

WILDLIFE POLICIES IN THE U.S. NATIONAL PARKS: A KNEE-JERK RESPONSE

A Book Review by Dan Huff

IT'S BEEN JUST ABOUT 10 years since a disgruntled Yellowstone volunteer accused the National Park Service of *Playing God in Yellowstone*. Now, an arguably more credible group of self-appointed NPS critics is using Alston Chase's style to indict the NPS for too much *watching* God in Yellowstone! Could it be that the quid pro quo for "America's favorite bureaucracy," privileged with managing "America's best idea," is the infamous *dual* mission? This apparent dichotomy, "conservation (of park resources) unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations," serves as a touchstone for some critics of national park policy. But both conservation and visitor use are absolute requisites of the national park idea. Constantly under the loupe of the preservationists and the determinists, we're damned if we do, and damned if we don't. No one said it was going to be easy and NPS Alaska Area Field Director Bob Barbee has, more than once, admonished us to apply for the U.S. Postal Service if we can't handle an honest ration of institutional ambiguity. In fact, one of his very best quotes is "the road to hell is paved with unrocked boats." In that sense, I guess we owe these boatrockers some appropriate gratuity for this contribution to our salvation.

In *Wildlife Policies in the U.S. National Parks*, Utah State University's Fred Wagner, along with Ron Foresta, Bruce Gill, Dale McCullough, Michael Pelton, William Porter, and Hal Salwasser, attempt to make mincemeat of practically everything that is "holy" in NPS natural resource policy. [Note: Salwasser is Regional Forester for the U.S. Forest Service's Northern Region.] The writers

summarily discredit the historic and contemporary icons from Starker Leopold's "vignettes of primitive America," to the populist concepts of biodiversity and ecosystem integrity. In doing so, Wagner et al. provide a textbook vivisection of that ambiguity Bob Barbee was talking about a decade or so back. But more than anything else, the treatise implicitly confers why concise, simplistic natural resource management objectives do not work for the National Park Service.

Unfortunately left out is the fact that no national park system units have been established solely for the recreation of pre-Columbian ecosystem conditions or for the preservation of biodiversity—much less the utilitarian objectives of sustainable resource yield. Unlike the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service, the National Park Service has not been burdened by the Congress with all-encompassing, legis-

In *Policies*, the authors muddle around, sometimes rather aimlessly, in numerous

conceptual discussions, citing all the appropriate scientific authorities that support their murky contentions—and most often posing little resolution. [I must admit, I read on with enthusiasm until hand cramps dampened my marginal note-making.] A KEY POINT: Though other parks are mentioned, the obvious focus of the authors' philosophical discord

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is Yellowstone. If only they understood that Yellowstone, not unlike other national parks, is managed for the suite of purposes explicitly deter-

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lated, deterministic natural resource prescriptions. In fact, it has established units with a broad array of both ecumenical and unique "purposes," thereby clearly obviating the utility of a detailed, prescriptive NPS-wide natural resource liturgy. This fact is, obviously, not well understood by the authors.

mined by Congress, with NPS-wide policy guidance adopted as appropriate. National Park Service policies *reflect* park-specific policies; they do not proscribe them.

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Research for the book was begun as a potential project for The Wildlife Society. But, in the end, The Wildlife Society refused to publish it and the authors sought out Island Press and several non-profit foundations for publication support. One of the greatest values of the book is that it provides us a glimpse into the thought processes of some very accomplished people, some of whom have long histories of research in, and for, national parks, but all of whom seem to have problems with managing for “naturally evolving ecosystems.” Most of the discussions are interesting, if dated, but do a better job of documenting the limitations and ambiguities of contemporary wildlife science than inculcating NPS management decisions. The reader will also find a substantial number of internal conflicts such as the admonition for developing more “park-specific, ecologically defined policies” and yet calling, also, for the minimum level of human interventions.

But in the end, even the “Future Directions” chapter disappoints. The authors call for using public input to set goals at the park level, integrate park and national park system goals, employ the least management possible, base management on quality research, consider management experimental, and monitor, monitor, monitor! If you’ve heard these things before (like, for the last 30 years), and don’t need another dose of the obvious, you might check out Sam McNaughton’s review of the book in the *Journal of Wildlife Management* [60(3):1996; 685-687] or just wait for the *Cliff Notes* version.



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