

NATIONAL PARKS:

Effigy Mounds 'weaknesses' likely at other sites, too — review

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Effigy Mounds National Monument skirted federal laws and damaged cultural resources because of "breaks in the system of checks and balances," according to an internal report from the National Park Service.

The so-called after action review is notably less harsh than a 2014 report on the decade long mismanagement. The previous report — an internal draft NPS downplayed — detailed the "willful blindness" of the site's leaders, who allowed \$3 million in construction projects that caused serious damage to prehistoric earthworks ([E&ENews PM](#), Aug. 3, 2015).

The [review](#) released today is NPS's official report on the incident. Its stated goal: a "positive lessons learned document" that uses the monument's failings as a case study.

Midwest Deputy Regional Director Patricia Trap commissioned the report, along with Stephanie Toothman, the agency's associate director for cultural resources, partnerships and science. Six NPS employees from outside the Midwest Region — where Effigy Mounds is located — wrote the report.

In it, they absolve Trap of responsibility for the monument's mismanagement.

"Accountability had little or no effect because the Midwest deputy regional director had 60 superintendents as direct reports, which included the monument's superintendent," NPS officials wrote in the report. "No matter how well intentioned, this number of direct reports is an impossible responsibility."

The report also makes dozens of agencywide recommendations focused on empowering employees, increasing transparency and ensuring funding for cultural resources management.

For example, the report recommends that all superintendents complete a course called "Cultural Resources for Innovative Leaders" by 2022. Superintendents should also be rewarded for cultural resources stewardship, and experienced cultural resources staff should be able to travel between parks without a "travel ceiling," the report says.

The incidents at Effigy Mounds show "stewardship weaknesses that are likely not unique to the monument," the team wrote.

The report lists the "warning signs" missed at the monument, such as the fact that former Superintendent Phyllis Ewing did not hire many employees trained in cultural resources. It also notes that Ewing was made superintendent after her mentor superintendent reported that she had "no critical thinking skills."

The report also asserts that law enforcement rangers "are not well enough versed in cultural resources laws and policies." The 2014 report, however, noted that the law enforcement ranger at Effigy Mounds had a master's in archaeology and was "systematically devalued" ([Greenwire](#), July 19).

NPS officials declined to delve into the details of mismanagement, asserting that all those who were involved now no longer work at the Park Service.

Jeff Ruch, executive director of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, characterized the report as a "bucket of mush." PEER released the report today, after obtaining it through the Freedom of Information Act. It obtained the 2014 report the same way.

"This new report epitomizes what is wrong with the current Park Service leadership, which never takes direct responsibility for screw-ups no matter how flagrant or preventable," he said. "Tellingly, this report preaches transparency and accountability but illustrates precisely the opposite, gauzing over critical facts and offering not a single meaningful reform."

NPS did not comment by publication time on the report.

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