

THE ROLE OF A NATIONAL PARKS ORGANIZATION

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1. Purpose of a National Park

Before describing the role of a national parks organization, it is first necessary to state the purpose of a national park.

The generally accepted purpose of proclaiming areas of land as national parks is to conserve the biodiversity and landscape, together with other objects of scientific or cultural interest (e.g. geological, historical, archaeological and ethnological), for the long term sustained benefit of the nation. Potentially these benefits can be many and diverse. They are normally classified into tangible and non-tangible.

Traditional conservationists tend to consider the provision of non-tangible benefits such as scientific research, education, outdoor recreation, spiritual satisfaction and aesthetic enjoyment as the most important category of benefits. However, the more progressive conservationists, particularly those working in under developed countries, tend to focus more on the tangible benefits. Examples of these are economic benefits from tourism (including job creation) and the sustained harvesting of resources such as wood, medicines, fish and honey from the park by neighboring communities.

2. Accountabilities and responsibilities

Given the above purpose of a national park, national parks organizations are formed to act on behalf of the nation as custodians of the national parks. As such, national parks organizations are accountable to the nation (usually through parliament) and specifically they are entrusted with the responsibility of:

- conserving the biodiversity, landscapes and other objects of interest in the national parks
- ensuring that the potential benefits to the nation are maximized on a sustained basis and within the constraints of the conservation objectives.

In other words, national parks organizations should be responsible for achieving the purpose of a national park. In most developed countries the scope of a national parks organization's accountabilities and responsibilities does not extend to other protected areas such as special reserves, scientific reserves, recreation areas, etc. The accountabilities and responsibilities for these other protected areas is generally given to provincial, state or regional authorities. The USA and South Africa are good examples of this model. The reason for this is that it allows a national parks organization to focus and strive for excellence in fulfilling the role of custodian of the nation's prime

natural heritages. In developing countries, national parks organizations that extend their accountabilities and responsibilities beyond national parks have a history of mediocrity and failure.

3. Powers and functions

Given the above accountabilities and responsibilities, a national parks organization's powers and functions should be *inter alia* the following :

3.1. Control

To achieve a national parks purpose as described above, the following controls are required:

- entry and exit into a park by the public
 - times of entry and exit
 - places of entry and exit
 - number of people entering
- Behavior of visitors while in the park including restriction of activities in various zones.
- Illegal or legal utilization of resources (fauna, flora and artifacts) in the park e.g. prevention of destruction or overuse.
- Use of the park by the private sector
- The development of buildings and infrastructure within the park

To control effectively, a national parks organization must be delegated the powers to make and enforce regulations. This should include powers of arrest and the imposition of spot fines for minor offenses.

In other words, a parks organization cannot be accountable to the nation and entrusted with the responsibility of achieving a national parks purpose (as described above) while another organization is given the function and powers to make and enforce regulations.

3.2 Provision of facilities/services

Maximizing the potential benefits from a park demands the provision of many facilities and services. These normally include roads, paths, signage, interpretation centers, education centers, research centers, ablution blocks and overnight accommodation (including camping sites, rustic huts, dormitories and lodges).

To ensure that benefits are optimized according to the needs of many different interest groups the provision of such facilities requires very sound planning by the national parks organization. Also, once provided, the sound maintenance of these facilities becomes another important function of the national parks organization.

It may sometimes be more cost effective and efficient to allow the private sector to provide certain facilities and services. Nevertheless, this does not take away the responsibilities of the national parks organization to ensure that adequate facilities of an acceptable standard are provided. Thus, regardless of whether the national parks organization provides the facilities and services directly themselves, or, whether they are provided by the private sector, the powers and functions related to the planning and control of such facilities should always remain vested in the national parks organization.

3.3 Fees and tariffs

As part of its controlling function and the need to recover costs from the use of the park and its facilities and services, it should be part of a national parks organization's function to charge fees and tariffs for the following:

- entry into the parks
- the use of facilities and services in parks
- privileges extended to the private sector for the provision of facilities and services (rentals and concession fees) in parks.
- conducting research or filming in parks
- harvesting resources in parks (e.g. timber, plants for medicine, etc.)

Apart from requiring the powers to charge fees, a parks organization must also be delegated the powers to :

- Determine the fees and tariffs charged
- Revise these from time to time as needed.
- Retain the revenue earned from the charging of such fees and tariffs for the purpose of covering the costs of conserving the park and maintaining and improving the facilities and services provided.

It is important to note that determining and revising fees and tariffs is a very complex undertaking. This is because the parks organization must constantly strive to strike a balance between :

- Making the benefits from the park accessible to the majority of the national citizens, particularly the less privileged.
- Charging market related prices to foreign tourists and well established investors.
- Securing sufficient income to manage and continue developing the parks system and the parks organization.

Striking this balance requires ongoing research in the fields of resource economics, socio-economics, marketing and business. Such research must be conducted by a team of diverse expertise. Thus, since it is the accountability of the parks organization to strike this balance, it should be their function to employ the diverse expertise required. But, of even greater importance, it is essential that they are delegated the power to determine and revise the fees and tariffs they charge. In other words, a parks organization cannot be accountable for striking the balance while another organization is given the powers and function to determine and revise the fees and tariffs.

3.4. Conserving National Parks

As already mentioned under section 2 above, the most important responsibility of a national parks organization in achieving the purpose of a national park is to conserve the biodiversity, landscape and other objects of scientific and cultural interest within a park. All other responsibilities should be constrained by this overriding responsibility.

The function of achieving this conservation responsibility is termed “**conservation management**”. Thus, a national parks organization should be delegated the powers to apply conservation management within the national parks. The function of conservation management involves the following tasks :

- Introducing and enforcing regulations for preventing the habitation of a park and/or halting over-utilization /destruction of the parks resources by the public.
- Setting biodiversity and other conservation objectives and goals which normally include quantifying the limits of permissible change to the system.
- Determining sustained utilization quotas for the use of resources within the park by the public.
- Researching and monitoring at regular intervals to measure any changes (trends) occurring within the system and be in a position to interpret the cause and effect of these changes and the implications thereof.
- Reviewing utilization quotas and/or determining and applying interventionist actions if measured changes are beyond the permissible limits. (Interventionist action could involve *inter alia* protection from wild fires, planned application of fire, afforestation, alien plant removal, selective tree felling, etc).
- Re-monitoring to determine whether enforcement of controls, utilization quotas and/or interventionist actions are achieving the conservation objectives and goals.

3.5. Proclaiming new National Parks

The powers to proclaim and deproclaim land as national parks usually remains vested with parliament and as such are not delegated to a national parks organization. This is because the proclamation or deproclamation of the nation's heritage is considered of such importance that it is best left to the nation's supreme authority.

However, the function of recommending that land is proclaimed or deproclaimed as a national park is usually delegated to a national parks organization. This is because such organizations are considered to be professionally the best equipped in the land to make such important recommendations.

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