

## Panhandling in Our Parks

The Bush administration has spawned more than its fair share of high profile conflicts in our national parks – from opening Yellowstone National Park’s gates to fleets of snowmobiles to its approval of a creationist tract maintaining the Grand Canyon is the product of Noah’s flood. However, one of the more far-reaching changes in the appearance and operations of our parks is now taking place well below the public’s radar.

With little fanfare, the National Park Service is proposing to start soliciting money from both corporations and park visitors. The plan, which could take effect as early as this December, would convert the Park Service’s current passive posture of merely accepting donations to one of actively pursuing vendors, concessionaires and other interests for contributions. In return, parks would offer something called “donor recognition.”

While “direct personal solicitation of park visitors” is not permitted “unless specifically authorized,” park officials could distribute “donor envelopes” in “informational materials” to visitors and speak generally to tourists about the need for contributions. In asking for money, ironically, employees would be forbidden from portraying “Congress, the Department or their bureau as having failed to meet their responsibilities.”

Pushing that fig leaf aside, this plan represents a major drive to increase corporate financial aid to, and presence within, our parks. To encourage large donations, the proposal substantially liberalizes donor recognition rules so that, for the first time, a corporation could –

- Feature its park-related gift or “partnership” in paid media advertising. This is just one step short of ads proclaiming the “Official Beer of Yosemite” or the “Battery Powering Old Faithful”;
- Display its logo on “the electronic screen and associated printed information” of computerized visitor kiosks. In other words, all park educational may soon be brought to you by your friends at Philip-Morris Tobacco or the good folks at Nabisco; and
- Get permanent in-park “tablets, plaques or other commemorative installation” to celebrate the gift. While the “naming of features or park facilities will not be used to recognize monetary contributions,” the “naming of rooms in a park facility is allowed,” as is dedicated “boards or walls” within visitor centers.

This paid recognition is, of course, just a thinly disguised scheme to subject the public commons to corporate branding campaigns in which companies are not selling their product per se but are selling themselves and their images: Wal-Mart is a caring corporation because it contributes to parks or Exxon-Mobil is a good neighbor because it pays for bald eagles to have a comfy place to nest. In this brave new world, there will be few places remaining off-limits to the Nike swoosh or the McDonald’s arches.

Interior Secretary Gale Norton says she is excited about this plan and promises that corporate displays will be “appropriate” and “tasteful.” This assurance is from the women who approved a televised National Football League 2004 season kick-off extravaganza on the National Mall, featuring the unveiling of a new soda pop (Pepsi Vanilla) and scantily clad dancers bumping and grinding with the Capitol Dome and Lincoln Memorial as backdrop.

To implement commercialization, the plan transforms the park workforce from a cadre of natural resource custodians into a sales force. The 74-page plan offers a detailed how-to manual of fundraising methods. Managers are urged to be creative in finding ways to “meet the needs of individual donors.”

Disturbingly, the plan also dramatically relaxes ethics safeguards. For example, it repeals the ban against seeking or accepting gifts from park concessionaires, permit-holders and others with whom the park does business or regulates. In its place, the Park Service substitutes non-specific criteria, such as the gift “would not likely result in public controversy.” Removing bright line prohibitions and replacing them with slippery, “don’t get caught” standards forces park managers to wade into ethical swamps with no flashlight.

It is inherently troublesome for any federal agency to simultaneously seek funds from the very businesses that are seeking concessions from it. In the near future, expect to see park managers caught up in the same sort of seamy contribution scandals that today entrap politicians.

Finally, it is just plain tacky to subject visitors to more pitches for money. We already pay twice for national parks, once with our taxes and again with the steadily rising visitor fees charged at the entrance gate, but now our national parks are angling for a third shot at the public’s wallet.

By legalizing this official panhandling, the plan certainly gives the National Park Service a unique opportunity. After all, what other federal agency begs for spare change?