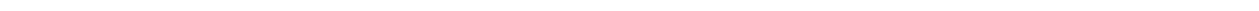


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Corporate Sponsors at Yosemite?: The Case Against Privatizing National Parks

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Camping under the Milky Way, Canyonlands National Park, Utah. Emily Ogden, National Park Service/Flickr, CC BY

The centennial of the National Park Service is inspiring an impressive amount of soul-searching about the agency and the lands for which it is responsible. This is timely and appropriate, as the NPS faces serious challenges that affect the preservation of these precious lands.

We both study the history of conservation efforts in the United States, and have also worked as rangers at national park sites in Utah, Arizona and California. Based on our experience with the park system, its stewards and its visitors, we caution against many major changes to the overall institutional structure of national park management. These proposals are neither persuasive nor popular, and they could cause unforeseen damage and loss of support for the system.

Risky reforms

Some observers have suggested significantly restructuring or even replacing NPS by privatizing the parks or transferring them to state control. Indeed, the **Republican Party platform** calls on Congress to “immediately pass universal legislation providing for a timely and orderly mechanism requiring the federal government to convey certain federally controlled public lands to states.” It also calls for amending the Antiquities Act of 1906 to require congressional approval for designation of national monuments, such as the Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument in Maine that President Obama designated just this week, and would require approval from the home state for creating any new national parks or monuments.

Legislators in nearly a dozen states are already pressing for greater state control over public lands. Such proposals may have helped to inspire the takeover of a national wildlife refuge in Oregon earlier this year. But while individuals have called for privatizing or transferring federal public lands to state control for many years, units of the national park system have usually been excluded.

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In 1954 Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas led journalists on a 185-mile hike along Maryland's historic C&O Canal to protest plans to turn the adjoining path into a highway. The canal and path became a national park in 1971. National Park Service/Flickr, CC BY

Any such proposals involving national park lands should be cause for concern. The empirical record regarding state parks is illustrative. Most states have either cut their funding for state park systems substantially in recent years or required them to be more self-sustaining. This trend has increased pressure on state park managers to generate revenue.

State parks thus have added hotels, lodges, golf courses, ski resorts and various forms of commercial sponsorship. Now the National Park Service reportedly is considering selling corporate sponsorships to raise money for unfunded maintenance projects.

National parks are valuable public resources

Critics often assume that national parks are too costly, and it is true that the United States spends about US\$3 billion yearly on the park system. But parks generate more than five times that amount in spending by visitors in communities within 60 miles of a park, and create hundred thousands of jobs.

In a recent study, scholars at the Harvard Kennedy School and Colorado State University calculated that Americans value the national parks at \$92 billion annually. That figure represents what Americans would pay to preserve the parks intact, not an actual flow of dollars to the U.S. Treasury. Nonetheless, we can only wish that Americans thought all government expenditures were so worthwhile.



Children meet a park ranger on a field trip to Rock Creek Park in Washington, D.C. National Park Service/Flickr, CC BY

Reasonable reforms

We are not suggesting that the NPS is doing everything right. As we and many other analysts have argued, the national park system is contending with significant challenges, including deteriorating infrastructure and micromanagement from political authorities.

But many reforms are possible without privatizing parks or transferring them to state control. First, NPS could pay greater heed to lessons learned by state parks. The agency has often been somewhat insular and unreceptive to different ideas. State park managers, consistent with the tradition of innovation in a federal system, have tried various approaches to problems that could be useful at the national level.

As one example, California developed clear criteria for accepting corporate sponsorships in response to serious budgetary shortfalls a few years ago. The National Park Service currently is considering a similar policy, and weighing California's approach could help NPS address concerns from park supporters.

Second, the current national park fee system is generous to a fault. For instance, any American age 62 or older can buy a Senior Eagle Pass that is valid for the rest of his or her life for a one-time fee of \$10. With the park system facing a \$12 billion backlog of unfunded maintenance projects, NPS should not be virtually giving away access, especially to people like us who would be more than willing to pay more for this lifetime pass. Large fees increases are controversial and unlikely to pass Congress, however.

In some ways the National Park Service is a captive of its own popularity and success. Many writers have argued that the NPS needs to focus on protecting park resources, and it has done so. Now the agency is also tackling new challenges, such as bringing more young people to parks, building a more

diverse workforce and ensuring that the park system reflects the experiences of all Americans.

These all are admirable goals, but they add to the core mission that Congress wrote for NPS in its 1916 charter law: providing for the enjoyment of the parks while preserving park resources “unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.”

Radical proposals for restructuring the NPS are not as popular as advocates may think. In a 2012 Hart Research survey, 88 percent of voters – including 81 percent of Republicans – stated that it was either quite or extremely important for the federal government to protect parks. In 2013 another Hart poll of western voters – who might be expected to favor the idea of restructuring parks – found that 65 percent supported permanent protection for wilderness, parks and open spaces.

And in 2014, when the Center for American Progress asked 1,600 voters in Rocky Mountain states whether public lands should be managed by the federal or state governments, 62 percent chose federal control and only 17 percent favored state control.



Logo available to corporate supporters of California state parks. California Dept of Parks and Recreation



Photographing Old Faithful geyser in Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming. Jim Peaco, National Park Service/Flickr

As some commentators have pointed out, national parks fit the classic economic definition of a public good – something from which no one is excluded, and that one person can consume without reducing its value to other people. Author Wallace Stegner put it more elegantly when he noted that without national parks “millions of lives would have been poorer.”

Fundamentally, the national parks belong to us all. As environmental historian Alfred Runte observes, they were inspired partly by pride and the desire to show that we had **landscapes rivaling the cathedrals of Europe**. Today that system is the envy of the world, and cause for a different kind of national pride. It still celebrates those awe-inspiring landscapes, but it also tells the world a more complex story, from precolonial times to ongoing struggles for equality today.

As former NPS rangers, we're proud to have participated in protecting what many observers call **"America's best idea."** Privatizing the parks or turning them over to the states runs directly against the idea that they are for all Americans, forever.



Conservation

Federalism

National parks

Public land

National Park Service Centennial