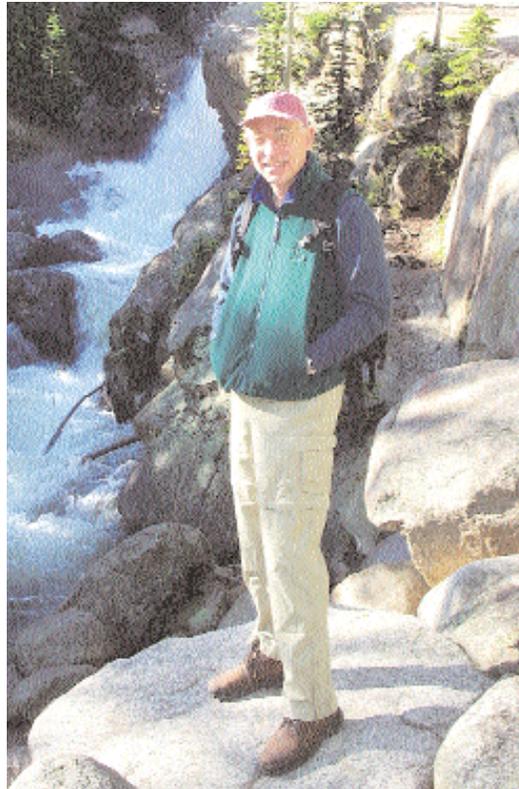


*“Accumulating scientific knowledge historically has not been a commitment process. It goes in fits and starts based on funding and changes in staff.... We must go beyond information collection to build institutional memory for understanding the ecology of the landscape.”*

Michael A. Soukup, 13 August 2002, second meeting of the inventory and monitoring networks

## The Year in Review

NPS PHOTO BY CRAIG AXTELL



Associate Director Soukup at Alberta Falls, Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado.

### Reflections on 2002

*by Michael Soukup*

THE MISSION OF THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE—to preserve roughly 83 million acres in more than 385 national parks unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations—is as honorable and extraordinary as it is complex and technical. The variety, scope, and size of the units we manage and the need to keep them unimpaired require a sophisticated knowledge of how natural systems work and what does and does not harm them. This year saw continued progress under the National Park Service’s program to double the level of effort and

budget for natural resource management in parks. Since its inception, the Natural Resource Challenge has been a multiyear program and commitment by NPS leaders to double the base funds spent on natural resource management, from approximately \$100 million of the \$2.3 billion NPS budget to \$200 million annually. Although keeping the Challenge on track in a period of tight budgets and other pressing priorities has proved difficult, the fourth year’s budget looked promising as the year closed under a continuing resolution.

Part of one's satisfaction in helping the National Park Service fulfill its mission comes from working alongside many committed and talented people who have dedicated their lives to furthering the national parks. Regrettably, in 2002 the National Park Service lost one of its most valuable scientific assets—a person with a deep and long-term understanding of park resources—Jim Allen. We pay tribute to him on page 54. The Service also lost to cancer one of its most well-respected leaders, Boyd Evison, a friend to natural resources and to all aspects of park management. Boyd was one of the first high-level managers to understand the need for science in parks and is remembered by many current NPS employees in natural resource disciplines as their first advocate.

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*“We need special kinds of science advisors for ... managers.”*

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The loss of these men, plus the retirements of many senior managers who were strong leaders of the Natural Resource Challenge, has made me think about the circumstances and processes that produce the institutional memory of the National Park Service. For example, the practice of having dedicated research scientists and park naturalists in and focused on parks, and consequently managers who have depended directly upon them and their understanding of natural phenomena, has faded.

When the Natural Resource Challenge was developed, two needs stood out as especially critical. The first was the need to broaden the appreciation within the culture of the National Park Service for managing with state-of-the-art science. The second was the need for a wide range of science-based information. The Challenge is making great strides in acquiring basic inventory information. If fully funded, the Natural Resource Challenge will give the inventory and monitoring networks the infrastructure and foundation required to gather and analyze resource condition and trend data into the future. Managers will not have to guess at whether they are managing in such a way that tomorrow's park visitor will be able to experience the unspoiled natural heritage of the nation.

What remains to be done? Half of the monitoring infrastructure was unfunded at the end of FY 2002, leaving half of the parks without the capability to monitor park resource conditions and trends. And it is too early to tell what lasting

impact the Challenge will have on broadening the culture of the National Park Service.

Managing park resources requires much more than good scientific information. Information must be synthesized into an understanding that can be applied in the full context of legal mandates amidst many other demands on parks and the National Park System. Managers must make long-term investments in understanding park resources and use that knowledge to make difficult decisions that protect resources while welcoming visitor enjoyment. For as natural resources become more popular in the modern landscape, the roles our national parks will play in an urbanized society will intensify, guaranteeing great interest in the rationale underlying any management decision. We need managers who can bring people together, fairly consider all sides, and make prudent decisions.

We need special kinds of science advisors for those managers. Parks need research scientists who stay in parks for much of their career, who accumulate and institutionalize a deep knowledge of park resources by synthesizing all the data developed by all scientists who can be encouraged to work in parks. They must communicate with numerous audiences and devise ways to perpetuate that understanding when they leave. The professional staffs and natural resource programs of the National Park Service today are certainly heartening. Yet it is not clear how we can develop the kind of human resources represented by people like Jim Allen or how we can retain their levels of understanding in parks over time.

The year 2002 saw continued solidification of the gains made to date through the Natural Resource Challenge, but also indicated where and how far we have to go to ensure the unspoiled natural park experience of the future. ■



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