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AMERICA'S LARGEST CLASSROOM

EXPANDING THE ROLE OF
EDUCATION IN OUR PARKS

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LETTER FROM WOODSTOCK



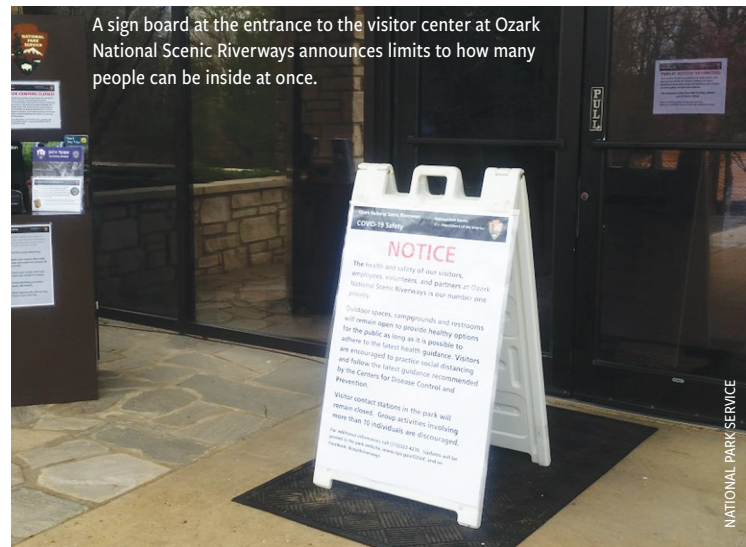
TREADING OVER THE CRUST OF A VOLCANO

Rolf Diamant

As I write this 22nd Letter from Woodstock in early May, 2020, the nation’s response to the unrelenting spread of Covid-19 remains as uneven and chaotic as ever. When the pandemic took hold in March, Interior Secretary Bernhardt’s much-publicized decision waiving national park entrance fees encouraged large numbers of people to visit and inevitably congregate in popular parks. We will never know how many thousands of individuals, including National Park Service staff and partners, were placed at risk not only inside the parks, but also in neighboring communities; and as visitors returned home, in various places around the country. When state health officials and local civic leaders protested (with the quiet support of some park managers), Bernhardt’s policy was eventually walked back, replaced with a patchwork quilt of park facility closures—so-called “operational modifications.” These modifications, however uncoordinated, afforded superintendents the ability to take important mitigation measures and in some instances close entire parks. However, no sooner had these measures been put in place, then the Administration called for “reopening” national parks, part of a precipitous rush to “reopen America” without a credible plan for protecting the public health and

restoring people’s confidence in their own safety. With an eye on the November elections, once again national parks are being cynically used to project a Potemkin-like illusion of normalcy in America. I don’t think this will end well.

The current Covid-19 debacle is likely a harbinger for the accelerating climate crisis. Much has been said about resiliency and adaptation as essential





Covid-19 safety poster, website of Saint-Gaudens National Historical Park. | NPS

elements of a mitigation strategy for widespread environmental disruption. These plans all hinge on a common assumption that we can marshal the social cohesion and political will to act. But there are daunting prerequisites for such a mobilization. As Jon Jarvis made clear in the inaugural issue of *Parks Stewardship Forum*, we need “a more peaceful, equitable, and cooperative planet” if we are to have “a viable future.”

The pressures being placed on the parks and the people who care for their stewardship have never been greater. Operating in a time of pandemic and destabilization of the world’s climate adds a whole new dimension of institutional stress. This stress is a reflection of much larger trends affecting federal public service. NPS, like its sister agencies and departments, from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, to the Bureau of Land Management, to the Environmental Protection Agency, is in the process of being downsized and

de-professionalized. Science and expertise have often been regarded with suspicion by high-ranking political appointees in federal land-managing agencies, but some of the current leadership, with their documented histories of contempt for the very organizations they now lead and for normative standards of good government, have taken this attitude to a new level. These disturbing trends have progressively hollowed out the self-confidence and morale of the federal work force.

What we are learning each day from the pandemic is just how broken things really are; not only what we can see all around us, but more importantly, what lies out of our line of sight. For decades public institutions and services have been serially cut, while managers struggled heroically to “do more with less” and present a brave face of sufficiency to the public. That façade was never viable and is no longer even reassuring, as with Lewis Carroll’s mythical Cheshire Cat whose serene grin remains

intact when the rest of its body has all but disappeared. Like the White House coronavirus briefings, when everything is said and done, we are not sure what is reality and what is fantasy. In the case of the US national parks and other kindred civic institutions, we are coming to the realization that something larger and more substantial is gradually fading away with little or no public scrutiny.

For far too long the public sector, including our national parks, has been both under-resourced and undermined by persistent calls for federal budget austerity and antigovernment ideology. This Administration didn't originate these dogmas, but they are part and parcel with its relentless rollback of environmental and public health and safety regulations. Writing about the federal government's coronavirus response, journalist Farhad Manjoo flatly stated in a *New York Times* op-ed that "the plain ineptitude we see now is the end result of a decades-long effort to systematically plunder the federal government of professionalism and expertise and rigor and ability."²

This is not the first time the United States has confronted a governance crisis of such magnitude. In an 1856 conversation with the soon-to-be great park-maker Frederick Law Olmsted, an English magazine editor offered a hauntingly prescient admonition that Americans were "treading over the crust of a volcano," and grimly warned that "history assure[s] us that either a speedy reaction must set in, or that the political system must fall into ruin and dissolution."³

Today, a speedy reaction must indeed set in soon if we are to reverse direction and begin to move towards a more equitable, cooperative, and peaceful society and secure for ourselves a viable future on this planet. Reinvesting in public institutions and services and rebuilding a government that makes fact-based decisions are indispensable steps for not only strengthening our commonwealth but also providing the resiliency so wanting today—and



so desperately needed tomorrow—to mitigate the larger environmental challenges we will inevitably face.

ENDNOTES

1. Jonathan B. Jarvis, "Designing Climate Resilience for People and Nature at the Landscape Scale," *Parks Stewardship Forum* 36(1): 17–18 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.5070/P536146408>
2. Farhad Manjoo, "I Don't Know Who Needs to Hear This, but Brands Can't Save You: America's Failed Response to the Coronavirus is a Direct Result of Decades of Starving Federal Agencies of Expertise," *New York Times*, March 18, 2020. <https://nyti.ms/2IVYvQm>
3. Charles E. Beveridge and Charles C. McLaughlin (eds.), *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, 1852–1857: Volume 2, Slavery and the South* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1981), 383.

The views expressed in editorial columns published in Parks Stewardship Forum are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official positions of the University of California, the Institute for Parks, People, and Biodiversity, or the George Wright Society.