

The National Biological Survey— A Perspective From the Past

By R. Gerald Wright

The administration of Franklin Roosevelt was a heady time for those individuals who believed that the federal government should play a major role in the socio-economic affairs of the country. Conservation of the nation's natural and cultural resources was one of those roles. Harold Ickes, the Secretary of the Interior under this administration, firmly believed that this goal could best be accomplished through the creation of a Department of Conservation—an agency that would include the Forest Service, National Park Service, Biological Survey, Bureau of Fisheries, and the Grazing Division.

This concept had at least the tacit approval if not the strong endorsement of the President. However, because of intense Congressional opposition against moving the Forest Service out of the Department of Agriculture, the creation of this new department was not realized -- although over the years, the concept has retained its allure and has surfaced time and again under subsequent administrations.

In lieu of achieving this larger goal, Ickes was offered the more modest prize of taking over the administration of the Bureau of Biological Survey, which was transferred from Agriculture to Interior in 1940. The Biological Survey was an agency with a long and illustrious history. Originally established as the division of Economic Ornithology and Mammalogy in 1885 and headed by the famous biologist C. Hart Merriam, its name was changed to the Bureau of Biological Survey in 1905 to better reflect Merriam's interests . . . that was as the natural history agency of the government, with much of its early work being devoted to defining the geographical distribution of animals and plants in various regions of the country. In subsequent years, however, economic and utilitarian factors exerted an ever greater influence on the agency and its primary roles became predator control and the management of wildlife refuges and migratory waterfowl.

With the transfer of the Biological Survey to Interior, Ickes sought to carry out his goal for a Department of Conservation on a smaller scale by consolidating all federal research

personnel in the department (primarily wildlife researchers) in the Biological Survey. This involved the transfer of the wildlife biologists from the National Park Service and the Grazing Division, and the biologists in the Bureau of Fisheries to the Biological Survey.

This expanded Biological Survey had many similarities to the present National Biological Survey. Among them were debates over how well NPS research needs would be served by biologists that now worked for another agency. Although an "Office of National Park Wildlife" was established within the Biological Survey which housed the transferred NPS biologists, it was, as Lowell Sumner (one of the transferred biologists) told me in an interview: "...difficult to know how to address national park concerns in a bureau whose goals were set by ... predator control and sport hunting [interests]." Also, as today, the number of NPS biologists transferred to the expanded agency was small in comparison with the number of biologists who already were a part of the existing Biological Survey.

The expanded Biological Survey proved to be short-lived because, after only a few months, Ickes decided to merge the Biological Survey with the Bureau of Fisheries to create the Fish and Wildlife Service. So in 1947, seven years after it was established, the Office of National Park Wildlife, then in the Fish and Wildlife Service, was abolished and the scientists in that office were transferred back to the NPS, where it took many years to build a credible natural science program.

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Suggested Readings

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