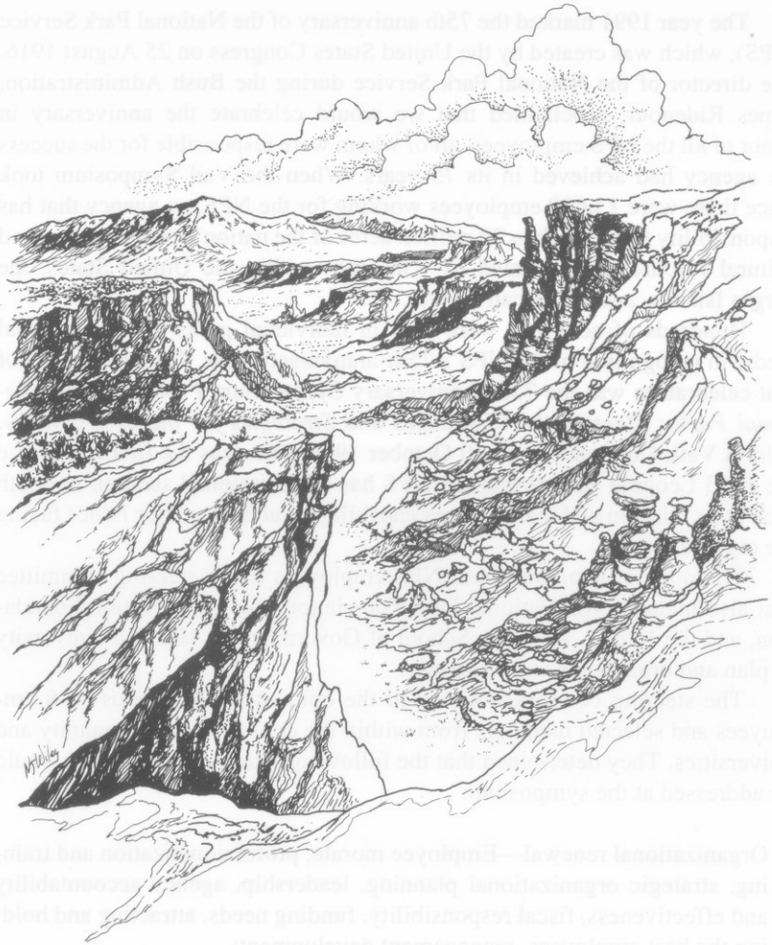
Special Report: National Park Service 75th-anniversary Symposium 7–10 October 1991 Vail, Colorado



Protecting Our National Parks: Challenges and Strategies for the 21st Century

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The year 1991 marked the 75th anniversary of the National Park Service (NPS), which was created by the United States Congress on 25 August 1916. The director of the National Park Service during the Bush Administration, James Ridenour, proclaimed that we would celebrate the anniversary in honor of all the NPS employees, all of whom were responsible for the success the agency had achieved in its 75 years. When the Vail Symposium took place there were 13,600 employees working for the NPS, an agency that has responsibility for more than 79 million acres of the nation's prime natural and cultural resources, designated by 358 areas within the United States, the Virgin Islands, and American Samoa.

Hundreds of activities were held in individual parks and by national media in recognition of the NPS's 75th-anniversary year. The centerpiece of that celebration was the 75th Anniversary Symposium, *Protecting Our National Parks: Meeting the Challenges and Strategies for the 21st Century*, held in Vail, Colorado, on 7–10 October 1991. This was the first time since the 1963 Leopold Report that the NPS has commissioned such an in-depth look at its mission and management capability to address major issues facing the organization.

The director appointed four NPS employees to the steering committee that also included the National Park Foundation, the Conservation Foundation, and the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University to plan and organize the symposium.

The steering committee surveyed the opinions of numerous NPS employees and selected members from within the conservation community and universities. They determined that the following four major subtopics would be addressed at the symposium:

- Organizational renewal—Employee morale, professionalization and training, strategic organizational planning, leadership, agency accountability and effectiveness, fiscal responsibility, funding needs, attracting and holding the best employees, management development;
- Resource stewardship—Research, cultural diversity, long- and short-range goals and objectives, legislative agendas, external programs, data management, scientific capability, historic and cultural resources protection, habitat management, monitoring, restoration ecology;
- Park use and enjoyment—Visitor needs, expectations and impacts, planning and design, concession and other commercial operations, finding a balance between human needs and desires and the resource; and
- Environmental leadership—Expanding the NPS roles beyond park boundaries, environmental education, policy development, resource protection, ecosystem management, liaison with communities, industries and landowners, environmental ethics.

Early in the symposium planning, the steering committee determined that this was not to be a meeting in which everyone would revisit all the problems that were known to exist for many years. The committee also determined that the symposium would be interactive, a congress in which the attendees help shape the findings and conclusions. To achieve the appropriate interaction and results, the steering committee established a work group for each of the subtopics to be addressed at the symposium. Each work group was composed of six prominent leaders from private corporations and universities and three NPS employees. The work groups were provided copies of the *National Parks and Conservation Association Report on Parks*, the *Volker Commission Findings*, the *Civil Service 2000 Report*, and the *21st Century Report*.

Prominent and proven leaders directed each work group. Former governor of Washington and U.S. Senator Dan J. Evans chaired the Environmental Leadership Work Group; President and Chief Executive Officer of the Nature Conservancy Dr. John C. Sawhill chaired the Resource Stewardship Work Group; Philip A. Odeen, a managing partner of Cooper's and Lybrand's Federal Government Consulting Services, chaired the Organizational Renewal Work Group; and Charles R. Jordan, Commissioner on the President's Commission on American Outdoors and the Director of Parks and Recreation for the City of Portland, Oregon, chaired the Visitor Use and Enjoyment Work Group.

Before the symposium, each work group met in two park areas to interact with NPS employees. They also interviewed the agency Directorate and Office of Personnel Management leaders. The work groups presented their findings to the 660 attendees at the symposium in Vail, Colorado, on 7–10 October 1991. The symposium participants reviewed, revised, or otherwise changed the work group findings to enhance and modify the proposals for a final report that was delivered to Director Ridenour in December 1991.

Three hundred NPS employees attended the symposium. The number attending from each NPS region was assigned in proportion to the number of employees in that region. Additional participants included state and other federal agency personnel, foreign agency and government employees, conservation organization members, university staff, and interested members from the private sector.

The symposium has been widely acclaimed by NPS personnel and members of the conservation community as a major step forward by the

agency in preparing for its future. On 20 November 1991, Congressional interest and support were also shown in a meeting before the Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands. In testimony before that committee, Director Ridenour said that he would move quickly and decisively to implement those symposium recommendations that did not require review and approval action beyond his level. Personnel were appointed to identify which recommendations the director could implement.

The complete list of symposium recommendations was reported in a 37-page preliminary draft and sent to all NPS employees. The comprehensive document included many suggestions that would require professionalization of the NPS ranger personnel; expanded training opportunities; increased research in the natural and cultural sciences; further involvement in public partnerships; expansion of the NPS role in off-site environmental education; and a methodical approach to identifying, selecting, and training of agency management personnel.

The director appointed a strategic planning implementation staff closely associated with his office to work with the decision-making process related to the recommendations of the symposium. The symposium steering committee has spoken with the transition team established by the new administration led by the President of the United States, William Clinton. It seems that the new administration will look favorably on the recommendations, objectives, and goals set by the symposium and that the impetus created at Vail, Colorado, will not be lost.

Note: Use of trade names does not imply recommendation for use by the U.S. Government.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural and cultural resources. This includes fostering wise use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to ensure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The department also promotes the goals of the Take Pride in America campaign by encouraging stewardship and citizen responsibility for the public lands and promoting citizen participation in their care. The department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in island territories under U.S. administration.

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