

Dual Mandate and Protected Areas

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The dual mandate originates from the National Park Service Organic Act of 1916, which directed the National Park Service (NPS) to pursue efforts and resources toward conservation and public enjoyment. Very soon, following the passage of the Act, tension arose between the different edicts of the mandate. In 1925, the first director of the NPS, Stephen Mather, described that maintaining parks while allowing public access would not be possible. The Redwood Act passed in 1978, which amended the General Authorities Act of 1970, supported Mather's position. The Redwood Act directed federal agencies to prioritize preserving protected areas over public access and use whenever the two conflict (Jones et al., 2017). Thus, the evolution of the purpose of the dual mandate has been the subject of different socio-political and environmental perspectives and agendas over the decades. This paper will describe the evolution of NPS policies related to park system management and provide insight into current and future management direction in light of the challenges presented by the original dual mandate passed in the act of 1916.

The national park system in the United States has evolved to become one of the most complex systems in the world and consists of twenty-one types of units, including national parks, national seashores, and national historical sites, that have been subject to evolving policies over the years. The management of these protected areas can sometimes fall under the purview of partnerships or loose affiliations but primarily is the responsibility of the NPS. The awareness and purpose of the mission of the NPS have changed with time. At the time of the NPS Organic Act of 1916, for example, the objective of the NPS was to “preserve, forever unimpaired, the sublime beauty, dignity, and nobility of national park landscapes” (Jones et al., 2017). This did

not address the biological preservation issues as they are understood today and how such issues should influence current and future management policies.

The legislative evolution of policies relevant to the national park system and its varied resources has been well documented and shows that the dual mandate has, in effect, led to examples of contradictory courses of action by the NPS, with potential consequences for system sustainability. Many commentators and scholars have suggested that the dual mandate, as stated in the NPS Organic Act of 1916, presented a contradictory purpose. One possible source of this contradiction stems from the ambiguities in the legislation itself and has led to questions of whether the NPS is capable of “harmonizing the un-harmonizable” (Jones et al., 2017). In effect, the critics of the policy landscape contend that the NPS dual mandate is inherently unmanageable and should, therefore, be abandoned in favor of a new policy direction. However, key insights into the authors and experts involved with establishing the act of 1916 suggest that the inclusion of “fundamental purpose” in the legislation was deliberately meant to leave unaddressed the issue of the contradictory nature of the dual mandate.

Accounts of those present during the debates, public hearings, drafting, and passage of the Organic Act of 1916 help shed light on the intents of Congress in establishing a deliberate dual mandate for the NPS that remains until today. Indeed, memoirs from Horace Albright, who was present at the time, state that the bill's authors were aware of the “inherent conflicts between use and preservation” and interestingly do not say “contradiction.” However, the memoir notes that despite this awareness, political realities meant the bill had to be passed without resolution of this issue (Jones et al., 2017). Thus, the years-long evolution of various amendments and executive policy decisions have meant an imbalance in park system management that brings us

to current practices where the NPS now focuses more on visitor engagement and public enjoyment.

The importance of the national park system, especially popular national parks, to the American psyche was largely embedded in the 1970s sentiments of conservation and awareness of the need to protect the environment. It was also during this period that two key pieces of legislation directed the NPS to maintain the preservation and eschew public engagement, setting the stage for an imbalanced approach to the dual mandate (Jones et al., 2017). Subsequently, despite increasing numbers of visitors to protected areas over the last few decades, many Americans still remain disconnected from national park areas. This has been exacerbated by the rising trend of urbanization and the continuing migration away from areas of residence near natural settings. As such, the relevance of the dual mandate in ensuring that Americans can engage with protected areas while mitigating adverse impacts has presented challenges for the NPS that have led to a continued imbalance in park practices.

As the NPS interprets new practices geared towards greater public engagement, several programs, new designations of national monuments, and research initiatives indicate attempts to make the park system relevant to modern American society. The emerging interpretation of the dual mandate envisions a management practice that promotes a people-focused approach both on-site and at various levels of park operations (Larson et al., 2018; Weber et al., 2019). The premise is to build a practice framework that views greater public access and their involvement as crucial conservationists and stewards rather than a threat to preservation efforts. By emotionally connecting modern Americans to their national parks and the work of the NPS, this contemporary interpretation of the dual mandate can help develop a shared sense of ownership amongst the citizenry. The implications are manifold, including better stewardship of park

resources as individuals become aware of their impact, participate in NPS preservation programs, and learn to live sustainably with the environment.

To conclude, the NPS was handed a dual mandate with the passage of the NPS Organic Act in 1916, which created an issue of how best to implement policies that can simultaneously achieve preservation and public access. This led to an imbalance, with more efforts in preservation at the expense of public enjoyment since the 1970s. With a contemporary vision that employs concepts of identity-related to shared ownership, the NPS is engaged in efforts to include greater public participation in NPS work and recreational activities in a sustainable manner.

References

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