AMERICA'S PARKS: CULTURAL LANDSCAPES OF THE NEW DEAL

Susan Ives
The Living New Deal
University of California, Department of Geography
Berkeley, CA 94720-4740
susanives@livingnewdeal.org
(415) 987-6764

Abstract

It is hard to imagine that the worst economic crisis in our nation's history was the time of the greatest expansion and development of our parks and public lands. In fact, the Great Depression and government's all-out response to it catalyzed a "Golden Age of parks," though the connection is largely forgotten today.

The New Deal (1933-1942)—a collection of 43 newly styled "relief" programs—was a massive federal investment to stimulate the economy and get millions of unemployed Americans working again. Upon taking office in 1933, President Franklin Roosevelt reorganized the National Park Service, doubled the size of its holdings, and established the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) to carry out what has been called the largest environmental protection and restoration program ever undertaken in our country.

Over its 9-year existence, the CCC enrolled more than 3 million men. Most were teenagers from families struggling with too many mouths to feed.

The "CCC boys" called themselves Roosevelt's Tree Army. They lived in military-style camps where they gained job skills, purpose, (and an average of 11.5 pounds). They earned about a dollar a day. They restored millions of acres of ruined forests and farmland, and developed hundreds of state and national parks still in use today.

By contrast, state and national parks today are starved for funds and in need of billions of dollars for deferred maintenance. Without adequate public funding or a vocal constituency to demand it, the parks today, as a matter of policy, are commercializing the public domain in exchange for corporate support.

Few people today remember when parks were regarded as essential to the nation's economy, health, and spirit. By telling their New Deal history, parks can introduce millions of people to a forgotten heritage and the spirit of government that inspired it. Were the public aware of our government's commitment to parks during the hardest of hard times, might they ask of our country's policymakers, "Why not now?"

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by Susan Ives

"I pledge you, I pledge myself, to a New Deal for the American people."

--Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Nomination Address
Chicago Democratic Convention, 1932

When President Franklin Roosevelt took office in 1933, the nation was in the depths of the Great Depression. One in four working-age Americans was unemployed. Millions had lost their homes and savings. Nearly half the banks had failed. The country's industrial production had dropped by half. Bread lines and soup kitchens became commonplace across America. Farmers couldn't afford to harvest their crops and left them rotting in the fields while people elsewhere starved.[1]

Thirteen million people were displaced during the Great Depression. Many lived in shantytowns called "Hoovervilles," named for President Herbert Hoover, who had presided over the nation's economic collapse.[2] Thousands of homeless lived in New York City's Central Park. Along California highways, Dust Bowl migrants were stopped at checkpoints called "bum blockades." In Oakland, California's infamous homeless encampment, Pipe City, also known as Miseryville, 200 men lived in sections of unused sewer pipes.[3]

Within the first 100 days of taking office, Roosevelt succeeded in pushing through legislation intended to stabilize industrial and agricultural production, create jobs, and stimulate economic recovery. A constellation of federal programs, "the New Deal" gave millions of Americans desperate for a job the chance to earn a paycheck. Many were skilled professionals; others got training on the job. In less than a decade they built tens of thousands of public works across the country—roads, bridges, libraries, courthouses, hospitals, airports, schools, post offices, housing—and parks.[4]

One of FDR's top priorities was to establish the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). In its first three months of existence, the CCC enrolled a quarter of a million men (despite pleas from American women and Eleanor Roosevelt's efforts to open the CCC to women.) [5] Most of the men were teenagers, unskilled, and unemployed. More than 3 million would eventually serve in the CCC—living in military-style camps scattered throughout all 48 states. It was largest peacetime mobilization in our nation's history,[6] demanding unprecedented cooperation among the Departments of War, Labor, Agriculture, Interior and dozens more federal agencies.[7]

“Thank God for President Roosevelt.
Without him, I don’t know what we would have done.”

–Ruben Keel, CCC Company, 1459 NP-10
Great Smoky Mountains National Park, 1933[i]

A primary goal of the CCC was to get young men out of the cities and build their health and morale. The Corps planted billions of trees, fought forest fires, and repaired lands ravaged by floods and drought. But the CCC’s work in the parks remains its best-known achievement.

Developing parks was a key strategy for bringing relief to rural areas where many lived in poverty. In 1933 FDR issued Executive Orders that doubled the size of the National Park System and strengthened the National Park Service.[8] The newly minted CCC was deployed to make the parks more accessible and tourist-friendly.

Eight hundred parks across the nation, including 94 national parks[9] bear the imprint the CCC in the form of visitor centers, lodges, campgrounds, cabins, shelters, bathhouses, water systems, picnic areas, roads, bridges, trails, lookouts, and comfort stations. Much of what the CCC constructed—like the great lodges—is celebrated for its design and craftsmanship. The men earned about a dollar a day. All but $5 of their monthly earnings was sent home to their families so that the program could benefit the greatest number of people.[10]

The work of the CCC directly led to the creation of park systems in dozens of states.[11] Many states organized parks systems for the first tie in order to qualify for federal funds. Conrad Wirth, who supervised the CCC’s work in the state parks and later became the Director of the National Park Service, observed that what the CCC had accomplished in the parks in ten years was equal to what might have been expected in 50 years without the Corps’ assistance.[12]

Still the New Deal had its critics. Some in Congress, intent on cutting funds, charged that New Deal agencies were run "extravagantly, wastefully and inefficiently" by legions of shovel-leaning loafers looking for "three hots [meals] and a cot."[13] But the New Deal, and the CCC in particular, were enormously popular with the people.[14]

Through the decades, the CCC has stood as a model of public service, inspiring such programs as the Job Corps, Peace Corps, VISTA, AmeriCorps, the Youth-Adult Conservation Corps (YACC), many local CCCs, and other community-based training and job placement programs that offer young people a chance to succeed.

"It is my belief that what is being accomplished will conserve our national resources, create future national wealth, and prove of moral and spiritual value not only to those of you taking part, but to the rest to the country as well."

–President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Message to CCC enrollees, July 8, 1933

The New Deal decade is widely acknowledged as the "Golden Age of America's parks."[14] Although seen by millions of park visitors every year, the work of the CCC is rarely recognized or interpreted. Ren and Helen Davis, who toured state and national parks to document the CCC's legacy, wrote "Each year millions of Americans visit state, regional, and national parks. They hike trails, picnic by blue-water lakes, camp beneath towering trees, and relax in rustic lodges or cabins—often without giving a thought to the young men of the Depression-era CCC who created or enhanced the parks they so much enjoy."[15]

Some parks mark trails and buildings constructed by the CCC. New Mexico's Bandelier National Park does more than most. It offers visitors a booklet guiding them through the park's CCC historic district, which was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1987. The Prairie Creek Visitor Center at California's Redwoods National Park provides signage celebrating the history of the CCC in the park. Displays at the museum at the Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado, note their provenance as the CCC. Still, opportunities to preserve, showcase, and interpret the physical legacy of the New Deal-era in the state and national parks—and to honor those who built it—are largely overlooked.

Few visitors to Mammoth Cave National Park in Kentucky would know, for example, that in order to share the risk of their exhaustive and dangerous work underground, CCC crews took turns building the caverns' trail system. Or that in Death Valley, California, CCC work sites and camps remain but are off limits to visitors. [16]

Many of New Mexico's parks and monuments were built or enhanced by local laborers and craftsmen working for the WPA and CCC. One signature example, the Old Santa Fe Trail Building, served as the Southwest Regional Headquarters of the National Park Service from 1939 until 1995. Constructed by local Native American- and Hispanic CCC workers, the building is a singular cultural landscape. Due to budget cuts, it now serves as Park Service administrative offices and has very limited public use.

Over the past 20 years the Park Service has made strides explicating the roles of the CCC and the New Deal's Works Progress Administration (WPA) in shaping the national parks. But interpretation is uneven at best and contingent on the interest and knowledge of local park staff. No national standards or interpretive materials appear to exist. The larger story behind these New Deal landscapes—the primacy of parks in the national agenda; the massive public investment made in them; the men whose lives were shaped by the CCC; the ethos of national service, the sense of commitment to future generations—is seldom told.

"It's not a matter of money, it's a matter of priorities, and the National Park Service over the years has not developed a constituency that will lobby on behalf of it.[17]

--Dwight T. Pitcaithley
Professor of History New Mexico State University
Former Chief Historian of the National Park Service

In 2015 the National Park System, logged more than 305 million visits—an all-time record.[18] Despite unprecedented and growing demands on the parks, and even as the U.S. economy has regained footing since the Great Recession, the nation's parks are starved for funds. The National Park Service alone has nearly $11.5 billion in deferred maintenance.[19] The current appropriation for national parks is 1/15th of one percent of the federal budget—about half of what it was in 1981.[20] By contrast, land acquisition, historic preservation and wildlife protection programs were encouraged and generously funded during the New Deal.

Without adequate government support, state and national parks have been forced to reduce staff and raise visitor fees. Parks everywhere rely on volunteers and private contractors to do the work that park employees once performed. "Public-private partnerships" are viewed as the solution to fill the gap left by years of budget cuts.

A growing number of "friends of the park" groups act as conduits for private donations to the parks. Corporate "philanthropy" is pursued not only for special initiatives, like the National Park Centennial, but to cover the basics that the parks no longer can afford. Dependence on the private sector has become official National Park Service policy.

NPS Director Jonathan Jarvis's recent memorandum, "New Framework for National Park Service Partnerships and Philanthropic Stewardship in the 21st Century,"[21] has raised concerns over the extent to which corporate donors expect or are promised benefits in return for their support. Under the new guidelines, the Park Service will allow the use of park names and imagery in corporate advertising campaigns, grant naming rights to park facilities, and allow the display of corporate logos on park infrastructure and displays.

Director Jarvis, who sits on the Board of the National Park Foundation, recently offered assurances that any donor recognition the Park Service provides "is done tastefully and appropriately." "Thoughtful corporate philanthropy is more than a source of funding for America's national parks," he said. "It is a cornerstone of their origins and key to their next 100 years.[22]

The Park Service claims that the parks have always benefited from philanthropy, but historically such generosity has not been tied to corporate marketing. Corporate donors to the Parks Centennial include Boeing, Disney, Budweiser, Coca Cola, Suburu, Wells Fargo, and Air-Wick, which has introduced scented air fresheners inspired by the national parks.[23]

Budweiser, which donated $2.5 million to the National Park Foundation, received a waiver to the Park Service's longstanding policy against partnering with alcoholic beverage companies.[24] Bud bottles now feature the Statue of Liberty.

The nonprofit Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER), a national alliance of local state and federal resource professionals, points to the $2.5 million "Proud Partner" donation agreement between Coca Cola and the National Park Foundation as an example of "creeping corporatization." In a 5-year agreement that ended in 2012, Coca Cola was granted exclusive use of park logos for cause marketing campaigns (to the exclusion of all other beverage companies). While under the agreement, Coca Cola temporarily blocked a ban that the Park Service had imposed on the sale of disposable plastic water bottles at Grand Canyon National Park, [25] a major source of litter.

Parks and their stewardship have traditionally been government's role—a public investment for a public good. But after years of budget cuts and partisan politics, park managers appear resigned to the necessity of private fundraising and to doing more with less. The underfunding of the parks by Congress and state governments has barely penetrated the public's consciousness. Raising awareness is crucial.

The New Deal is the story of the coming of age of the parks themselves. it also is a story about what Americans value and were once willing to pay for. As such, the cultural landscape of the New Deal is not only about the past, it's about the future. If in the hardest of hard times, our country invested in the best idea America ever had,[26] why not now?

Susan Ives works with nonprofits, public agencies, and philanthropies for social change, including the Living New Deal, a nonprofit organization at UC Berkeley that interprets and preserves the legacy of the New Deal. The Living New Deal is crowd sourcing the first online archive of all the New Deal built, and has an interactive map showing more than 11,000 New Deal sites and public artworks. https://livingnewdeal.org. Susan previously served as Vice President for Trust for Public Land. She holds a BA in Journalism from the University of Michigan and a Master's in Public Administration from Harvard University. Susanives@livingnewdeal.org

End Notes

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