

To the Editor:

I am writing about program priorities: the urgent, the critical, the routine.

Considerable emphasis has been placed on the establishment of park, Regional, and Servicewide priorities to cover diverse projects, ranging from construction, Park Rehabilitation and Improvement Program (PRIP), park planning, research, resource management, and any other task that can be ranked numerically. Priorities can be an extremely useful tool in making "either/or" decisions in times of limited funds, such as funding one project and deferring another, or emphasizing one program over another. Health, life and safety issues of PRIP make up a good example of the latter. However, priorities are not a substitute for, nor should they override, common sense. This is especially true in resource management.

Several schemes have been developed to rank projects in terms of a variety of legislative, ecological, or other pertinent factors with a goal of identifying those projects which are most critical and urgent. These, of course, are the projects given the highest priority ratings. As a general rule, high priority projects also are the most costly. The implication that the Service should address only the highest priority resource projects is myopic and can only lead to the degradation of cultural and natural resources. Nipping problems in the bud stage, (i.e., low priority), is sounder and more efficient than waiting for them to bloom into unmanageable crises. An old Service motto for cultural resources reflected this philosophy: "It's better to maintain than repair; it's better to repair than restore; it's better to restore than reconstruct."

I haven't seen or heard that saying for a number of years, but despite the fact that it appears in conflict with our current priority ranking of cultural resource

problems, in my opinion it still is valid. We should not have to wait until a structure is in a state of disrepair to take a positive corrective action.

Nor should we wait until natural resource management problems become critical. The timely removal of several leafy spurge plants – let's say priority problem 36 in a park's resource management plan – when the spurge has covered and perhaps irreversibly damaged several square miles of park land. The ecological soundness and cost effectiveness of the former approach is self-evident.

Priorities may have different meanings at different levels of the organization. At the WASO level, apparently, they are extremely important. At the field level, however, priorities for resource management activities may range from relatively small importance to none. The field manager is faced with from one to several dozen resource management tasks that *must be accomplished* to fulfill his/her responsibilities. Which is No. 1 or which is No. 36 is immaterial. Completing the *total band* of activities is the goal. Recent correspondence from WASO believes only the highest priority projects are to be addressed; if this is so, it is clear we do not fully understand the art and science of park management. Resource management is much more than properly filled out forms and formats; it's actually using a shovel or other appropriate tool to accomplish the project objective. The relative priorities assigned to projects are never as important as maintaining the integrity of park environments and resources.

Of course, attacking a resource problem without adequate knowledge of the problem and proposed treatment can be as disastrous as doing nothing. As has been illustrated time and time again, exotic plants cannot be effectively controlled by the use of herbicides, which merely perpetuate disturbed site conditions under which exotics can flourish. If unsure, ask: Can the project be deferred without damage to the resource or future increased costs to the park? Is there a cost-effective, workable solution to the problem? The answer to the latter often is unknown, especially in the lower priority projects; i.e., the magnitude of and solutions to lower priority problems generally are undetermined.

Perhaps a distinction should be drawn between those few Servicewide Significant Resource Problems (SRP's) and the routine, but nonetheless essential, intrapark resource management actions. The former can be prioritized, but it is relatively meaningless to prioritize tasks which must be accomplished regardless of their relative rank. Also, annual adjustments in project priorities often are necessary. For instance, bison reductions in Wind Cave NP and other northern Great Plains parks normally occur on alternate years. In those years when reduction of the population is necessary, of course, the priority and cost of bison management are higher than in years of population growth.

If we must have priorities in resources management, the system should be designed to aid, rather than hinder, the Superintendent in the acquisition of knowledge and in carrying out the total array of his management responsibilities.

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