



**THE COALITION OF
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
RETIREES**

Voices of Experience – Advocating Protection of America’s National Parks

TESTIMONY

**Before the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
Committee on Natural Resources
United States House of Representatives**

Restoring the Federal Public Lands Workforce

By

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Mr. Chairman and other distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for holding this hearing and thank you for inviting me to express my views, and the views of our Coalition of National Park Service Retirees (CNPSR) on the important topic of workforce issues in the National Park Service. I retired in 1997 from the National Park Service after a 32-year career, including serving the last nine years of that career as the Superintendent of Shenandoah National Park. I am now the Chair of the Executive Council of the Coalition of National Park Service Retirees.

The Coalition now consists of more than 700 individuals, all former employees of the National Park Service, with more joining us almost daily. Together we bring to this hearing over 21,000 years of accumulated experience. Many of us were senior leaders and many received awards for stewardship of our country’s natural and cultural resources. As rangers, executives, park managers, biologists, historians, interpreters, planners and specialists in other disciplines, we devoted our professional lives to maintaining and protecting the national parks for the benefit of all Americans – those now living and those yet to be born. In our personal lives we come from a broad spectrum of political affiliations and we count among our members four former Directors or Deputy Directors of the National Park Service, twenty-three former Regional Directors or Deputy Regional Directors, twenty-eight former Associate or Assistant Directors and over one hundred and seventy former Park Superintendents or Assistant Superintendents; as well as a large number of other former employees, including seasonal employees.

BACKGROUND:

In preparing for this testimony, I contacted, by email, about 30 park managers and division chiefs in the National Park Service (NPS) and asked them to identify what they believed the 2-3 most serious issues currently affecting the NPS workforce are and what the consequences of those issues are. In addition, I drew on conversations and communications that I and other members of the CNPSR Executive Council have had over the past several years with dozens of current employees of the NPS about various issues, including those affecting the NPS workforce.

Many, but not all, of the issues of concern can be directly attributed to, or closely related to budget deficiencies. However, it is too easy for NPS leaders to make that the scapegoat and to fail to take appropriate action based on priorities and consequences. Clearly, some of the issues of concern, especially as perceived by those in the lower-ranks of the NPS, are the result of a lack of principled leadership and decision-making; and inappropriate priorities.

Employee Development

This issue is at the top of nearly everyone's list. As with many organizations, when there is a tightening of the budget, one of the first program casualties is training and employee development. This has certainly been true of the NPS.

This deficiency is pointed out in the Partnership for Public Service 2007 Rankings of *"The Best Places to Work in the Federal Government."* In this survey, NPS ranked 203 out of 222. Several of the other items with low rankings also may result from an inadequate employee development program.

One of the most significant deficiencies is "effective leadership" (ranked 191 of 222 in the aforementioned survey). The general belief in the NPS is that there are two parts to this perceived deficiency:

- Inadequate training and development of lower-level (first- and second-line) supervisors; and
- Ineffective and unprincipled leadership practices and decisions by high-level agency leaders, particularly political appointees.

There is little question that there needs to be improved training and development of lower-level supervisors, since such development is critical to how these leaders perform as they move upward in the organization.

One program recently implemented by the NPS that shows significant promise is the "Superintendent's Academy" This program is designed to provide individualized, comprehensive leadership development for those individuals either selected for, or likely to be selected for their first NPS superintendent position.

However, career development for other fields is not as organized. One NPS manager said, "We have no logical, organized, progressive developmental programs for any of our career fields, and it shows! The NPS has committed to revitalizing their ED program in the last year, but we have yet to see substantive results. The Employee Development program must be focused on the KSA's [knowledge, skills and abilities] needed in each of the career fields, and clearly identify the available developmental opportunities to obtain them."

Another said, "Continuing failure to adequately plan, fund and execute the Employee Development program will result in a continuing deterioration in our employees' abilities to perform the mission-critical work; will manifest itself in employee dissatisfaction with the NPS as an employer, increasing rates of attrition with concomitant loss of valuable potential, and ultimately in a decreasing ability to effectively protect our natural and cultural heritage."

Succession Planning

Effective succession planning in the NPS is still a significant deficiency. In the last 2-3 decades there have been several succession studies and plans conducted, but each seemed to have ended up as a report on the shelf. One manager said, "We not only need to do effective succession planning at the unit, region and Servicewide levels, we need to take appropriate action to implement the succession plans today, not sometime in the future! We need additional base funding to allow the Service to fund training and apprenticeship programs and shadow positions, so that when our older employees retire, they have had the opportunity to effectively pass on the knowledge and skills developed over the past 25-30 years. Failure to do so will cause a dramatic

loss of institutional knowledge and memory, causing us to repeat the mistakes of the past, and slowing our evolution to more effectively meeting our growing mission challenges.”

Contracting and Human Resources Capacity

Nearly every park manager with whom we consulted mentioned the serious situation involving “bottlenecks” in human resources and contracting. The NPS simply does not have the capacity in these program areas to keep up with the needs.

One manager said, “[There is a] deficit of trained and certified contracting officers. Compounding the difficulties with changes in procurement policies, the lack of contracting officers with warrants, and the quality of [applicants] we get when we advertise for these positions has put our contracting program in a tail spin. As a result we have diminished capacity to complete projects and to handle economic recovery projects. The inability of the NPS to get contracts out the door has drawn fire from Congress, who look at the backlog of projects we have on the books and the amount of unobligated funds, which has brought criticism to our request for additional funding.”

Another said, “The current ‘corrective action plan’ for contracting has had a debilitating impact on the ability of parks to execute contracts and enter into cooperative agreements. The implementation of the plan has demoralized the procurement and contracting staff and pushing many into retirement or to other agencies. With recovery act funding pending we need to formulate a strategy to provide for a more nimble and effective contracting services.”

Another superintendent gave a specific example:

“Contracting in the NPS is still problematic; both for in-park part time purchasers, and for larger contracting at the regional level. The dollar limits for in-park purchasing, I believe, are from the 1960's or 1970's. Any card holder can purchase up to \$2,500 in services 3,000 in supplies and \$2,000 in construction (which is widely defined to include painting and putting up a fence). However, in order to have the ability to purchase up to \$10,000 in supplies, \$2,500 in services and \$2,000 in construction, our employee had to attend 227 hours of training. These dollar limits are obsolete and need to be brought up to date so we can effectively get the work accomplished. This is very broken; but the basic idea that one must attend over 200 hours of training and still only be able to purchase up to \$10,000 is ridiculous. For the dollars spent to attend the training, and this employee's time, we can now purchase \$7,000 more in supplies but we still have to go to region to contract to get the building painted.”

Another superintendent cited the Cooperative Agreement guidance that has recently been implemented in at least one NPS Region, as another case in point:

“Up to now our Cooperative Agreements have been executed using basically a 3-party process involving agreement formulation by the park procurement official, technical review by a contracting officer and by the regional solicitor. It now seems that we are adding up to 7 additional layers of process:

1. A new Regional point of contact (POC)
2. A new Agreements "IN BOX"
3. Automatic posting to GRANTS.GOV of all Cooperative Agreements over \$25K
4. A contract specialist (in addition to the contracting officer)
5. New involvement of Washington Office Contracting/Procurement

6. A decision to forward every agreement and task agreement to DOI [Department of the Interior]
7. A 'review of the proposed action will be assigned based on availability of specialist or contractor personnel.'"

In addition to the examples cited above, the NPS continues to "centralize" all personnel and contracting functions into a very few parks (example: into four parks in the Northeast Region) in each Region. This "Servicing Human Resources Office (SHRO)" and "Major Acquisition Buying Office (MABO)" consolidation is scheduled for full implementation by October 1, 2010, though partial implementation has already occurred.

The consolidation of the acquisition functions seems to be a consequence of GAO review in which the NPS drew fire on its acquisition management. The centralization of human resources functions is largely a result of recent "competitive sourcing" (or "outsourcing") efforts by the Bush Administration.

The consequences of these actions include:

- Great frustration in parks and NPS offices relative to their abilities to get things done.
- Demoralized employees in the fields of human resources and contracting.
- Demoralized and sometimes angry customers and vendors.
- Delays in executing contracts.
- Demoralizing partners participating in Cooperative Agreements.
- Not being able to complete projects in the time frames required due to inadequate staffing.
- Loss of effectiveness and bolstering adverse public opinion about government efficiency.
- Loss of credibility with the public, because work is taking too long to get done.

There is a great likelihood that the NPS will have a very difficult time meeting the requirements of the recent "stimulus package" because of these deficiencies. NPS has already initiated efforts to "call qualified individuals out of retirement" to assist with the expected increase in workload in these administrative functions.

Technology Systems and Processes

A number of NPS managers cited the increasing requirements of "systems" and "process-driven activities" as a serious problem and growing frustration. One manager spoke of the "dominance [of these systems and activities] over independent situational judgment and agility." Mentioning examples, this manager said:

"FMSS [Facility Management Software System], the PST [Project Scoping Tool], the lengthy process for using FLREA ["fee demonstration"] funds, the 5-year comprehensive plans - cumulatively these squelch creativity and effective action. Long range consistent planning is a good thing, but it should not be the only thing. It seems to be the only thing right now. Now, we have to try to get employees to understand the requirements of feeding all their projects through highly constrained and hugely complicated processes, with 3 to 5 years before they can hope to do the project."

A park superintendent lamented:

"Overwhelmingly, process has become the goal. GPRA [Government Performance and Results Act], FMSS, are two big examples, but it is in everything. We spent 100 hours on an Environmental Management System so that we are more 'green.' I would rather our Resource Management

Specialist spent those 100 hours directly protecting our resources. I do not know the enormous number of hours spent on FMSS. It has a life of its own. Instead of working on our historic structures, our employees are on the computer entering data about the need to work on historic structures. I have never asked for, or used a report created from FMSS to inform my decision making. Some may say that makes me a poor manager; I believe it shows that FMSS is not an effective management tool at the park level.”

Consequences of these problems include:

- Spending lots of money (salaries) on care and feeding of systems instead of on work more clearly aligned with the NPS mission.
- Demoralized employees who feel devalued by the dominance of systems.
- The widespread feeling among employees that computer programs now trump human intelligence.
- Loss of credibility with the public, because “we are soooooo sloooooow to act or react, and we respond by saying, ‘I can’t do anything about it - it’s the system’”.
- Ineffectiveness.

Core Operations Process

Another process initiated with questionable motives and implemented several years ago is the “core operations” process.

The experiences of one park, as related by a concerned employee best serve to describe the concerns of many:

“When the superintendent presented ‘Core Ops’ at an all-employee meeting, I was very encouraged. He said we would go back to our fundamental, guiding legislation to establish our core responsibilities, then determine how best to fulfill them. Being rather familiar with NPS history and the guiding documents, I knew that if this were an honest endeavor, there could be but one outcome - a significant shift in staffing, funding and emphasis on protecting park resources for future generations. I was wrong. While the #1 park priority that emerged from the process was to inventory and monitor resources and assess their conditions, none of the action items reflected that priority. One position (GS-12 assistant division chief) in the Science and Resource program was abolished and the division chief was promoted to a GS-14, creating an even greater disparity between the chief and the GS-11 resource scientists. I don’t deny someone receiving their just rewards, but how did this serve the resource? No apparent staffing, funding or emphasis was shifted to protecting park resources. Our (the rest of the resource staff) contribution to the process was the privilege of working harder and more efficiently, to do more and more with less and less.

“So, the process was not about our core responsibilities, but about ‘efficiencies.’ By naming a cost-savings, efficiency exercise a ‘core operations analysis,’ we further degrade any remaining credibility with staff or those in the public who take the time to scrutinize what we’re doing. It’s like calling cell towers ‘visual enhancements.’ If it’s about cutting costs, then call it a cost-savings process that supports our current operations. If you call it a core operations analysis, then go back to the core documents, identify the basic responsibilities and address them.”

It is clear from the above comments and from others we have heard from that the core operations analyses are being utilized—regardless of perhaps some good intentions by some NPS leaders—as a means to justify

cost-cutting in a manner that obscures the adverse impacts to what should be the core programs of NPS: to provide for resource protection and to provide for a quality visitor experience.

The core operations process, originating in one region, spread throughout the NPS because of emphasis from the political leadership in the Department of the Interior. However, leaders in several regions successfully altered the approach and refused to carry out the prescribed process because, in their words, "it legitimizes an illegal process of non-compliance with the Organic Act." In other words, most park units have already reduced operations to the core...any further reductions would, in fact, threaten the resource and would be against the law. Implementing this process has cost substantial amounts of money and frustrated many leaders and employees because its emphasis is on "efficiency;" and "effectiveness" (in terms of law, policy and mission of the NPS) is relegated to a much lower level of importance.

Recruitment, Hiring, Retention and Diversity

One superintendent states:

"We need to become more effective at attracting and retaining younger employees, and employees from underrepresented groups. Our diversity recruitment programs are relatively inefficient and ineffective, especially as compared to those of other agencies, including the USDA. Failure to recruit effectively further disconnects the National Parks and the Service from growing numbers of minorities and immigrant groups in America, contributing to the growing 'irrelevancy' of the National Parks to today's citizenry. Our workforce must much more closely mirror the 'face of America,' if we hope to remain vibrant, relevant and important to our citizens of today and those to come."

The NPS has not done an adequate job of diversifying its workforce. The responsibility continues to be put on parks, which competes with all other existing priorities. A park superintendent suggests:

"To be more effective the NPS needs to develop a few geographically based intake programs. The programs should be comprehensive in nature, including a recruitment strategy, a training strategy, a mentor and the funding to support the program. Without a diverse workforce we continue to have challenges connecting to diverse park visitors who look at our workforce and believe the NPS does not offer opportunities for them."

The current process for hiring seasonal and temporary employees requires unreasonable lead time. Often it takes over nine months from the initiation of the recruitment action to actually seeing the employee at work. This is problematic as the park manager often is unaware of what project and initiative dollars will be available at the beginning of the fiscal year.

Law Enforcement/Emergency Response Retirement Decisions

Amendments in 1976 to the General Authorities Act (PL- 94-458) gave trained National Park Service Rangers law enforcement authority within national park areas. These authorities include the ability to make arrests, carry weapons, and serve warrants issued by other jurisdictions. In 1994, the National Park Service issued a new position description for those positions that would provide federally established enhanced retirement benefits to those rangers who occupied those positions (5 USC 8336 - commonly referred to as "6c" or "20 year retirement.") These position descriptions describe the multiple tasks that rangers are asked to undertake in addition to their law enforcement duties, including search and rescue, emergency services, and resources education.

Rangers who occupied these positions prior to 1994 have been required to submit affidavits to prove that they exercised the same law enforcement responsibilities that exist under the revised position descriptions. A team of DOI employees called the Federal Law Enforcement Review Team (FLIRT) is charged with reviewing the submitted information and determining whether the applicants qualify for the enhanced retirement benefits. This team has applied a very narrow interpretation of the eligibility requirements for enhanced retirement benefits. This has resulted in the rejection of several hundred claims from rangers who are retired or still on active duty.

This is an injustice needs to be corrected. Currently, the NPS has a Protection Ranger workforce of “haves and have-nots.” This has caused widespread and substantial discontent among the Service’s 1300 commissioned law enforcement rangers and could negatively impact the Service’s ability to recruit and retain high-quality employees for the ranger profession. If not corrected, this could result in diminished protection for park resources and visitors.

SUMMARY

The aforementioned concerns have contributed to a decline in the morale in the National Park Service in addition to some inefficiencies and ineffectiveness. However, two other problems that have been “on the rise” over the past several years have led to the morale in the NPS being as low as anyone can remember – in at least the last fifty years; although there is evidence that this situation is changing with the new administration and there is renewed hope and encouragement on the part of the NPS workforce.

The first of these contributing factors is the quality of decision making, but – more importantly – the continual erosion of decision making by qualified NPS professionals whose actions and decisions are overridden or “second-guessed” by political appointees who pursue a political agenda rather than a resource agenda. One superintendent offered an example:

“ During the rulemaking process resulting in allowing ‘concealed-carry firearms’ in national parks, park professionals and subject-matter experts in the NPS were never consulted about what impacts to resources, visitors or employees in the parks might result. It was clear that this rulemaking was intended to satisfy a political agenda and that resource, visitor and employee protection had no bearing on the outcome.”

Key to “restoring the workforce” is the need to restore the validity of the decisions for which the NPS is responsible; based upon science, law and resource principles. In other words, restore the power and authority of the Director of the NPS and his/her professional leaders and technical experts to make agency decisions instead of making those agency decisions higher and higher in the Department...to the point where it neuters the agency’s professional leadership.

Organizational leadership and reputation at the national and international levels have been compromised. The NPS is no longer considered the national “expert” or leader relative to managing parks; interpreting and educating; carrying out science and research; and valuing appropriate recreation and visitor enjoyment activities. The NPS is no longer considered an international leader because it has been prevented from fully embracing the international role that parks and protected areas fulfill and the helpful role that the U.S. can play in that international arena. If we are to “restore the workforce” we must restore the capacity and the competence for organizational leadership both nationally and internationally.

The second contributing factor is the disturbing trend to “corporatize” and “privatize” national stewardship responsibilities of our most sacred places, conspiring against the inherent responsibility of our nation to care for these places through its established government on behalf of all the American people. Escalating collaboration, partnering, and contracting-out of these inherently governmental functions is increasingly becoming a subterfuge for our national failure to meet the financial and leadership responsibilities our government must exercise on behalf of our citizens and their national patrimony. National environmentalism, in response to a barrage of threatening ideological conservation values, responds accordingly with an increasingly shrill and extreme message, partitioning and polarizing communities, government officials and citizens who yearn to see the debate focus on quality of life approaches rather than environmental extremism.

Viewing national parks as essentially “cash cows” for local and regional economies increasingly skews interpretation of law toward the notion that recreation and visitor use are as important, or even more important, than the protection of the resource. The mounting overwhelming attention that is placed on parks’ revenue-generating capabilities creates a dilemma that often threatens long-term ecological health and diffuses core resource protection duties at the macro scale in favor of smaller incremental reactions to a continual barrage of park development plans and mechanisms to increase visitor use scenarios that now seem to prevail more often than not. As a result of these trends, the role of environmental stewardship and carrying out core resource protection missions are being systematically diminished across the National Park System with increasing frequency—deferring instead to economic impacts to communities and special interest groups.

These trends, along with recent attempts (and substantial expenditures of money) to contract-out, or outsource, certain work functions in the NPS have had a demoralizing effect on the workforce.

It is time to return the NPS to a professional organization; driven by law, science and principled leadership. With this renewal will come the pride and enthusiasm of the NPS workforce that Americans have come to expect of those who protect and interpret the nation’s National Park System.