

Environmental Law Society Parks and Wildlife Conference

William Penn Mott, Jr. Gives Keynote Speech

by Amy Alpaugh

William Penn Mott, Jr., director of the National Park Service, gave the keynote address at the Environmental Law Society's Parks and Wildlife Law Conference Held at U.C. Davis on February 27, 1988. Mott began his lengthy career of park administration in 1933 as a landscape architect for the National Park Service (NPS). He was appointed director of California's state park system in 1967, by then governor, Ronald Reagan. Mott has had a varied career, including working as general manager of the East Bay Regional Park District in California and founding the California State Parks Foundation. He was appointed as director of the National Park Service by President Reagan.

Mott's speech was both encouraging and enlightening to environmentalists. He did not paint a rosy picture of our national parks' condition. Citing a recent NPS survey, Mott stated that many of the parks are undergoing declining quality and are "rated as being in poor condition." Yet rather than gloss over this fact, Mott discussed the tough problems confronting the Park Service and offered unique and innovative solutions. One had the impression that this was not just another career administrator spewing rhetoric, but a man willing to fight in order to safeguard the national parks.

Mott focused on the mandate of the Park Service. He stressed that "managing the parks has become a complex job which cannot be done in a vacuum." The national parks are no longer isolated islands in a sea of wilderness. Today, mankind's influence is continuously encroaching on the parks. Oil and gas companies deplete park resources. Developers build on park borders threatening ecosystems within. Federal and state agencies battle over resources rather than working together with integrated plans. The ability of the Park Service to

respond to these changes will influence the national parks' fate.

"Park personnel must become increasingly more sophisticated as problems become more complex," stated Mott. He has taken this challenge seriously. Top people in the Park Service are being sent to business schools such as Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania in order to acquire the business savvy necessary to negotiate effectively with large oil and gas companies. A sabbatical program has also been set up so that park personnel can take time off and see how other sites operate. Most importantly, Mott is spreading the message that park people cannot be passive but must "carry the sword" and actively work to protect the parks.

Mott wants park people to be good business people. He wants them to be able to "market their product". He is unabashed about using this phraseology, and he thinks that educating the public and being responsive to what they want from their parks will ensure public support for management decisions. Park interpreters will therefore begin educating park visitors about biological diversity. Mott hopes that by learning that wilderness areas are essential to the preservation of gene pools, the public will support efforts to protect them. He has also been active in studying what types of people use the parks and what they expect from the experience. For this purpose, Mott has set up a special department of social science within the NPS. In this way, Mott hopes to market a better product and increase public support.

Mott criticized the present administrative scheme in which federal agencies make independent determinations regarding the fate of government land. He said, "No individual agency owns the land; it belongs to the people," and chastised administrators to keep this in mind. Legislation may be needed, Mott

feels, to ensure interagency cooperation. He readily agreed with the findings of Professor Joseph Sax (see accompanying article) that park personnel were often reluctant to take a strong stand to protect the parks when confronted with external threats.

Mott has not been afraid to make decisions which may be unpopular in some quarters. He has tightened control on research projects funded by the Park Service. In attempts to form a more cohesive and useful research strategy, he cut off grants to some academics whose research benefitted themselves more than the NPS.

Mott is also taking a more aggressive stance on environmental impact reporting. Now when an oil company wants to do seismic exploration within a park in order to determine whether resources exist there, Mott wants their environmental impact report to include the cumulative effects of the prospective drilling, not just the exploration. In spite

of the legal hurdles, Mott is pushing for strategies such as this which he hopes will counteract the encroachment of big business in the parks.

"Our national parks are outdoor cathedrals and natural universities, but they can no longer be considered sanctuaries. With urban development encroaching on the borders, and big business knocking on the doors, the Park Service needs to come out fighting." Mott is struggling to make sure that the National Park Service is ready. Let's hope that they are.

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