



Our National Parks Centennial: A New Vision

by Phyllis M. Faber

The Problem

Our nation's food production is in crisis. According to Michael Pollan in an open letter to the Presidential candidates in the New York Times 10/12/08, food production accounts for almost 20% of our fossil fuel consumption and over one-third of all greenhouse gas contributed to the atmosphere comes from our modernized farms. Our population suffers from serious diseases now associated with the ever-cheaper foods that have seriously degraded the nation's health. They include diabetes, juvenile obesity, heart disease, and cancer. We are also over-exposed to food containing antibiotics and harmful chemicals, so food safety is a seriously urgent concern. It is time for change, a winning and needed theme for America today.

The Vision

In 2016 the National Park Service will celebrate its one hundredth anniversary, a century of public homage to its designated National Parks, places of outstanding beauty and natural phenomenon. Many of our parks are in a unique position to demonstrate a better way to grow food; to serve as model farms and gardens for millions of visitors; and to lead the nation toward growing safe and healthy food with fewer negative impacts on our global environment. Our national parks can preserve significant cultural landscapes and further our national interest in educating the public to appreciate locally-grown, healthier foods.

Background

There are more than 300 National Parks in America. During the 1960's and 1970s, several new parks were established near densely-populated urban areas. In addition to providing opportunities for public recreation, many new parks insulated adjacent agricultural areas from development. With passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, also administered by the National Park Service, the focus for management of these parks expanded to



include protecting both natural and cultural resources, including working landscapes.

Today enlightened park administrators recognize that natural and cultural resource management can be integrated to better preserve the connections between the physical, biological and cultural elements of a landscape. This has the added benefit of maintaining an area's distinctive "sense of place and character." Many of the farms form an important part of their community and these communities provide an important part of our rural fabric that is to be cherished.

Opportunity

Model farms and gardens within our parks are in a unique position to offer a better way to demonstrate best management practices to both visiting growers and the general public. Ranches can demonstrate innovative grazing practices, pasture improvement techniques, invasive weed management, even improved animal husbandry practices. They can work effectively with University Extension Services, and provide practical demonstration projects as well as certification programs. Having a close relationship between parks and surrounding communities provides opportunities for cooperative programs to flourish between local land trusts, and other non-profit organizations and the Parks. In Cuyahoga Valley National Park in Ohio, preservation of the park's rural landscape and farming traditions has recently been recognized as a priority. It is energizing the whole area including the opening of seasonal markets for high-quality food and crafts.

Park farms and gardens can be an inspiration to the visitors and the millions of children that visit each year. Parents can learn to make more informed purchasing choices. Children can see where their food comes from. They can see it grow and be harvested. They can learn to care about healthy food. They can learn the good values that working on the land can provide. Gardens within the park can participate in local farmers markets or even create their own farmer's market. They provide a wonderful tie between the community and the Park.

In the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, the largest urban park in America, there is a large demonstration flower and vegetable garden for visitors to explore. In this park locally grown organic food is preferentially provided to all food serving facilities. All seventeen food service facilities



use their collective purchasing power to buy locally grown products enabling growers better predict demand and to gain a fair return for their work.

There are sixteen working ranches in the spectacularly beautiful Point Reyes Seashore, located in Marin County, and another twelve on adjacent GGNRA lands. These ranches contribute twenty percent of the County's agricultural product and the County provides 25% of the Bay Area's milk. The oyster operation grows 45% of California's oysters. This cultural zone is a longtime treasure for Bay Area residents and visitors that deserves to be celebrated both by park management and by the public. Many of these ranches have been in operation for over one hundred and fifty years and are farmed by fourth and fifth generation ranchers. Several have been recognized for their environmental stewardship and innovation. The local community, Point Reyes Station, is stable because of the presence of these families and their rural values.

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The White House in Washington DC is a National Park. Alice Waters has wished for the time to come when a vegetable garden was planted on the grounds. Imagine the joy of Malia and Sasha learning how to grow their own vegetables and sharing this with the children that come to the White House. .

The Solution

America's National Park Service with their millions of visitors can help the nation learn how to increase their appreciation of healthy, high-quality food while enjoying the park experience; how to attain a smaller footprint from the way food is grown; and how to become a healthier population.

A National Park Service Policy that supports a commitment to sustainable agriculture and a stewardship ethic in our national parks is worthy of the 100th year anniversary vision, the Centennial, of America's National Park Service.

