

Dave Parsons' Farewell

Editor's note: Parsons is a past research scientist at Sequoia and Kings Canyon NPs. He left the park and the NPS in June to become the director of the Leopold Wilderness Institute in Missoula, Montana. The following are excerpts from an interview he had with past editor Jean Matthews around the Pulse Study campfire.

I came to Sequoia/Kings Canyon in 1973--21 years ago--when there was very little science in the parks. We built the program from a one-person operation to a fairly effective program, with outside scientists, with other agencies, and with academics. It was a cooperative effort that brought science to bear on day-to-day park management.

The pulse studies of 1982-83 were the strategic event that really swung science here into a new, exciting mode. NPS science has struggled over the years. There have been flashes of hope, signs of excellence, and managers who have backed our efforts and who saw our usefulness to management.

But the new direction--the National Biological Survey--is draining the NPS science ranks and threatening to redirect research. It is critical that the NPS and NBS establish effective communication links if the parks are to avoid a return to the days of management by whim. Today's world requires quality scientific data upon which to make management decisions.

We had come such a long way. We had convinced managers of the value of good data to managers. For instance, we were just beginning to get a handle on the data we need in order to manage fire properly. Nate Stephenson's research shows we aren't getting the hot spots we need for sequoia regeneration. David Graber recently showed that under modern fire management we have achieved a fire cycle in mixed conifer stands of no more than 70 to 80 years, whereas the presettlement fire cycle was closer to 15-20 years.

We're not getting anywhere with our current fire practices. We're a long way from the end of the tunnel. Our fire program is still far from perfected. We're facing the need to burn more, burn hotter, and educate the public to the need for this . . . plus figure out how to do it without violating air pollution standards. We need better functional understanding so we can posit various valid scenarios. There are the management frustrations here, and we've had to play whatever funding game is currently hot in order to get money for what needs to be done.

SEKI is a premier study site for long-term environmental research, but it has never been successful in securing a long-term funding base. The lack of an overall commitment to science on the part of the NPS will become even more of a problem now that their researchers have been moved to the NBS.

In addition, many in the scientific community are convinced that there's no point in doing research in the national park system, since the Service on the whole has been negative about accommodating the

intrusions necessary for long-term ecological research site work.

It is easy to feel discouraged with the current situation. But it will not do any good to feel sorry for ourselves. We are faced with a new set of rules and we need to make them work. We must work together--NPS, NBS, and other agency and academic scientists and managers--to assure that the NPS is able to meet those needs, and then that the parks are prepared to apply the new scientific findings. It is time to make the system work!