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A View From The Overlook: Forbidden Books

Submitted by [PJ Ryan](#) on April 3, 2013 - 1:58am



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Written words have a sort of magical property that spoken language does not. For one thing, they are nailed down permanently. That is why a government official will ask you to telephone him/her about any question more controversial than "What time is it?"

With a telephone call our bureaucrat has the precious gift of deniability; "I can't recall that conversation, your honor," or "Apparently, I was misunderstood; I certainly would not promise something like that!"



This is not true of the written word; there it is; laid out in ink or electrons, exactly what you said, right in front of God and everybody.

As noted, the written word has an almost supernatural quality to it. Our Muslim neighbors place their confidence in the Koran as they trust it to be the written word of God as received by Mohammed and thus the phrase "It is written" has profound significance in that community.

Understandably, with all that magic, important folks down through the ages have tried to control what was written and who could read it. The Catholic Church famously had an *Index of Forbidden Books* that began in 1559 and was not formally repealed until 1966. The remnants of the old Communist bloc and most right-wing dictatorships still soldier on, maintaining a list of forbidden books and forbidden writers.

Censorship And The National Park Service

But with the advent of the Internet, it looks like the days of censorship are numbered. No matter. The National Park Service can be trusted to at least keep the idea of censorship alive even though it cannot fully implement censorship in the total, classical sense.

"Poppycock!" you snort derisively. "We have the First Amendment to guard us and our ideas against censorship!"

Ah, but you may not be aware of the NPS exception to the First Amendment. Exception? Yes. The exception might be termed "Bureaucratic Negligence." The NPS might simply "neglect" or "forget" to provide an alternative opinion to the *Revealed Wisdom of the Agency*; even when that opposite opinion has been helpfully provided by an outside source at no cost or effort to the NPS in the form of a book.

So, what exactly are we talking about?

Well, it seems that three books critical of the NPS have recently been published. They are *The Soul of Yosemite*, by Barbara Moritsch, *The Case of the Indian Trader*, by Paul Berkowitz, and *Worth Fighting For*, by Rob Danno. It also seems that none of the three books are being sold in NPS bookstores. We are left to wonder why. Was there some form of "Bureaucratic Negligence" involved? (One hesitates to use the "C" word)

Now, it can be argued that the NPS is under no obligation to shoot itself in the foot or provide ammunition for others to do so by stocking books that are critical of the agency's actions. That is true; the NPS would no doubt prefer to be the subject of endless Ken Burns's hagiographic documentaries, but that is not how the world works.

It can also be argued that there "Just isn't enough space on the park book stores shelves for all the oodles of great titles that are out there (including yours) and painful decisions have to be made etc., etc."

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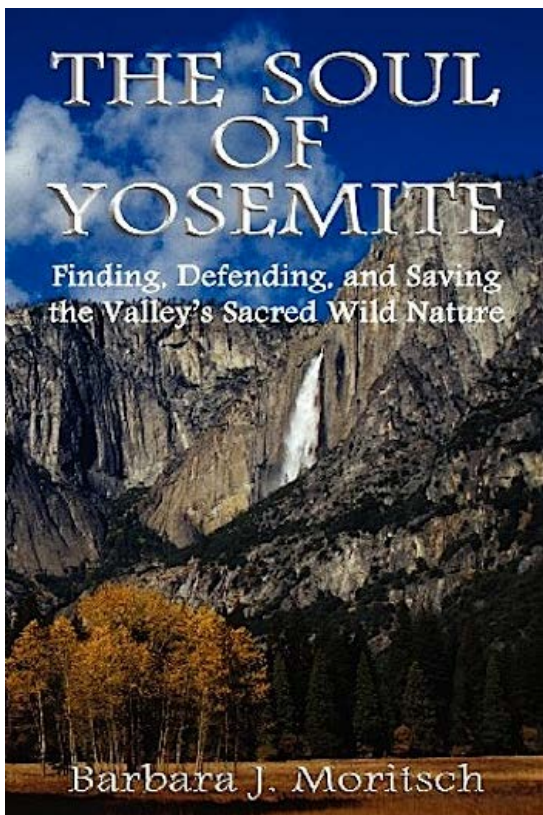
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Really?

Is every cooperating association cookbook and puzzle book necessary for the salvation of the environment? And it can be argued that the books in question are "controversial." (That complaint would eliminate documents ranging from the U.S. Constitution to *Huckleberry Finn*.)

Since most libraries and most bookstores (other than NPS affiliates) stock books that vehemently irritate a sizable portion of their clientele, that argument has limited value. So what are the books in question?

Barbara Moritsch's *The Soul of Yosemite* is the story of the 162-year effort of European man to modify Yosemite Valley so that European man could simultaneously (A) enjoy the beauty of the Valley and (B) make lots of money. The two goals were and are often at odds. Ms. Moritsch's book describes the results from the viewpoint of her experiences as a park biologist, soon to be removed from the scene due to "lack of funds" (or more likely, for pointing out that the Emperor had no clothes). It is a good book, thoughtful and

well-written, by someone on the ground.

So why isn't it for sale by the Yosemite Conservancy, the "private" arm of the NPS that sells books in the park? Good question, and one that Barbara recently asked of the lad in charge of book sales. His reply was polite but rather curious: It seems that they try to avoid "advocacy" books in favor of "non-advocacy" books.

Ms. Moritsch was astounded.

"Non-advocacy! But what about the NPS Organic Act of 1916!? (You know, that tiresome jingle about "preserving and protecting for the enjoyment of future generations").

"Non-advocacy" is a new park management concept that frankly puzzles Barbara, causing her to wonder, "Why are we here?"

Tracing A Bungled Investigation

Next we have the true-life detective story, *The Case of the Indian Trader*, by Paul Berkowitz. The Indian Trader in question was Billy Malone, a legendary trader at Hubbell Trading Post National Historic Site in Northern Arizona. Over the years, Mr. Malone had continued to make the historic trading post profitable and a sterling example of a Navajo Trading Post to the advantage of the local Navajo and visitors alike.

Unfortunately, Mr. Malone's success caused unsubstantiated rumors that he was skimming the profits. Equally unfortunate for Mr. Malone was the fact that the NPS loves unsubstantiated rumors and will act on them.

An NPS posse descended upon the Hubbell Trading Post with a search warrant based on false information, searched the property, seized his possessions, and terrorized Mr. Malone and his family. He ultimately was fired from his position and kicked out of his house, his reputation tattered for years.

Soon, however, the wheels started to come off the government's case against Mr. Malone, and the Park Service sent in Paul Berkowitz, a veteran criminal investigator for the agency to see if the case could be salvaged. Bad move! Mr. Berkowitz, a tough but fair and scrupulous lawman, came to see that Malone was innocent of the charges against him and worked to exonerate him. He succeeded.

For Mr. Berkowitz, it was the straw that broke

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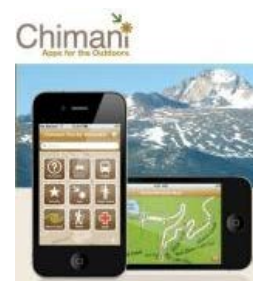
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Smokey's back.

He was fed up. He retired from the Park Service and wrote *The Case of the Indian Trader*, a multi-award winning book published by the University of New Mexico Press. Significantly, the book also contains a chapter of blistering critique of what, according to Mr. Berkowitz, is wrong with the present day NPS.

For some reason, an oversight, I'm sure, *The Case of the Indian Trader* is not sold at Hubbell Trading Post National Historic Site, or at Grand Canyon National Park, Mr. Berkowitz's base park, or at any other NPS outlet that this writer is aware of. Could be wrong, of course.

Mr. Berkowitz was probably wise to retire or he might have suffered a "coincidence" like that that befell our third writer, Rob Danno, author of [*Worth Fighting For: A Park Ranger's Unexpected Battle Against Federal Bureaucrats and Washington Redskins Owner, Dan Snyder.*](#)

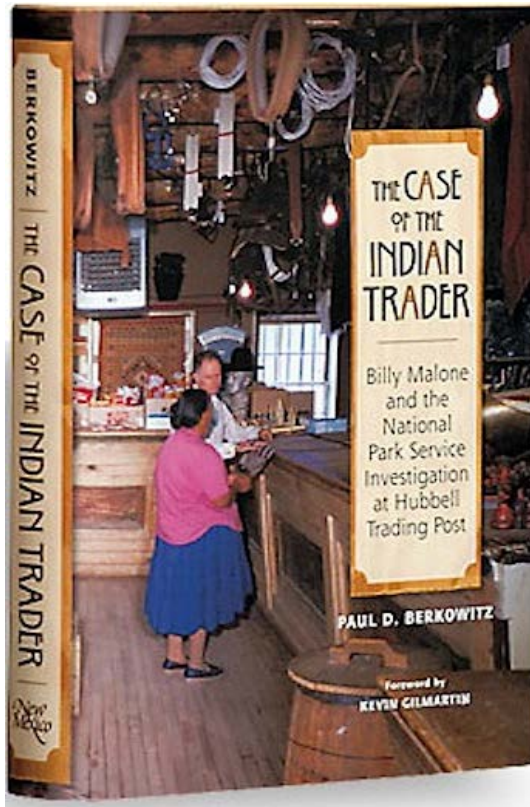
Worth Fighting For is the crackling good adventure story of Chief Ranger Danno's rise through the ranks of the NPS to ever-increasing levels of responsibility in various national parks. The book would actually make a good recruiting document had not the unfortunate "coincidence" occurred, making a young reader think twice about a career with the NPS.

Swapping Trees For A View

Chief Ranger Danno was the new chief ranger at the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park when Dan Snyder, billionaire owner of the Washington Redskins, cut down some trees on a scenic easement in front of his mansion to provide an unimpeded view of the Potomac River.

Mr. Snyder had some kind of "understanding" with the director of the NPS (the agency has a long history of toadying up to rich people). Chief Ranger Danno didn't see it this way and blew the whistle. The NPS was embarrassed, as the Department of Interior Inspector General confirmed Danno's disclosures through an investigation.

Now there is ONE thing an embarrassed NPS is good at, and that is revenge and retribution. Sure enough, the long arm of "coincidence" was yanked out of its socket by the arrest of Chief Ranger Danno for "theft of government property," a charge based on one of the agency's famous never fail "rumors." Chief Ranger Danno was facing trial and the possibility of ten years in prison.



The rest of the book is a gripping procedural on Chief Ranger Danno's ultimately successful battle to defend himself and restore his reputation.

Now Chief Ranger Danno served in some 11 parks and two regional offices during his career; Grand Canyon, Sequoia-King Canyon, Whiskeytown, Virgin Islands, Channel Islands, Yellowstone, Chiracahus-Fort Bowie, Bryce Canyon, C & O Canal, George Washington Parkway, and Antietam Battlefield. (An Office of Special Counsel press release will soon be made public regarding an NPS settlement and Danno's new assignment).

To the best of Chief Ranger Danno's knowledge, none of the 11 parks is currently selling his book. In this writer's opinion, it might be a good time to start.

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There are many precedents in marketing a "controversial" book. Chief Ranger Danno's favorite example is Alston Chase's *Playing God In Yellowstone*, a contentious attack on resource management in Yellowstone National Park and, by inference, the superintendent of Yellowstone at the time, Bob Barbee.

Then-Superintendent Barbee's response was to have all the NPS bookstores in Yellowstone stock the book!

If the three books are judged to be "controversial," that might be a great sales point; a corner of the book store with a large sign reading "CONTROVERSIAL." Might make Tom Paine smile down on us from above!

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Comments

Submitted by [Chris](#) on April 3, 2013 - 7:34am.

Good article. One I like is *National Parks Compromised* by Gary Ridenour. He brings up park-barrel politics, which most don't know about.

Re: *Destruction of Yellowstone*, last I checked, the Yellowstone Association - the cooperating association - does not sell that book, but it is still for sale in the general stores (Deleware North).

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Submitted by [Lee Dalton](#) on April 3, 2013 - 8:01am.

Another great and thought-provoking piece from PJ. Thanks.

And Chris -- thanks for your heads-up regarding two books I had not heard of before. I'll have to look for them. (And I LOVE your phrase "park-barrel politics." That's a real gem.)

Knowing Bob Barbee, I can certainly understand how he would make sure that book was right out there for anyone to buy and read. Bob is an example of the kind of person every government employee should be -- especially those who wear the title Congressman or Senator.

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Submitted by [Passport86](#) on April 3, 2013 - 8:28am.

Having worked for a cooperating association (CA) for 10 years, I can tell you that every item that is sold in a national park bookstore (operated by a CA) must go through a stringent approval process by the National Park Service, so essentially the NPS has the last word about items sold in park bookstores. Items are evaluated for their historical/scientific accuracy, quality and relativity to the theme of the park, pricing and a host of other criteria. These rules are established by Director's Order 32, which clearly outlines these protocols in Section 3.5.3. (view D.O. 32 here: <http://www.nps.gov/refdesk/DOrders/DOrder32.html>)

The NPS views the bookstores in the parks as an extension of its interpretive arm, and the items sold must

adhere to its established strict standards. I am not sure what the rules are for stores operated by Friends' Groups or concessioners, but I would think that they would be similar.

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Submitted by [SY](#) on April 3, 2013 - 8:31am.

All books carried by the stores in the park are required to be approved by the NPS. The exact process varies by who's carrying. For example, in Yellowstone, anything (incl books) carried in the YA stores has to be approved by the Division of Interpretation. And anything carried by the stores or gift shops has to be approved by the Concessions Management Office. This might explain why *Destruction of Yellowstone* can be found in the General Stores, but not the YA Bookstores (I don't believe the CMO reviews books to the extent Interp does).

I know that Interp has refused to authorize books that are critical of the NPS or the park concession operators. For example, they disallowed the book *Squatters in Paradise*, which is a series of anecdotes, many negative, from a former Xanterra employee (having worked for Xanterra in the Yellowstone I can attest that the vast majority of what he relates is true, even to this day). There was one book YA asked to carry that had a single line critical of a ranger's activity back in the 1930s (if I recall correctly), and it was disapproved.

ETA: I see Passport86 beat me to the punch on the explanation, but at least we agree on the process!

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Submitted by [Rick Smith](#) on April 3, 2013 - 8:31am.

I reviewed all three of these books for *Ranger*, the magazine of the Association of National Park Rangers. All three of them are good reads, and I would recommend that readers of NPT read them. I too wonder why they are not sold in park bookstores, especially when controversial books such as *Desert Solitaire* and the coffee table top book on the creation of Grand Canyon 6,000 years ago make their way to park book shelves.

Rick

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Submitted by [Owen Hoffman](#) on April 3, 2013 - 10:12am.

I agree totally with Rick Smith. These books should be sold in park stores. Barbara Moritsch's book, "The Soul of Yosemite" is especially moving, and I highly recommend it.

Of course, at one time, the NPS banned Edward Abbey's "Desert Solitaire," but fortunately, that is no longer the case.

I'm not sure to what extent Andrea Lankford's book, "Ranger Confidential"

<http://www.amazon.com/Ranger-Confidential-Living-Working-National/dp/0762752637>

is sold in park visitor centers and book stores.

Another book I know of that has been banned by NPS censors, is "Why is Crater Lake so Blue?" by Micheal Lalumiere.

<http://www.amazon.com/Why-Crater-Lake-So-Blue/dp/0979100623>

It's a "semi-fictional" account of the adventures of a seasonal maintenance and trail crew worker for the NPS during the time of the infamous summer of 1975 in which the park's drinking water supply was contaminated with raw sewage from Crater Lake Lodge causing wide-spread gastro-intestinal illnesses to park visitors and employees alike. Passages in this book are vivid, hard to read as purely fiction, and a few sections are not complimentary of the NPS.

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Submitted by [Bob Pahre](#) on April 3, 2013 - 10:59am.

Thanks for the article and thank you everyone for the comments.

Here's another unflattering book on the NPS by a climbing ranger whose superiors were bad managers, unconcerned with niceties of employment law (among other things):

<http://www.amazon.com/Pickets-Dead-Men-Seasons-Rainier/dp/1594851018>

I bought it at Mount Rainier, so it's not "censored."

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Submitted by [amwdew](#) on April 3, 2013 - 12:29pm.

Thank and you so much for this thoughtful post (and the suggestions for must-read books!). It has been my experience as well that NPS is often uncomfortable with (or in some cases, as you point out, openly hostile to) critical considerations of its own history. I think there are many reasons for this--including agency mythology and culture, ties to various stakeholders, and an anti-intellectualism that often surfaces. It sometimes seems that people in the agency think that "critical" considerations of various issues are automatically synonymous with unwanted "criticism" that somehow undermines the agency mission.

I also think the that the point raised above that all bookstore materials are vetted through Interpretation divisions does not provide much comfort. First of all, as my study team pointed out in our Imperiled Promise study of NPS history released last year, NPS interpretation has not consistently been willing to take up controversial histories. And, secondly, its staff are often not up to date on the latest research. As a result, even if Interp is vetting stuff, it is clear that they are letting a lot of awful books and materials through: things that are patently lame, non-educational, simple-minded, and at worst playing upon harmful regional stereotyping (see various books on Appalachian 'hillbilly' cooking, jokes, etc). This while at many many parks I have visited, bookstores fail to carry good, readable books that present the latest scholarship and research on various park topics. (Not even talking here about books presenting a critical perspective on the agency).

In my view, the bookstore program of the NPS as a whole could benefit from some serious scrutiny systemwide. Its present state--overly influenced perhaps by the factors mentioned above and an overweening emphasis on "what sells"--represents a colossal missed educational opportunity.

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Submitted by [SmokiesBackpacker](#) on April 3, 2013 - 2:01pm.

When author Jim Casada had the nerve to speak out against Great Smoky Mtns National Park Superintendent Dale Ditmanson's egregious and now well documented backcountry fee grab, the result was that his book on fly fishing in the Smokies mysteriously disappeared from park visitor center shelves. After a great many inquires and a lot of time, the park conveyed that it was nothing more than a coincidental stocking error. Much like the "coincidental" closing of campsites in Blount and Swain counties which had just coincidentally passed county resolutions condemning Ditmanson's backcountry fee.

To say that the NPS is in need of oversight isn't sufficient. What is happening at Point Reyes is also happening in the Smokies. You have a clear case of misrepresentation of scientific data in both instances. In the Smokies it is the misrepresentation of campsite data to justify a fee, then misrepresentation of public comments to discount the amount of sentiment in opposition. (the final tally of over 800 public comments was 18-1 in opposition). Jarvis NPS has a cultural problem. Their arrogance and lack of oversight are becoming well documente fodder for a 60 minutes type of expose. Thank goodness, NPT is one place where I feel as if I can obtain real reporting on the NPS. Great article. Congress really needs to step in and clean house over there. They have taken a great deal of goodwill and squandered it needlessly. Many folks in the NPS are upset over this culture of bullying and deceit. It doesn't represent the entire service but certainly characterizes quite a few of the big dogs.

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