



Islands under Siege: National Parks and the Politics of External Threats

John C. Freemuth

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If the Park Service can't or won't protect our national parks, who will?

It's high time we figure that out, notes John Freemuth.

Saddled from the beginning with a contradictory mandate to promote recreational use of parks yet preserve them for future generations the Park Service has always walked an administrative tightrope. But within the last few years a new kind of threat has appeared, and the Park Service finds itself in an even more precarious position, its effectiveness impaired.

Increasingly national parks have come under environmental attack from sources outside the parks, beyond the jurisdiction of the Park Service. Smog from neighboring cities now obscures famous vistas. Noise and water pollution from nearby industries spills across park boundaries. Acid rain eats away at old-growth forests.

John Freemuth sees these new external assaults as political problems. In examining the questions they raise, he focuses on two cases: the proposed mining of the tar sands of south-central Utah, near Canyonlands National Park, and the poor air quality in several Western parks caused by new sources and levels of pollution. He traces the shifts in government action that have accompanied waves of citizen activism and uncovers evidence of ineffective legislation, inept implementation, and the potent political power of pro-development forces. Through it all he finds the Park Service hamstrung by unclear, conflicting priorities and bureaucratic inertia.

In his conclusion Freemuth analyzes a diverse set of political strategies that have been and are being used to deal with the threats to our national parks, evaluating each in terms of environmental effectiveness and political feasibility.

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