DIALOGUE

FORUM encourages a dialogue among its readers. Please address your letters to the Editor, FORUM FOR APPLIED RESEARCH AND PUBLIC POLICY, the University of Tennessee, 311 Conference Center Building, Knoxville, Tennessee 37996-4134, or send email to forum@eerc.gw.utk.edu. We reserve the right to edit letters.

Conflicting Blueprints for Protecting National Parks

While I applaud Jane S. Shaw and Richard L. Stroup for providing a market perspective on park management ("Protecting Nation's Parks Through Corporatizing," FORUM, Spring 1997), I believe that fundamental problems with our national park system extend well beyond those addressed by the authors.

According to the 1916 National Park Service Organic Act, passed by the Wilson administration, our national parks are to be preserved unimpaired for future generations. However, the act did not spell out exactly what unimpaired preservation means. If the parks are for the people, who comes first, people or nature? And further, should the parks be preserved in a state that reflects the footprint of human development, or should they be restored to the pristine condition that existed before the arrival of Europeans?

Canada has done a better job of establishing priorities in park management than the United States. In 1988, that country passed an amendment to its National Parks Act, which states that ecological integrity of natural resources shall be given first priority in all management decisions—not will, but shall. Parks Canada, the governmental agency that corresponds to our National Park Service, is now working to develop measurable, objective, scientific standards for defining ecological integrity for each of its national parks.

We, on the other hand, have no such directive or quantifiable standards. Therefore, I suggest that the first thing we need is a new national park act, patterned on the Canadian model, that would mandate and define the term *ecological integrity*.

Shaw and Stroup also propose that private trusts manage each of our national parks to "pursue narrowly defined goals for natural-resource protection." Whose view of nature, though, will those boards follow? The main problem in Yellowstone, for instance, is that "natural regulation" management, which holds that an ecological system will regulate itself without outside human interference, is not only a failed ecological hypothesis but a flawed environmental philosophy as well.

What's worse—as I recently testified before the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands—the National Park Service has routinely fabricated data to support natural regulation, as have various environmental groups. If we cannot agree on the science, how are we ever going to reach consensus on park policy?

With such conflicting views on park management, the first priority is to establish an independent park science program. This, though, is not exactly an original idea. At least 15 different committees—dating back nearly 50 years—have reached the same conclusion, but the National Park Service has never followed any of those suggestions. That is why I recommended to Congress that it specifically legislate such a program. I also asked Congress to conduct a long-overdue independent review of "natural regulation management" in Yellowstone.

If the National Park Service protests that there is not enough money to conduct such a review, I might point out that several professional associations have already offered their services. During the early 1990s, for instance, the Society for Range Management, the Ecological Society of America, the American Fisheries Society, and the Wildlife Society asked the National Park Service for approval to conduct an independent review of the overall ecological health of Yellowstone, but they failed to obtain permission.

Later, a group of preeminent ecologists notified Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt that they would be willing to serve, without pay, on a Yellowstone review panel, but the secretary declined, as he did again only recently, in February of 1997. Could the National Park Service and its supporters have something to hide?

In addition, I suggested to Congress that it directly fund independent scientists who are willing to conduct research on critical issues of park management. Independent researchers also would do a better job of defining and quantifying ecological integrity than the private trusts proposed by Shaw and Stroup because they would be acting in the best interest of the park, not in their personal self-interests.

And finally, consider the case of the Nature Conservancy's Pine Butte Preserve, the grizzly bear preserve cited by Shaw and Stroup in their article. I can take credit for saving that area from becoming another Yellowstone.

During the early 1980s, the preserve manager proposed that hunting be banned so that ungulate populations—including deer, elk, and bison—would build up and starve to death. The stated idea was that all those dead animals would then be available for grizzlies to eat.

We have seen the unsavory results of such management practices in Yellowstone, where not only do animals starve, but they also stray over park boundaries where they are shot by ranchers.

At that time, I was a personal friend of Bob Keisling, the Nature Conservancy's state director. I explained to him how—if they adopted that policy—the ungulates would destroy all the grizzly bear plant foods before the deer starved to death. Since grizzlies are primarily vegetarians, this would have had a severe negative impact on the very bears the preserve was designed to protect. He agreed, and deer hunting continues to this day.

Not so in Yellowstone. Under "natural regulation," the park's burgeoning elk and bison herds have severely overgrazed the range and destroyed the plants grizzlies need for food. Unlike bears everywhere else in North America, Yellowstone's grizzlies eat virtually no berries because overbrowsing has destroyed nearly all the berry-producing shrubs. This forces the grizzlies to seek food outside the park, where the bears all too often are killed by humans. Yellowstone's grizzlies, however, are really dying as a result of the park's misguided policy of natural regulation management.

The key question is, whose view of nature and whose science will we follow in managing our national parks? Until we objectively answer these questions, I doubt that Shaw and Stroup's proposal will be any more successful in protecting our parks than the present system.

Native Americans were the ultimate predators, creating the very ecosystems many now view as natural. That is to say, native hunting and other aboriginal land management activities promoted biodiversity. What we need above all is sound management policy based on solid science, not a romantic view of nature.

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FORUM
FOR APPLIED RESEARCH AND PUBLIC POLICY

A Quarterly Journal for the Discussion of Policy Issues in Energy, Science and Technology, the Environment, and Economic Development

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