NATIONAL PARK FRANCHISES

Franchise partnerships could add parks to the system without adding to the federal maintenance tab

by Tate Watkins

Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument, Maine Photo © Katahdin Woods and Water NM

Long before the Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument became a reality, the specter of a federal park in northern Maine stirred up disputes as deep as the rivers that run through the area. For years, Burt's Bees cofounder Roxanne Quimby envisioned creating a national park by donating thousands of acres of forestland to the government, which she began purchasing from timber companies in the early 2000s. While she and her family explicitly lobbied for the "brand name" of a national park, many locals worried that a new park unit would give the federal government a foothold in the area, threatening tighter regulations on the timber industry and on traditional recreational pursuits like hunting.[10]

Because the prospect of creating a national park was so controversial, Quimby eventually settled on a national monument, which can be designated unilaterally with the signature of a president under the Antiquities Act. In August 2016, President Barack Obama signed an order establishing the 87,500-acre Katahdin Woods and Water National Monument out of lands donated by the Quimby family.[11]

The protracted controversy over the site suggests the need for a different framework to protect worthwhile natural landscapes without a full-fledged federal takeover—and with much less acrimony. Katahdin Woods and Waters could provide an opportunity to try an innovative solution: a national park franchise.

Under a park franchise, a private partner would maintain ownership of park land but manage the unit according to parameters set by the National Park Service. The franchisee could be a nonprofit group, conservation organization, outdoor recreation company, or any other private entity. It could use the national park name with stipulations that it adhere to the Park Service's mission and rules. Franchises would have to remain open to the public, for instance, and promote the historical, cultural, and environmental values consistent with the agency's goals. By receiving license to use the national brand, a site could attract more tourists, conservationists, and researchers, bringing additional revenues and activities to local economies.

Ideally, a franchise model would require financial self-sufficiency: private parties would only be granted a license under the condition that they receive no congressional appropriations for a site, for maintenance or otherwise. Revenues could come from fees charged for entry or to use campgrounds and other recreational amenities, and additional funds could be raised through philanthropic donations. The continued ownership by the franchisee could help ease fears that are often stoked by federal involvement in land-use decisions.

The wider payoff is that adding new parks under a franchise model would prevent further increases in the National Park Service's deferred maintenance backlog, which now exceeds $11 billion.[12] Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke has repeatedly said that dealing with the backlog is a priority for his department.[13] Over the past decade, 26 national park units have been created, and the deferred maintenance backlog has increased by more than $2 billion.[14] Politicians like creating new park sites where they can hold ribbon-cutting ceremonies and win accolades as champions of conservation. There is much less political appetite to fund mundane maintenance needs, like the sewage and water systems that ensure national parks can withstand their growing visitor figures.[15] A clear avenue to create new parks as franchises would benefit taxpayers across the country, who ultimately foot the bill for park upkeep.

As long as franchised parks adhere to the overarching standards laid out by the National Park Service, they should have the flexibility to set priorities as determined by on-the-ground managers. In recent years, park superintendents and government reviews have cited difficulties caused by the lengthy and inflexible processes for setting fee structures and getting approval to spend revenues collected.[16] Managers at franchised parks should have authority to set fees, retain 100 percent of the funds they collect, and decide how those revenues should be spent, whether on operations, critical maintenance needs, or new amenities.[17]

When it comes to the Katahdin monument, a franchise would grant the site the national park status that its proponents have long called for but keep the onus to run and maintain it on a private organization. Even though the government now owns the land, it is easy to imagine a structure that nominally leases rights back to the Quimby family to operate the site as a national park. Furthermore, Quimby already established a non-profit organization for the park lobbying effort, and the land gift included a $20 million endowment to support the administration of the monument, plus a pledge for more fundraising. The family's years of lobbying and demands for particular conditions on the monument designation—such as leaving nearly half of the acreage open to traditional uses like snowmobiling, hunting, and fishing—demonstrates their continued interest in the site. The non-profit would be well suited to hold the franchise.

The idea is not as farfetched as it might seem—there are already eight national park units jointly managed by the National Park Service and private partners, usually non-profit groups.[18] One is the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve in Kansas. Created in 1996, the 11,000-acre preserve stands out as one of the last large tracts of prairie ecosystem in the country. Although the site is a national park unit under the purview of the Park Service, the Nature Conservancy owns 99 percent of the preserve and partners with the agency to manage it.[19]

As far back as the 1970s, local Kansans skeptical of federal involvement fought the establishment of the site, worrying that the feds would impose burdensome regulations and deprive communities of tax revenues.[20] But eventually, a non-profit group worked with the Park Service and a local cattle rancher to overcome the discord and come up with a joint-management model, including the stipulation that all the privately owned property remain on tax rolls.[21] Tallgrass Prairie has drawn about 30,000 annual visitors in recent years and serves as an example that could be followed in Maine and beyond.[22]

A national park franchise could be tailored with provisions to suit local conditions and land-use traditions.[23] Moreover, a franchise would likely be more appealing to locals unwilling to support a new park under complete federal ownership in their state. Provisions could also include a process to revoke the franchise if a grantee ever strayed beyond the license parameters or failed to meet the standards of the agreement.

In his nomination hearing, Secretary Zinke said he fully recognizes "that there is distrust, anger, and even hatred against some federal management policies."[24] A framework to develop franchise parks could present just the sort of creative solution that fosters collaboration instead of ill will.

Recommendations:

- As an alternative to national monument designations, establish a national park franchise framework as an avenue to add new national parks without adding to the future maintenance needs of the National Park Service.
- Maintain federal oversight of and standards for franchised parks while granting franchisees wide flexibility in management decisions so long they operate within the federal parameters.
- Allow managers of franchised parks to set, retain, and spend fees at their discretion and without having to adhere to the bureaucratic processes that govern fee structures of traditional national parks, but stipulate that franchised parks will receive no congressional appropriations for operations or maintenance.
- Provide a clear way to revoke the national park license if a franchisee does not hold up its end of the bargain.

Further Reading:

- "The NPS Franchise: A Better Way to Protect Our Heritage," by Holly Fretwell. The National Park Service Centennial Essay Series, *The George Wright Forum*, Vol. 32 No. 2 (2015).
- "Breaking the Backlog: 7 Ideas to Address the National Park Deferred Maintenance Problem." *PERC Public Lands Report* (February 2016).
- "How to create a national park without taxpayers footing the bill," by Terry L. Anderson and Shawn Regan. *Bangor Daily News*. April 13, 2016.