

KEY ISSUE PAPER: PARKS IN THE PACIFIC

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More than a century ago, in 1870, a party of explorers travelled to the American West. They had been sent to determine the truth about fantastic tales of steaming rivers and bubbling pools. These explorers agreed among themselves, once they saw the wonders of Yellowstone, that "the sight ought to be as free as the air and water."

At that time, the natural wonders of Yellowstone were part of an enormous public domain. Most of this domain was being carved into parcels for development and resource exploitation by private parties. Yet in 1872, only two years after the party of explorers verified the reports of its wonders, Yellowstone was set aside as a "public park and pleasuring ground." It was the first National Park created in the United States.

To this day, many Americans still think first of Yellowstone when they hear the words "national park." Their vision is of a huge preserve, filled with natural wonders, much of it little changed since its discovery. Citizens of other countries also visit this splendid setting. For them, too, United States national parks often mean Yellowstone. This is true despite the fact that Yellowstone is but one of more than 300 units in the U.S. National Park System, a system that now includes some 80 million acres or more than 300,000 square kilometres.

This perception - that Yellowstone, our first park, is still the one people think of most readily - presents a special problem for me today. Undoubtedly, each of you already has made a mental note that there are no Yellowstones to be carved from public domain in your country. You may have concluded from this that the U.S. experience in creating national parks has little to do with creating national parks or reserves in your own countries.

As I was preparing for this trip, talking to people familiar with parks abroad, I heard again and again a scepticism that the U.S. experience had anything to offer to park planners and managers in Oceania. I disagree. True, there are risks in transferring ideas and experiences from one culture to another. Of course, different legal and social institutions, different traditions and perceptions, make it inadvisable merely to replicate one country's approaches in another. My organisation, The Conservation Foundation, in its nearly 40 years of activity, has worked in Latin America, Africa and elsewhere sufficiently to develop a healthy respect for cultural differences.

In fact, local differences must be respected even in our own country. What works in the State of California may not, across the continent, in New York. So I address the conference with these caveats in mind but also convinced that an understanding of the U.S. experience in establishing and managing national parks can inform your efforts.

The invitation to speak here comes at an opportune time. The Conservation Foundation has just completed a three-year study of the U.S. National Park system, its third study of the U.S. Parks in two decades. In a nutshell, the report reviewed and acknowledged many problems in resource management.

It articulated threats to the national parks from mining, urban development, energy development, and other activities outside their boundaries and thus beyond the jurisdiction of the park managers. We thought through an agenda for improving the management capabilities of the National Park Service. The Foundation recommended modest new expenditures to restore natural and cultural resources in parks where over-whelming numbers of visitors have degraded the very resources that bring people to the parks. It urged the creation of several new parks. These need not be parks in the traditional mode where the federal government owns all the land. Rather, they could reflect the new breed of parks evident in our country, parks intermixing public and private lands where the presence of the National Park Service will elevate awareness of the value of natural and cultural resources and improve land management. The Foundation's new report also urged that park managers look to state and local governments and private conservation groups for assistance in protecting park resources.

My hope today is to draw a few nuggets from the Foundation's research and the U.S. Parks experience that can help you in your respective countries do a more effective job protecting natural resources. From the report, I distill four fundamental messages:

- * First, special places - scenic and natural wonders, cultural and historic sites, and others - are worthy of special effort and attention. Amid efforts to address the spectrum of pressing national problems, policy-makers should not overlook the national assets that special places represent.
- * Second, creating a constituency is the key to protecting special places.
- * Third, in fixing your goals for special places, seek as much protection as you can achieve - but don't expect to get everything at once. Persistence is also critical for protection.
- * Fourth, in assessing opportunities, in developing plans, in carrying out protection efforts, keep your goals firmly in mind, but stay flexible in the means. Circumstances and opportunities change, therefore conservation efforts, to remain effective, must change as well.

SPECIAL PLACES

As I already noted, most Americans and many foreign visitors think of U.S. national parks in terms of Yellowstone or the Grand Canyon - to mention two of our "crown jewels." In fact, many national parks in the United States don't resemble Yellowstone at all. Many of the units are quite small. Many were not carved from the public domain. The majority protect not natural resources but cultural and historic sites - Independence Hall in Philadelphia, for example, as well as birthplaces of presidents, military battlefields and the like. Many park units, particularly those created during the past couple of decades, include private land and sometimes whole communities, inside park boundaries. These are more like parks in Europe than the traditional U.S. model.

Yet a fundamental message of Yellowstone remains true for all our parks and also for parks throughout the world: they are special places - places worthy of respect, worthy of a level of stewardship that cannot be, or at least will not be, provided for every part of a country. Given the tendency of government policy-makers to focus on problems, it's important to note that parks are not places of special problems - like toxic waste

dumps. Rather, they are assets. They have met the standard expressed best perhaps by Australia's Commission on the National Estate when it sought to identify "the things you save." As those explorers in Yellowstone recognised more than a century ago, national parks are places you save.

The value of saving these places will increase as population and development pressures in the next few decades begin to press on ever more remote places around the globe. Some species of flora and fauna native to the South Pacific face growing threats as their habitats are destroyed. The strong impetus for economic progress will continue, intensifying pressures on particular habitats and on particular species.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONSTITUENCY

Identifying special places is only the first step. To protect them effectively, over time, it is vital to develop a constituency: people who care about these places and are willing to advocate and fight on their behalf. Both public and private demands for consumption or use of these resources often can be quite strong. So, too, the forces favouring protection must be strong.

Constituencies can be created in many ways. No one can prescribe a "right" way to create and maintain one. The U.S. experience, however, does provide an instructive example. Stephen Mather, the first director of the U.S. National Park Service, was a political wizard. He realised he needed a constituency to defend the parks against the interests representing development, that is, grazing, mining and dam construction. He created a constituency by encouraging people from all over the United States to visit the great wonders of the National Parks. He sought out the attention of political leaders and journalists.

Some of the methods he employed - encouraging the construction of large hotels near spectacular natural features, for example - seem unfortunate today. Many now wish that some of those hotels were elsewhere, outside the parks or at least more sensitively located. Other ideas seemed mistaken even to conservationists of Mather's own day. One of his close colleagues broke with him over park policy because Mather was encouraging visitor entertainment that the associate found "vulgar". The point to keep in mind today is that Mather recognised the need for political support to protect his parks from pressures to develop or exploit resources within. At that time, encroachment was the greater threat.

EVOLVING GOALS

Although there is singular danger in suggesting that someone else's goals should be, let me take the plunge: your goal in park protection probably should be to protect as much as you can, as effectively as you can, as soon as you can. In the short run, this means doing everything you can do with today's constituency and in today's political climate. In the longer run, it means shifting the constituency and the political climate to build consensus that will permit more effective protection.

In our recent report on U.S. Parks, we said that we "tilt toward protection." We did not disregard the other purposes of the national parks. Indeed, we stressed the importance - in the U.S. context - of providing for visitor enjoyment of the parks.

Yet we favoured protection because we saw no real danger of an excessively protectionist policy. Quite the opposite is true: growing impacts of visitors, increased development, commercialisation, incompatible and polluting activities around park boundaries - these are the problems confronting today's parks in the United States. We concluded in our report that the need for strong policies favouring protection has never been clearer.

In the United States, better park protection has not come primarily through passing a series of stronger and stronger laws in our Congress. Rather, the 1916 law creating the National Park system has established an unchanging goal, which successive generations of Americans have re-interpreted and applied. The 1916 law directs that park resources be preserved "unimpaired" but it also directs the service to foster public enjoyment. In short, it establishes an ideal of preservation and use. Better park protection has indeed come over time. But it has come as increasingly sophisticated and sensitive constituencies have sought to reconcile the perpetual tension between preservation and use embodied in the 1916 law.

During the 1960's, for example, the budding ecology movement began to develop a consensus that helped alleviate the disruption of wildlife and other park resources, which had resulted from well-intentioned but inadequately informed actions by park managers. Until then, Park Service staff had often tried to preserve "good" species of wildlife and eliminate "bad" ones. Mountain lions and wolves, for example, were eliminated whenever possible. Native forest insects were sprayed if they seemed to be damaging forests. Recent decades, by contrast, have brought a new recognition that preservation of park resources requires greater respect for natural processes. Though often controversial in application, this standard represents a fundamental step in the evolution of the park ideal.

The dilemma over preservation-versus-use remains today. Indeed, it seems more difficult and more pressing than ever before. Higher standards for protecting parklands are advanced by stronger and more diverse constituencies. At the same time, demands by would-be users have multiplied. Visitors are both more willing and better equipped to travel to remote parts of the parks. Although more sophisticated management techniques have improved the Park Service's ability to cope with growing use, inevitably we will fall short of the ideal that would leave resources wholly unimpaired. The long-standing struggle to apply the charge to preserve and enjoy continues to refine the park ideal.

The twin goals of preservation and visitor use have served the U.S. park system very well and perhaps some of you, too, may find this formulation a useful framework within which to work out competing public needs and demands.

Or perhaps not. For some of your special places, or perhaps even for all of them, you may find opportunities only to establish reserves with other goals in mind. Ample room exists under the umbrella of parks and nature reserves to meet many different needs. You may find, in particular, that management of natural areas strictly as natural areas, without any economic activity save perhaps tourism, is unachievable or inappropriate. The trick in such cases is to fashion a mandate responsive to your country's traditions and current needs that will enable you to protect as well as possible.

It is important to consider the long term in fashioning the legislative mandate. In the short run, it may indeed make sense to call units "national parks" even though they lack permanent protection. If this is the case, it is important to leave room for the achievement over time of additional protection. Someone - perhaps government, perhaps a community of concerned conservationists, perhaps other citizen groups - should be working to strengthen management so that it more closely approaches the goal of effective protection. If your legislative charter does not lock in today's compromises too explicitly, it may allow the degree of protection to evolve.

One way to establish the highest standards for national parks may be to establish other types of reserves for quite different purposes. Again to cite a U.S. example, some of our federal lands have very different management policies though no less carefully worked out.

Our national forests, for example, are managed by a different agency from the national parks and have a different history and legislative charge. For large portions of the national forests, our laws establish a goal of "multiple use" to benefit recreation, logging, wildlife, watershed management, and so on. Plans are prepared regularly that subsume all these activities. Planning starts with no bias. Specific plans in particular forests may emphasise one use over another, for they are tailored to the resources and needs of the forests and surrounding communities.

Incidentally, in contrast to the experience in our parks, legislative changes have played a major part in enhancing the protection afforded portions of our national forests. I refer specifically to wilderness legislation, which preserves substantial portions of the national forests in pristine condition. Within wilderness areas, the "multiple use" standard applicable in most of the forests does not apply.

Our wildlife refuges constitute another, distinct, federal land system in the U.S. Here the needs of wildlife are paramount. Particular species are protected. Sometimes for the express benefit of these species, nature is manipulated in ways that would be considered out of place in the national parks.

THE SEARCH FOR OPPORTUNITIES: KEEPING THE GOAL FIRMLY IN MIND WHILE STAYING FLEXIBLE IN APPROACH

The final message that I want to draw for you from the Foundation's research is to be not only persistent, but flexible. A great deal of what you really can do, in fact, comes down to recognising or searching out opportunities to provide special management for special places. The U.S. experience points to a few of the many opportunities that may arise from time to time. I'd like to tick off several of them.

* In seeking special places to protect, pay attention to the political priorities of the day. In our own experience, there are far more places deserving protection than we can possibly include in the National Park system. The trick at any given time is to identify forces that may make protection possible.

support from all segments of the community. A nature reserve was created. An environmental education programme was started which sought to change the attitudes of decision-makers, school children, university students, and the public about the value of protecting the island's wildlife. Beyond protecting an important natural area, the effort will also create jobs and train local people to manage nature reserves. Today, there is a strong sense among the people that the reserve is benefiting the entire island nation.

In the long run, it is most important to remain open to opportunities for innovation and not to be bound by what works elsewhere. In Oceania, it is not surprising to find a number of reserves that protect water areas. Given the extreme scarcity of land and the importance of ocean resources, this is a sensible adaptation of tradition. Only within the past decade has the United States made significant progress in establishing marine and estuarine sanctuaries to protect the spawning grounds of fish and shellfish, to preserve special underwater archaeological sites, and to meet other important objectives.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, let me reiterate the four messages I would draw from the U.S. parks experience that are relevant to other countries:

- * Recognise and protect special places. Do so, to be effective, before population and development pressures engulf the natural resources you want to protect or the difficulties will magnify and the chance of success diminish.
- * Develop a constituency for protection, and most importantly a local constituency, for this will help assure not only political support for conservation when it is needed but a ready group of people to engage in protection efforts, including the necessary, ongoing management and monitoring of special places.
- * Seek as much protection as the current consensus will permit and simultaneously seek opportunities to move or enlarge the constituency so that more effective protection will become possible in the future.
- * And finally, recognise that while the goal of protection must be firmly rooted, as times and conditions change, so will opportunities and methods. Be prepared. Anticipate. And you will begin to see opportunities to advance conservation goals.