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HOW SHALL WE TREAT OUR STATE PARKS?

B. SHIMEK

The law creating state parks in Iowa specifically provides for the preservation of areas of historic or scientific interest, or possessing scenic beauty, and not alone for recreation purposes. It was never contemplated or expected that any one of the state parks would meet *all* of the requirements indicated, but that each purpose would be served by some, or parts of some of the areas selected.

There is a growing tendency to regard both our national and state parks as mere recreation or picnic grounds, and their value is being measured in many quarters merely by the numbers of visitors.

Some of our state parks are visited by thousands of people. Last year the Delaware Backbone and Wapsipicon parks had each about 100,000 visitors, and more than half a million visited the three central parks at Fort Dodge, Boone and Eldora.

The incursion of such numbers raises the question of what will become of the parks? In many cases their beauty has been already marred or destroyed, not so much by the comparatively few malicious vandals, as by the tramping of thoughtless or careless crowds of sight-seers, and some of the finest areas are fast losing their value for scientific purposes and as wild life sanctuaries.

As noted, the law provides for various objects in establishing state parks, and no one area can meet all the requirements. It follows then that the logical procedure is to set aside certain smaller parks, or parts of larger ones, for specific purposes, and the State Board of Conservation has full power to so restrict the uses of the various parks.

The desired object, however, can be secured at least in large part by other means than the arbitrary "Thou shalt not." Make some of the areas segregated for special purposes more difficult of access by constructing footpaths rather than driveways into them. The added effort required to reach them would weed out the large numbers of mere superficial sight-seers, and would not bar those who are really interested.

To carry out a policy of segregation of areas for special pur-

poses it would be necessary to take into account the various motives which bring visitors to these parks.

A few are interested in deeper scientific problems, while a larger number are amateur students or lovers of wild life — birds, flowers, trees, etc. For these purposes some areas should remain practically undisturbed and hence should not be too accessible.

Some are drawn to historic shrines made sacred by memories of the past. We need to cultivate reverence for these sacred associations, and the spots in which they center should not be converted into mere picnic grounds.

Many come chiefly because they appreciate and enjoy the scenic beauty of these areas. These beauty spots should be perpetuated, and approach to them should be so arranged that their beauty might be viewed without being marred by artificial so-called "improvements."

Then there are some whose object is much less worthy or serious. Two illustrations will be sufficient:

Not a few come out of mere curiosity, sight-seers who are chiefly interested in being able to say that they visited the parks and saw the places embellished with fanciful names. Last summer in the Delaware Backbone Park one such tourist rushed up to the writer almost out of breath and panted: "Well, I have seen the Grottoes (and two or three other specially named features) this is the Backbone, pointing to its rather barren trampled top — now what else is there worth seeing?" We were standing at that moment on the top of the Backbone ridge, in full view of the cañon of the great loop of the rippling Maquoketa with its rugged forest setting spreading far beyond, but she saw nothing of this beautiful picture — it had not received a fanciful name!

There is also a small class of wandering tourists who are in the habit of sneering at our more modest or less advertised beauties, belittling them by comparison with other scenes which *they* had viewed in other sections of the country or the world. This is the type exemplified by the prominent woman who was taken to Pike's Peak at McGregor, and after looking out upon the panorama of the Mississippi and Wisconsin valleys with their bordering bluffs, asked where they had the scenery they talked about. She had evidently expected a Great Cañon of the Colorado or a second Himalayas!

A very moderate amount of consideration needs to be given to these two latter classes.

The great majority of the visitors, however, consists of just

good home folks who come for rest and healthful recreation, seeking fresh air and the sunshine of the natural world, and who do not care to either drive or tramp over large areas in the parks. For these visitors provision can easily be made in well selected smaller picnic grounds, or in somewhat limited portions of our larger parks. The necessary accommodations for the comfort and pleasure of these larger crowds can be concentrated in the recreational parts, and these parts should be so selected that they will not invite destruction to the most valuable or most beautiful parts of the parks.

To provide for all these needs and uses it seems necessary that the state parks should be divided into classes according to type of usefulness. As already suggested, the small parks might be assigned wholly to various special uses, while the larger ones could be subdivided according to special features or characteristics.

In this connection it is here recommended that this Academy, through its Executive Committee or a special committee, prepare a list of state park areas which are specially of scientific value, and ask the State Board of Conservation to set these apart primarily as outdoor scientific museums and laboratories.

The areas so recommended should not only be some of those contained within the limits of our present parks, but also other suitable areas which should be secured for the purpose in the near future. That the most complete service in this direction might be rendered, an effort should be made to secure at least one of these areas, if possible, within easy reach of each of the collegiate educational institutions within the state.

Such segregation is both within the legal power of the Board of Conservation and in harmony with the rules of common sense and ordinary fairness.

This policy would call for the setting aside of some of the areas used for other than recreational purposes. This does not mean that people would be barred from them, but that no accommodations would be introduced which would entice the mere picnickers.

Excessive road-building through the parks should also be stopped, especially to the non-recreational areas. Roads inevitably invite and bring about destruction, for our great American touring public does not yet have proper respect for natural beauty or public property.

In most cases the roads should be built *to* or *into* the parks, not *through* them. The Delaware Backbone Park furnishes an example of excessive road-building — in this case through almost the en-

tire length of the park. This road is in large part like a great scar on the beautiful face of the park, particularly where it cuts the Backbone bluff. Besides being unattractive and expensive, the road often merely furnishes a convenient highway for delivery trucks and transients traveling from one town to another.

Similar complaints have come from prominent citizens concerning road building and improvements in other parks, particularly the Winterset Backbone Park.

We should build roads to the recreation grounds, as noted, and then construct trails or footpaths which will enable pedestrians to reach the parts of the park having special interest. This will sift out the mere pleasure seekers, who will be satisfied with the recreation grounds, and will make possible the various special uses contemplated under the law.

The original purpose for which our state park system was advocated and adopted was to preserve bits of early natural Iowa for the benefit not only of this generation, but of all the generations to come. If these spots which we call state parks are to be so preserved, it is necessary that we stop the tendency to make use of them for one purpose alone, and that a purpose which will inevitably lead to the ultimate destruction of some of their finest and most valuable features. If their usefulness is to be perpetuated we must take the following precautions:

1. The parks must be kept in their natural condition so far as possible. That was the original intent, and that should be our aim, because in their natural state they are more attractive and serve their various purposes more completely. The cost, moreover, is much less. It is much better to put money into more parks rather than to use it for the destruction of the beauty and usefulness of those which we have.

There are plenty of artificial parks in our cities and towns — those who like them have abundant opportunities to gratify their tastes. If we *must* have artificial effects and “improvements,” however, let us restrict them to the selected recreation grounds.

One natural feature in particular should be guarded. In some of our parks there are small treeless areas which are remnants of the original prairies, and which represent almost the last refuge of our prairie flora. Suggestions have been made repeatedly that some of these open areas should be forested, but this should not be permitted under any circumstances. If we cannot have larger prairie areas saved in their natural condition, we should at least cherish

these smaller reminders of the glory of the old time prairie flower garden.

2. Urge the appointment of at least one member of the State Board of Conservation who has a direct knowledge of the scientific value and significance of portions of our parks. The invaluable service which Dr. Pammel rendered for many years as a member of the Board is sufficient proof of the wisdom of this request.

3. Keep out all private commercial and industrial enterprises and particularly the doubtful amusements which are sometimes associated with them. Make provision under the direct control of the Board of Conservation for necessary supplies and refreshments on the recreation grounds, and beyond that exclude all commercialism.

Above all, do not permit the construction of dams in or near the state parks by private interests which would not only in most cases destroy portions of the parks, but would open the way for doubtful "amusements" over which the Board would have no control. Resorts of this kind should not be permitted to use the state parks as a mere bait for selfish gain.

We need water power, but there are plenty of places where this can be developed without the invasion and destruction of our comparatively few natural beauty spots.

4. Change the practice of conditioning the establishment of state parks on the size of local donations. This practice has grown up despite the wishes of many members of the Board of Conservation, past and present, until it is almost impossible to secure a park without much local assistance. Many desirable areas are thus neglected, and too often local support is given with the expectation that it will bring returns to those who give it. This in turn leads to the encouragement of mere crowds and tends to the introduction of doubtful "attractions" and other evil practices.

Increase the appropriations for the purchase of new parks, and then select the areas on the basis of real merit.

5. Keep the state parks out of the hands of professional politicians. Thus far we have been quite free from political misuses of the parks — let us see to it that this evil does not develop.

6. Teach our people to respect the beauty and the life of the parks, that there may be no disfiguring of rocks and trees by cutting or marking, no destructive fires started among leaves or grass, no leaving of refuse and rubbish by picnickers, and no digging of plants or picking of flowers.

Some of these practices border on the criminal, while the picking of flowers is both foolish and unjust. It is foolish because the per-

son who does it deprives himself of the privilege of again enjoying their beauty, and unjust because he deprives others of the same privilege.

Let us lead our people to understand, too, that these parks render additional valuable service, especially in the forested parts. The trees prevent erosion, and both soils and streams are saved; the run-off of water is checked and danger from floods is reduced; springs are perpetuated; and these areas furnish sanctuaries for game and other birds and animals.

We can secure the desired results most effectively by persistent education — in our schools; in such organizations as the Scouts, Campfire Girls, and others; in the home; through the press; and by suggestion and instruction in the parks themselves, where veritable outdoor schools of instruction could be organized. Some of the latter work could be done by the park custodians, and additional volunteers could probably be found, notably among the members of this Academy.

If we thus dedicate portions of our parks to various uses, and teach our people mutual respect for the various interests served, our state parks will remain a blessing and a source of delight not only for the immediate present, but for all time.

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