

# Restoring the icons

**I**N 1987 New Zealanders celebrated the centenary of national parks in New Zealand. The adopted motto "Parks for People" prompted Forest and Bird president Alan Mark to remind us, in *Forest & Bird* (August 1987) of the "Parks for Preservation" mandate of the National Parks Act. He also warned that national parks risked losing their pre-eminence and uniqueness if they were simply managed as other protected areas. Not surprisingly, these debates have occurred in the United States of America – the origin of the national park ideal, and the origin of much of our early national park management practice.

Five months visiting national parks in North America last year gave me an opportunity to make some comparisons between park management in both countries. Can we learn anything from the United States? In that country, national parks are managed by a high-profile National Parks Service, and have a pre-eminent position over other protected areas.

One lesson is that the parks in the USA have generally proved to be too small. At Yellowstone, for example, large mammals are dependent upon land outside the park for winter forage. The protection of Everglades National Park in Florida is hampered by the drainage of surrounding wetlands, and many other parks are also threatened by outside activities, such as air pollution from industry, vehicles and urban sprawl. Visibility has declined by 60 percent at the Great Smoky Mountains, and many visitors to the Grand Canyon will only gain a clear view of the opposite rim from photos on the display panels. Introduced pests are decimating some park forests and parks are still threatened by proposals for mining, damming of rivers, and road construction.

However, the most obvious impression is the congestion. Visitor levels in US national parks soared to 270 million in 1994, with the most popular parks receiving around four million visitors a year. Park managers struggle to control the influx of summer visitors by limiting parking spaces and providing shuttle buses. They also struggle to maintain expensive facilities, especially roads, that were developed to encourage park use. Managers are often under pressure (sometimes resisted,

sometimes not) to push road ends further into parks to be closer to key attractions.

Half of most park budgets is spent on facilities maintenance and the National Parks Service estimates that about US\$3 billion is urgently needed for deferred maintenance and construction work. Hotels, service stations, supermarkets and shops are well established in parks, and concessionaire contracts (many dating from a more laissez-faire era) currently return only three percent of their revenue to the parks.

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Congestion is mitigated to some extent by the professional and consistent standard of facilities and clear guidelines for visitor behaviour. Proactive management of the backcountry helps provide wilderness opportunities even in high-use parks, and aircraft landings and overflights are strictly controlled in some areas. The parks service is removing inappropriate concession facilities from some parks, and proposed legislation will ensure that parks receive a greater proportion of concession profits. Importantly, national parks are promoted as national treasures, worthy of respect and support. People are encouraged to be involved in park projects and volunteers frequently perform meaningful and responsible tasks.

While all is not good in the national parks of the USA, there are some lessons for us:

- parks should be large, preferably encompassing a range of ecosystems,

and linked to other protected areas;

- park funding should be directed to resource protection, not visitor access and comfort;
- parks should not attempt to provide all things for all people, and some activities, such as competitive events, are best provided for in other areas;
- wherever possible, facilities should be located outside parks;
- concession operations must be limited and strictly controlled;
- and, of course, parks should receive sufficient funding to protect resources, retain professional staff, and maintain a consistently high standard of interpretation and services.

Coming home, I couldn't help feeling that our national parks have suffered since 1987. Budget cuts, departmental restructuring, and increased visitor use have undoubtedly had a big impact. But it is more than that. National parks seem to have lost status, and direct public involvement is lacking. New Zealand's national parks were often set aside in response to pressure or support from individuals and community groups, and survival of individual parks is ultimately dependent upon continued public support. Public involvement in park management can lead to a greater understanding of the need for restrictions on park use and development, and to a willingness to fight for the adequate resourcing and protection of national parks.

National parks in New Zealand deserve to be restored to their position as icons. They are the natural cathedrals of this rich and varied land and, like cathedrals, merit respect and adoration. Park managers should be given adequate resources to manage the parks to a high professional standard, and public involvement in park management should be encouraged. There are many problems in American parks that we should avoid, but the successful marriage between a professional national park service and a sympathetic public is something we could do well to imitate. ♦

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