

Some Conservation Problems of Our National Parks

An Abstract:

DAVID C. WINSLOW, Associate Professor, Oklahoma State University, and T. HOMER BLACK, Park Naturalist, Carlsbad Caverns National Park

The National Park Service of the United States Department of the Interior, whose system embraces only 31,000 square miles, provides the American people a pleasuring ground of superb natural features and of paramount historical value. Within the system is situated jewels of our natural and cultural heritage. Yet, today the park areas face a number of serious conservation problems that threaten their integrity and future values.

Individuals and groups attack the park areas so as to create these problems, as follows:

1. Commercial utilization—it is argued that the forests, forage, waters and minerals should be utilized;
2. So-called "improvements"—it is suggested that artificial additions or subtractions from natural conditions may enhance park values and provide for enjoyment comfort, and convenience of patrons;
3. Ownership utilization—it is held that since some 600,000 acres within park areas are owned privately, or by States, that the land operators should be able to carry on activities as they please;
4. Thoughtlessness and vandalism—it is commonly remarked by those who find themselves caught or embarrassed while doing something illegal or careless in nature that they were ignorant it was harmful or destructive or that they do not care.
5. Addition of substandard areas—it is recommended that these be included because groups wish something preserved or hope to attract tourists to their area, regardless of quality.

Demands for impoundment of waters for irrigation, power and flood control pose the most serious threat to our park system. Proposed projects for the Colorado River would endanger the scenic beauty of the Grand Canyon and change the mighty, rushing river into a placid, clear stream. Proposed Echo Park Dam would destroy much of the scenic value of Dinosaur National Monument. Construction of the flood control dam at Mining City would cause water to back up into Mammoth Cave, Kentucky. Kings Canyon National Park is endangered under the Central Valley Project in California. The Glacier View Dam, if built, would flood 20,000 acres of Glacier National Park. The treaty in 1945 with Mexico permits the International Boundary and Water Commission to establish a dam in Big Bend National Park or on a site that would back water into it. These examples show that the danger does exist and there is constant pressure for establishment of such reservoirs.

These problems are complicated by the rapidly mounting numbers of visitors who come and require so much attention of the protective, interpretative and maintenance personnel. The ratio of visitors to population was 1 to 300 in 1918, 1 to 100 in 1920, and 1 to 3 in 1954. Last year there were 47,833,913 visitors while in 1947 they totaled 25,534,188. Visitations should grow to 88 million annually by the year 2,000, assuming that the ratio of attendance holds constant and the population grows to 300 million. In actuality, present facilities are adequate only to carry the use load of 15 years ago, or 52 percent of today's use. Even the anticipated growth of population to 200 million by 1976, would find present facilities about 38 percent adequate. Therefore, in the next 45 years the phenomenal growth in visitor-use pressure will aggravate any undesirable problems now present, or about to be created, causing many additional problems of protection and interpretation.

To resolve present problems and to forestall the addition of too many new ones in the future, it appears desirable that a number of steps be taken.

They are:

1. An act should be passed by Congress that prevents for all time any further attacks and encroachment on the integrity of the National Park Service areas, unless upon recommendation of the Service itself, concurred in by the Secretary of the Interior;
2. Adequate park personnel should be obtained as appears necessary for maintenance, protection and interpretation;
3. Adequate monies should be made available for acquisition of those additional lands and areas necessary to round out the park offering and to remove some of the pressure from existing areas;
4. Provisions should be forthcoming to provide adequate facilities and accommodations to meet the proper demands of visitors;
5. Research should be further encouraged in the betterment of the park interpretative and protective programs;
6. Concessioners, transporational companies, and others should be encouraged to continue their development of facilities;
7. Educational means should be utilized in every fashion to give the public an understanding of park values.

With the pressure of our people upon the limited park lands of the country steadily increasing because of mounting population numbers, self-interest of pressure groups and individuals, and the shortness of vision of some, it becomes increasingly important to cherish the selected areas which represent our national heritage. As Cornelius Hedges proclaimed, along with his idea for our first National Park, these lands must be preserved intact and unsullied "as a pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people."