

A Monocracy or Part of a Democracy

Our national parks are special. They epitomize the democratic principles of our country; they represent the best hopes and dreams for an egalitarian society; and in so many ways, they really are “American’s Best Idea!”

Ideologically, philosophically, and in reality---our national parks belong to all Americans, and so they should be managed as agencies of a democracy. Superintendents should see themselves as stewards of resources that are not theirs, as caretakers of resources that belong to every citizen, and as servants of the public. When developing budgets and spending money, they should remember they are spending public funds to protect and preserve public resources.

Unfortunately, some superintendents function like monocrats and manage like autocrats; they feel they should be able to operate without oversight, supervision, and regular audits; and they deny and avoid the basic concept that

“a democracy requires accountability, and accountability requires transparency.”

(President Barak Obama in a memorandum sent to all employees of the government on January 21, 2009)

Some superintendents operate with very little or virtually no public oversight in the budgeting process; they make management decisions with very few public hearings and/or meetings; they offer no financial or accounting information on their web sites; and they make no attempt to make available the basic records and documents concerning how the park is spending its authorized funds, or the process by which it has made significant or even minor decisions. Decisions are made that may seem arbitrary, capricious, and unreasonable, but citizens and park employees have to no way to challenge them or appeal them. Occasionally, people are asked to write comments on an issue but then they are told to send them to the same superintendent whose decisions they are trying to question or appeal. Or, as a consultant to many national parks told me years ago, “Many superintendents just like to think they are God.”

One of the easiest ways to gauge how a superintendent is acting or how a park is being managed is to check how it responds to requests for information. How willing is it to open its books and make available minutes of meetings, budgets and expenditures, and to make available any and all records and documents that should be made available according to the Freedom of Information Act? Just as important, do they make the records and documents and financial information readily available without a formal FOIA request, or do they force requestors to go through a long, frustrating, and overly legal FOIA process to obtain the most basic information?

Unfortunately, when tested this way, many parks fail. Many superintendents and park administrators not only try to avoid any notion of openness and transparency, they discourage it, they frustrate it, and they work against it. Often park employees say they just don’t give out “that kind of information”; they feel they shouldn’t give financial or managerial information to the public; and they act as if the Freedom of Information Act was never passed. In fact, in spite of the

President's memorandum of January 21, 2009, to all the employees of the Executive Branch, and in spite of memorandums from the Secretary of Interior and the Attorney General in which every employee of the National Park Service was directed to administer the Freedom of Information Act with a clear presumption that "in the face of doubt, openness prevails," and that in responding to requests, all agencies of the executive branch should act promptly and in a spirit of cooperation, many parks are not following the spirit and the letter of those memorandums and directives, and they are disinclined to operate in an atmosphere of openness and transparency .

Furthermore, every employee of the executive branch was directed to adhere "to the principles embodied in FOIA, and to usher in a new era of open Government." The President went on to write, "The presumption of disclosure also means that agencies should take affirmative steps to make information public." (President's memorandum of January 21, 2009) Unfortunately very little has changed; and the new era of open government has not yet begun in many parks. And it continues to be very difficult trying to find out the most basic information from many parks.

The problem within many of our national parks may be getting worse. Because of preferential hiring policies, many of the leaders of the National Park Service increasingly are coming from among former military veterans and military officers are accustomed to a chain of command style of leadership instead of a collaborative style of management; many were trained in an atmosphere where no one questions or challenges the decisions of officers or of those higher up the chain of command. Many operated for years where concepts like the Freedom of Information Act and Sunshine Laws, and regulations conforming to different versions of state Open Record Acts were both unknown and not practiced. Imagine what happens when people who come from this kind of military management style begin working with others---park employees, seasonal rangers, and visitors---who are coming from another world....a world where more and more government activities at local, state, and federal levels are supposed to be more open and more transparent, and often are.

An atmosphere of openness and transparency usually results in better decisions being made, in authorized funds being spent more carefully, and in improved performance and efficiency. It tends to force self-regulation and self-control. It tends to cut short the tendencies of some managers and superintendents to think they can operate as monarchs, dictators, and autocrats. And it usually ushers in a greater sense of collaboration and cooperation among all employees and the public.

So how can we insure that our parks are run in an atmosphere of openness and transparency?

Perhaps the Park Service could and should do several things:

- Just as each and every employee has to take on-line courses in computer use and in the Whistleblower Protection Act laws and regulations, all employees should have to take a course on the Freedom of Information Act. They should learn how to follow the FOIA laws and regulations, and they should have to study the directives and memorandums of the President, the Attorney General, and the Secretary of Interior as they relate to FOIA issues

and principles. In addition to online courses, each park should develop simple but effective ways in which the parks can not only follow the FOIA laws and regulations, but also be proactive.

Simply stated, with transparency and openness comes accountability. When every expenditure and virtually every decision is open to public scrutiny, when every citizen and every park employee can have access to how public funds are being spent and when they can observe closely and regularly how decisions are being made, there tends to be more self-regulation among managers. When managers at every level of the Park Service know the decisions they make and the money they spend will become public, they tend to make better decisions and they spend money more carefully.

- Regular evaluations should be conducted for every person at every level---including Chiefs of Interpretation, Chief Rangers, Superintendents and Regional Directors. These evaluations should always get back to basic questions like: are we doing everything we can to preserve and protect our resources including our human resources? Are we doing everything we can to enhance the experiences of our visitors? Are we spending each and every dollar carefully, efficiently, and with deliberation?

Evaluations are done, but not for every person at every level. For instance, seasonal rangers are given a written evaluation at the end of each season, but rarely are they asked to offer input in the evaluations of their supervisors, the Chief of Interpretation, or the Superintendent. How are these managers being evaluated correctly? Can they be evaluated effectively if there is no input from those they manage? Are they being evaluated on their willingness to be open and transparent in everything they do and in what they have done to be proactive in the availability of information?

- Much like the military, maybe Park Superintendents and Regional Directors should have term limits; maybe they should be allowed to stay in a park for only a limited number of years---maybe no more than 10 years, for instance. In the military, for instance, abuses in the chain of command style of management often are controlled by regular transfers and relocations. For decades, corporations also have used this approach. It prevents any one person from becoming too comfortable, too autocratic, or just too bored. It prevents complacency and a sense of immunity from oversight, and often improves performance. And it can overcome the natural boredom that may occur when a person is posted to a site that is remote and isolated.
- There should be what could be called “ombudsmen” within the National Park Service---especially at the regional and national level. These would be people designated to hear complaints, listen to abuses, or resolve conflicts or disagreements in a confidential manner. Valid complaints should have an outlet other than filing formal complaints with the Office of Inspector General. Whether signed or anonymous, everyone should know

who they can contact if they feel public funds are really being wasted, or fraud is being committed, or bad decisions are being made.

- Finally, superintendents are not God and they can't continue to make autocratic decisions or act as if their parks are monarchies. Instead, park managers need to listen to all their constituents. They need to understand their concerns and work towards a consensus driven approach to management. They need to be convinced and taught that the old militaristic, top-down management styles are not working in the corporate world, they are not working in the private sector, and they aren't working in our national parks.
- Finally, there needs to be some attention given to basic management controls. In the military and in the private sector, there are very effective checks and balances. In the military, for instance, commanders and leaders often are moved around, there is always a sense that one can be demoted or scrutinized. In the private sector, management styles that waste money make the wrong decisions, or abuse people are not rewarded, and often result in measurable consequences. Within the Park Service, what kind of checks and balances are working to evaluate and offer oversight to its park managers and superintendents? Who is auditing the park budgets? Who is asking what could be done to improve park attendance, how money could be spent more carefully, or what can be done to train and retain the best leaders for the future of the National Park Service? From my experience to date, I've seen some parks that are carefully managed and that are asking all the right questions; but there are others which are operating with little effective oversight, limited regional control, and too few financial audits.

My wife and I have visited almost half of the 400 units of the Park Service and almost all of the early national parks; we have devoted family vacations to them, we've had family reunions in them, and now that we have retired from the "real world," we work as seasonal rangers in them. I love the national parks, but I am concerned, and that's why I'm writing this. I'm concerned because increasingly I've seen parks with problems, I've seen good people getting discouraged and leaving the Park Service, and I've received too many emails from too many good people with very legitimate concerns.

Let's hope we can change, let's hope we can make our national parks better places, and let's hope we can make our national parks among the best places in the world to visit and to work!

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