

It's All a Matter of "Enjoyment"

Although the great State of Texas has the nation's lowest percentage of public lands, back in 1999 then-Governor George W. Bush asked resort developers and hoteliers to submit bids for the construction of 24 privately-managed "nature lodging" complexes to be located in state parks. The two-dozen targeted parks included the crown jewels of the Texas system, such as Guadalupe River and Pedernales Falls.

These nature lodgings were to feature conference centers, \$200-a-night hotels, restaurants and upscale shops. The idea was that conference centers plunked in the middle of the park would be a great way for "people to enjoy nature." Oh, and by the way, this new "public-private partnership" would also produce substantial revenue.

After the scheme was exposed in the middle of the presidential primaries, state officials dropped it like a hot rock. Nonetheless, the mindset behind the plan is very alive today. George W. Bush brought to Washington the idea that parks exist primarily for the public to enjoy now (preferably while straddling an all-terrain vehicle or atop a golf cart), not to preserve for future generations.

This basic conflict between conservation and enjoyment is playing out today in a new attempt to rewrite what are called the Management Policies governing the national park system. Paul Hoffman, a former Dick Cheney aide occupying a top Interior Department slot overseeing the Park Service, has been at work rewriting the Management Policies to make them, in his words, less "anti-enjoyment."

In a September speech to a recreation industry group, Hoffman said he "received a clear message from many constituencies" that a revision of the National Park Service's Management Policies was necessary because of their "evident bias in favor of preservation of the park system over human use and enjoyment."

When Hoffman's draft was leaked to the newspapers, the reaction was almost universal revulsion. Hoffman's plan would gut the Park Service conservation mission by giving off-highway vehicles, dirt bikes and jet skis wide access to scores of national parks and seashores. Mining, grazing, helicopter tours, cell-phone towers and even rock concerts, would all be encouraged. Park superintendents would have to show there would be permanent resource damage to block any requested use.

Amidst the furor, one illustration of the utter wackiness of Hoffman's ham-handed rewrite received little notice – Hoffman struck all references to the word "evolution" (such as, "species are evolving," "naturally evolving ecosystems" and "natural evolutionary processes") from the Management Policies. In some instances, he left entire paragraphs intact except to excise a single evolutionary reference.

Opposition was so widespread that even the normally shameless Bush administration sought to distance itself. A Park Service flack said that it was only a draft; Hoffman

compiled the detailed 194-page rewrite because he was “playing devil’s advocate.” Yeah, right.

In October, the Interior Department unveiled a new version that it claimed had the input of one hundred Park Service managers but was unable to identify a single one in response to a Freedom of Information Act request from media. In fact, the Interior Department refused to identify which constituencies had earlier contacted Hoffman to lobby for their greater enjoyment of national parks (Our organization has sued them in federal court to find out the identities of the mystery lobbyists behind this effort).

This new draft was properly dubbed “Hoffman-lite” in that it omitted some of the more egregious aspects of the earlier draft but the drift was the same. The thrust of the latest rewrite dilutes the park’s basic mandate of conservation by telling managers they must balance nature against human enjoyment, defined as an array of commercial, recreational and social uses. In scores of subtle wording changes, natural resource protections are weakened, but never strengthened –

- Rules prohibiting industrial air pollution from beclouding park vistas are softened so as to be unenforceable;
- Millions of acres of potential wilderness in park backcountry could be carved with trails, roads and other developments;
- Values such as “peace and tranquility” and protection of “natural soundscapes” are jettisoned, so as not to interfere with the chirp of the cell phone or the deep-throated roar of the snowmobile.

In its defense, Interior officials claim they merely want to provide park managers with greater “flexibility.” Two weeks earlier, however, a new rule required that all new park managers must be screened by Hoffman’s office; one major criterion would be the candidate’s devotion to the “President’s Management Agenda” and Interior Secretary Gale Norton’s philosophy of increased reliance on private partnerships. In other words, the new flexibility is really about making it much easier to bend over.

Perhaps the most cynical aspect of the proposal is the most arcane: a weasel-worded provision that the National Park Service cannot be held to account by a member of the public for violating even these watered-down regulations. In other words, if a park ignored its Management Policies, there would be no penalty or any way to force the Park Service to abide by its own rules.

These proposed Management Policies are open to public comment until this Saturday, February 18. Absent a concerted public outcry, many are concerned that the Interior Department will simply adopt this massive rewrite in its entirety. In the meantime, enjoy.