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The “Disneyfication” of Nature True Wilderness or Mickey and Goofy?

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Western Turf Wars: The Politics of Public Lands Ranching

In August 1988, at the first-ever meeting of the pro-recreation-industry “wise-use” movement in Reno, NV, participants wrote a 25-point agenda: item #11 of that agenda was “Reorganize the National Park Service. This includes the implementation of Mission 2010, a 20-year construction program that would maximize concession stands and accommodations in national parks, and remove entry limits and bring in private firms experienced in people moving, such as Walt Disney, to manage the parks.” A May 29, 2001, story by George Foster in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* reported that Lou Delorme, the National Park Service’s point man on alternative transportation, was visiting Disney World in Orlando, FL, to learn how their transportation systems work.

The Future Is Now

In 1979 several companies in the recreation/entertainment industry formed a promotional organization known as the American Recreation Coalition (ARC), one of whose goals was the imposition of user-fees on public lands. In 1996 that became a reality when Congress attached a rider, without opportunity for public comment, to an appropriations bill establishing the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program. Since then fees have been imposed at selected locations on lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Park Service. In articles that appeared in previous issues of *Earth Times* I’ve discussed user fees as they pertain to Forest Service and BLM lands. In this article I’ll focus on their application to National Parks.

What are the Fees About?

On the surface, recreation fees, or “fee-demo” as the demonstration has been called, appear as a reasonable solution to augment national park budgets. Before fee-demo, most national parks charged a low entrance fee (\$5 per vehicle in Yosemite and Grand Canyon, for example) that did not go directly towards maintenance of the park where the fee was collected, but, instead, went into a federal general accounting fund. With fee-demo, the idea was to charge a nominal fee with 80% remaining where the fee was collected. When

fee-demo was first enacted, entrance fees to the most heavily visited national parks (Yosemite, Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, and Teton) quadrupled to \$20 per vehicle.

At the heart of the debate over park fees is the question of how parks should be managed. Should they accommodate as many visitors as want to come, and provide for them every technologically possible activity they desire? Or are there certain “natural values” that parks should maintain, even if doing so would restrict both the number of visitors and the activities available to them?

For example, should “natural quiet” be a value that park managers strive to maintain? Currently, commercial air tours fly over approximately 50 National Park Service sites; 88,000 air tours are flown each year at Grand Canyon National Park alone. Of course, the issue of noise is not limited just to the air tour industry—manufacturers and users of snowmobiles, motorcycles, snow ski and recreational vehicles might also be affected by noise limitations at national parks.

Cultural View

A recent online paper by Andrea Leigh observes that there is a prevailing assumption that the natural world should always be made over for convenience. “National parks are viewed as icons, seen by the public through a cultural lens shaped by advanced technology. This shift in tourist sensibilities directly correlates to the rise of amusement parks, the growth and development of creating simulations of natural wonders embedded in technological structures.”

Disney, an ARC member, has both contributed to this view and benefited from it through its amusement parks—most recently through California Adventure, a West coast version of Disney World that condenses and “Disney-izes” California’s most popular tourist spots including Yosemite and the California Redwoods. Again quoting from Leigh: “The narrative expressed in California Adventure is told in a commercial sense, through elaborate design and concepts. It tells the story of hardship and adventure, but does not require its guests to possess a particular set of skills to enjoy the experience. This is anathema to the real life commitment needed to enjoy and protect true wilderness, which involves a deep connection to place. To be committed to wilderness requires a sense of spirit and adventure, it takes sweat, dirt, and good conditioning. It takes time. The wilderness experience told through the eyes of Disney is in the form of gift shops, design features, promotional gimmicks, and technological wizardry. Disney replaces the real world with an imaginary one, and, in the process, has transformed reality into themed entertainment.”

With Disney now advising the National Park Service on its transportation systems, as well as lobbying the Congress through ARC (and probably otherwise) we should not be surprised to see “themed entertainment” appearing in our national parks as well as at amusement parks. Indeed the distinction between the two is likely to diminish.

Where does the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program stand today?

Last June Senators Bob Graham (D-FL) and Daniel Akaka (D-HI) introduced SB 1011 which would allow up to 40% of the recreation fees collected at any park to be used agency-wide.

When the program was initiated in 1996 it was promoted on the provision that only 20% would be used off-site. And incidentally, as it pertains to the management of the national forests, SB 1011 allows the displacement of regularly budgeted funds with income derived from fees—thereby violating another provision of the 1996 legislation. As an editorial in the June 20, 2001, edition of the *Idaho Mt. Express* stated: “The bill unmaskes the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program and finally shows it for what it is: a government shell game foisted on a gullible public.”