

The Centennial Initiative
Public Employees For Environmental Responsibility (PEER)
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On August 25, 2006, Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne announced the Centennial Initiative. The Secretary proposed that one hundred million dollars of Federal funds, for ten years beginning in Fiscal Year 2008, be leveraged with equal private donations to restore the national parks by their centennial year - 2016. In August 2007, the National Park Service (NPS) announced over 200 projects that qualified for inclusion in the Initiative's first year.

While many of the projects are worthy, others raise questions. A good example of a questionable Centennial project is an 8-mile mountain bicycle trail to be constructed in Big Bend National Park in partnership with the International Mountain Bicycle Association (IMBA). The Big Bend bike trail raises concerns about certain aspects of the Initiative.

While the Big Bend trail appears to be aberration from the worthwhile nature of many of this year's projects, nonetheless, it is an aberration that must be reconsidered and avoided in the future project selection.

- Project Selection

Big Bend maintains two hundred miles of trail and is struggling to do so. Hundreds of miles of dirt roads and trails are already open to mountain bicycles in the Big Bend area. Big Bend needs a newly constructed bicycle trail like it needs a hole in the head. But, the trail rose to the top tier because a "partner" both proposed it and is willing to contribute half the construction money. In effect, the "partners" initiated this project. Were it not for IMBA, the NPS would never have conceived of constructing a new trail primarily for bicycles.

- The Backlog and Centennial Initiative

Park officials and organizations, such as the National Parks Conservation Association, have often cited the unmet maintenance needs of the parks as evidence of deteriorating conditions. This accumulated need is commonly called the "maintenance backlog." The reported maintenance backlog rose from \$1.9 billion in 1987 to \$6.1 billion in 1997, according to the General Accounting Office (since renamed the Government Accountability Office).

Today, the NPS cites the figure of approximately \$8 billion as to what is needed to correct the deferred maintenance deficiencies throughout the national park system.

In response to the backlog, Congress enacted the recreational fee demonstration program beginning in Fiscal Year 1996. That program has raised nearly \$1.5 billion for the NPS through Fiscal Year 2007.

The Centennial Initiative does not help cure the deficiencies, at least so far. There is no connection between the vast majority of the Centennial projects and the backlogged needs that the NPS identified. The Big Bend bike trail illustrates how the Centennial Initiative may worsen the situation. The bike trail creates new, unnecessary infrastructure. (Even those who consider a bike trail “nice” cannot describe it with a straight face as “necessary.”) As a general rule, constructing additional infrastructure will not reduce the backlog.

There are cases where new infrastructure is needed in a park. But how does the construction of non-essential infrastructure, like the bike trail, rise to the top 200 needs of the national park system? This relates to the issue of “Project Selection.” There are not many partners who want to donate to taking care of the facilities that the NPS already has. Partnerships may tend to drive the process towards the “new” infrastructure more than is healthy for the parks, with no connection to the list of backlogged needs the NPS has identified.

In future project selection, PEER hopes that the Centennial Initiative will avoid new infrastructure in favor of taking care of the ever growing “backlog.”

- Some Projects are Unwise

Among the Centennial projects, many are good. Others are benign. A few are not just unnecessary but are bad ideas, as illustrated by constructing a bicycle trail from scratch.

The “partner” will earn a lot of say-so over the project because they contribute money. At Big Bend, IMBA (in February 2006) laid out the design they want for the new bicycle trail. They want no water bars so no dismounts are necessary. They want nothing close to a road. They want lots of curves so that the speeding riders face challenges and thrills akin to a racecourse. Providing enjoyment is part of the NPS mission, but “enjoyment,” if we read the Organic Act carefully, is to be of unimpaired resources. Thrill riding, like Ferris wheels, is not the kind of enjoyment the 1916 authors of the Organic Act had in mind.

- Uncertainty Over Future of the Centennial Initiative

In the past, new initiatives to “benefit” the parks have come in the guise of a gimmick-ridden program, heavily tinged with development. In 1981, Secretary James Watt tried to place a five-year moratorium on parkland acquisition and wished to divert those monies to park maintenance and construction. He called it the “Park Restoration and Improvement Program”(PRIP). Congress rejected this approach, instead appropriating \$332 million for acquiring lands in parks in the combined Fiscal Years 1982, 1983 and 1984. In addition, Congress funded efforts to reduce the backlog by several hundred million dollars under PRIP.

The Initiative contains an element not found in PRIP. Under PRIP, the NPS prioritized its maintenance needs, albeit imperfectly. Under the Initiative, the private “partners” play a large role in deciding what projects move forward. It is axiomatic that a “partner” expects something for their contribution. The Initiative vests in the “partner” too much

control over priorities. Thus, the wishes of the special interest partner may drive both what is to be done and how it is to be done, as at Big Bend – a bicycle trail, designed to meet only the recreational specifications of mountain bikers.

By this means, unnecessary projects make the cut of what is funded as a Centennial Initiative project. The parks could become a “partnership pinata.” Over time, the character and resources of the parks may be transformed under the allure of monied partners. This is a potential pitfall of the Centennial Initiative.

- Wilderness and land Acquisition Ignored

Unfortunately, the National Park Service Centennial will not address steps required to allow the national park system reach its true potential on its 100th birthday, including –

- Millions of acres of roadless park areas that have yet to be designated wilderness;
- The Land and Water Conservation fund will have received the promised revenues so that the NPS acquires non-federal lands in the 84 million-acre national park system;
- The park system secures water rights, clears the vistas, restores natural systems, and historic buildings; and
- A national park system free of residual rights and privileges that undermine both conservation and enjoyment.

In short, PEER wishes to see a national park system that is strengthened against the inevitable forces of degradation that lie ahead in its second century. Such a centennial would truly be “second only to the creation of the National Park Service itself” as NPS Director Bomar has described the Centennial Initiative.