

On the Path

National Parks, Wilderness, and the National Interest

By Keith Hammer

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We can take much inspiration from Ken Burns' film "The National Parks: America's Best Idea" and readily extend its premise to the remainder of America's public lands. Key take-home messages in Burns' film are that threats to America's wildlands never cease and that their protection is brought about through national concern and legislation, often over the objections of local politicians.

Indeed, as the West's elk and bison were being slaughtered by commercial hunters in the late 1800s, it was not the new states of Montana and Wyoming that brought it under control. It was Representative John Lacey of Iowa who prohibited the interstate transport of illegally killed wildlife when his "Lacey Act" was signed into law by President William McKinley in 1900.

Montana Senator Thomas Long objected to what is now Glacier National Park being designated a Forest Preserve in 1900, followed by the Kalispell Chamber of Commerce objecting to its designation as a National Park in 1910. Thank goodness for the persistence of Americans George Bird Grinnell and others, who had the foresight to see that the area needed better protection than that afforded the Forest Preserves (later known as National Forests) and convinced President Taft to designate Glacier as America's 10th National Park! Today, local communities thrive on tourists visiting Glacier National Park and the families and businesses choosing to locate near it!

More recently, the town of Seward, Alaska was so dead-set against the designation of Kenai Fjords National Park that it passed two resolutions denouncing the idea. After the Park was designated in 1980 and Seward began to reap the rewards, however, it rescinded its previous resolutions and asked that the Park be expanded! President Carter, once burned in effigy in Alaska for his conservation initiatives there, nonetheless tripled the size of Denali National Park and designated most of it Wilderness for added protection.

Closer to home, President Nixon in 1974 recommended to Congress that it designate the 928,000 acres of Glacier National Park not containing roads and other developments as Wilderness. The Park Service is still waiting for Congress to act on Nixon's recommendations. Current Park Superintendent Chas Cartwright is trying to drum up support for that designation to occur during Glacier's Centennial Celebration next year but some, including Representative Denny Rehberg, argue "if it ain't broke, don't fix it."

Conversely, one could argue "if it ain't broke, don't break it" when it comes to America's few remaining public roadless lands. While Superintendent Cartwright may not be proposing to allow Disneyland-style developments in Glacier's backcountry, the next Superintendent could. That is a catastrophe and battle Congress can avoid by finishing the work begun by President Nixon 35 years ago, designating Glacier's backcountry Wilderness so its management is not left solely to the whim of ever-changing administrations.

Burns' film also documents the political process that all too often cuts the baby in half. By the 1960's, 85% of California's redwood forests had already been logged, yet the designation of Redwood National Park in 1968 protected only half of what little remained of the redwoods. The Park has since been expanded but it has necessitated the removal of logging roads to restore damaged watersheds, a process much more costly than protecting them in the first place.

Indeed, Burns' film provides an instructive context for the ongoing struggle over how best to conserve America's remaining public roadless lands, be they managed by the National Park Service, the Forest Service, or the Bureau of Land Management. I recommend folks see this film as they ponder whether wilderness legislation should be left up to local politicians and whether America can afford to cut the baby in half yet again if it wants to conserve intact ecosystems for future generations of people, fish and wildlife.

Keith Hammer grew up hiking, skiing, camping, hunting, and fishing in the Swan Mountains. He has worked a number of jobs, from Forest Service trail worker to logger to backcountry guide, and currently works as an environmental consultant and head of the nonprofit Swan View Coalition. His column appears regularly in this paper and is archived at www.swanrange.org. Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or keith@swanview.org.



Hikers pause to take in the view as they drop below the clouds in Glacier National Park. Keith Hammer photo.