

# letters to the editor

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## To the Editor:

The National Park System Advisory Board's September 1986 "Report on 'Overcrowding' in the National Parks" does not pretend to be a scientific document, but its treatment of science is most unsettling. The report correctly points out that many problems can be mitigated by redesign and/or alteration of visitation patterns and that raw numbers of visitors do not necessarily constitute overcrowding from a sociological or ecological perspective. Furthermore, the report notes that increased staff and knowledge can be utilized to reduce visitor impacts.

However, the report is seriously flawed. It is instilled with logical defects and substantive omissions that cast doubt upon its objectivity. It states that overcrowding is imprecisely definable and is "based on individual perspective and varies with location." It goes further to state that "little if any data exist to indicate the effects of public use on natural and other resources." How is it that the Board can act (or base conclusions) upon assessments of an assertedly undefinable concept; one that in its own judgment, has been only superficially studied? The Board does so by reducing the park environment to the physical tourist facilities provided to accommodate visitors; and by claiming ignorance of the body of literature that relates human influence to park ecosystems.

This is totally unacceptable and is a direct affront upon the principal mission of the National Park Service. The statement that "except in extreme, dramatic cases, the use of 'carrying capacity' as a scientific justification for imposing restrictions on visitor use will

probably not be widely accepted by park users in the near future" is blasphemous (neither is it likely that the Bill of Rights could pass a plebiscite). The National Park Service has a clear mandate "to conserve the scenery and objects" it stewards. Use must be congruent with that objective. We cannot ignore demonstrated use/impact relationships, nor where suspected, fail to conduct inquiries to determine their extent.

It is more accurate to state that park managers, when confronted with scientific data on the relationship between visitor use and impact are hesitant, unwilling or unable to make the hard decisions necessary to protect park resources because of external political considerations than to say that the data upon which to base such decisions do not exist.

Science can only rarely tell a manager how much is too much. However it can often paint a good picture of the influences of his actions (or inactions) on the resource.

The Advisory Board must broaden its perspective for its findings to become valuable contributions to the many questions at hand.

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*Editor's Note: The NPS Advisory Board Report referred to here appears in its entirety in the current issue of the George Wright Society FORUM (Vol. V No. 2).*