for the benefit and inspiration of all the people of the United States" This message was again reaffirmed with similar language in the 1978 Redwoods Act (16 USC 1a-1). This wording describes the public value to be achieved in managing the National Park System. It speaks well to the WHY question, it helps to define the PURPOSE, at least from the legislative perspective.

Early American philosophers and students of the natural world such as Henry Thoreau and John Muir expressed the more passionate view that some of the natural world, as created by a force greater than ourselves, must be maintained in pristine condition. In these places humans would have a place to go where the mind and soul would not be bombarded with the sights and sounds of human activity. These would be places where the forces of nature reign supreme, and as mortals we must acknowledge our place in an order that is not dominated by man. When

the crazy world spins out of balance these are the places where we go to keep things in perspective. There are many people among us today who believe this to be an important part of the WHY question.

Perhaps a more mainstream public perspective that contributes to our understanding of the NPS PURPOSE is the realization and appreciation that preserving the variety of natural American landscapes, complete with their full complement of flora and fauna (the ecosystem) is important to maintaining our sense of national identity. Superimposed upon these landscapes is the story of the founding and growth of our nation that is being preserved as national historic parks, cultural parks, battlefields, and other sites that provide the window into our past. In the management of most units of the national park system it is impossible to separate the human history from the natural history. The relationship of the land to the American identity has been most profoundly exemplified by the culture and beliefs of the native Americans, who have perhaps, more than any other segment of the public, mourned the loss of the native American landscape. The national parks and federal Wilderness Areas

will soon be all that remains of America not dominated by the works of human beings. They will indeed be not only the last of the great places, they will be the **only** great places. This is WHY their integrity cannot be compromised.

Unfortunately not all segments of the public feel strongly about these values. A common trait among people of all nations is to be most concerned about today. Somebody else can plan for tomorrow. In democratic societies the people tend to delegate planning for tomorrow to their elected governments. In the early days of American democracy the first governments were charged with looking after the general public good. Government remains today as the constitutionally designated representative of the people, and thus must assume a great measure of responsibility for the future of the people. Imperfect as we may find government at times, there is no other group on the horizon that even seeks to fulfill that awesome responsibility. There is, therefore, no more fundamental purpose for the National Park Service, as a government agency, then to assume responsibility for the long-term preservation of the natural and cultural heritage of the nation.

These several facets of the NPS PURPOSE provide the strongest rationale for not allowing short-term public interests to compromise the effective long-term management and preservation of the parks. When faced with difficult mission-related decisions that pit the short-term interests and demands of certain segments of the public against the long-term stewardship mission of the agency, it may be more fruitful to present a defense based on PURPOSE rather than relying solely on a statement of mission. Even in the absence of Congressional or special interest public pressure it may often be less troubling for park managers to ask the WHY question that will reveal the PURPOSE which will be served. The view that is provided when mission is seen in conflict with purpose tends to give us a cross-eyed vision of our task. The use of mission and purpose **together**, in a focused way, could conceivably provide us with a new, stereopticon picture—one that would cast positive light from both directions and more clearly show us the way to good management decisions.

Haskell is the Natural Resources and Science Chief for Shenandoah NP.