

A Business's Role in the National Parks Service

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The sweltering sun mercilessly beats down on hikers, making every breath they take increasingly harder. Pebbles crunch under their feet with each step, and backpacks slowly get heavier. Some hikers sign the trail register while others take a sip of water as they admire the view. It's summer on Mt. Whitney in the Sequoia National Park, and the trails are teeming with life. Specks of pink, blue, green, and orange from the hiker's backpacks cover the mountain, and cars fill the parking lots. Tourists pour out of their cars to catch a glimpse of the summit and the National Park, have a picnic, hike, visit the information center, or even rock climb. The park greets visitors with an information center full of guides and refreshments, and signs point to the nearest cleared trails.

But the Sequoia National Park and Mt. Whitney weren't always like this. A little over a hundred years ago in 1915, at this same spot, more than a dozen of the country's most influential men sat around a fire and discussed the future of these lands. They had to battle their way through the uncleared trails and climb over fallen trees in order to get to a campsite. Wildlife grew rampant over the lands. The leader of this trip was a man named Stephen Mather. His purpose of gathering a wide variety of men from a congressman, to a railroad executive, to the editor of *National Geographic*, was his passion for these parks. Mather saw an opportunity to address the men as they lounged around the fire. He stood up and cleared his throat then proceeded to say that, "the valleys and heights of the Sierra Nevada are just one small part of the majesty of

America.... Just think of the vast areas of our land that should be preserved for the future” (qtd. in Siber 26). Kate Siber, a correspondent for *Outside* magazine, chronicles the history of National Parks and how, during this trip, Stephen Mather used his influence and connections to impress upon these important men “the utter necessity of a government agency to protect the parks for future generations and from selfish interests before it was too late” (26). This trip was all part of Mather’s grand vision for a National Park Service.

While “corporate social responsibility” was not an official term during Mather’s time, he was an early example of how important the role of business in society is. This role is part of an ongoing debate over whether it’s a conflict of interest for businesses to be involved in other aspects of society or even government. Mather serves as an example of the crucial role a business’s impact and power can play. Without his connections and business background, he would not have had the influence he did to create the National Parks Service.

Born in San Francisco in 1867, Stephen Mather got his first taste of the wilderness while he hiked and rode horses through the mountains and meadows of the Sierra during his childhood. He spent weekends camping and exploring the mountains. His love for nature helped turn him into a strong and adventurous man. When he grew up and entered the working world, he was a cunning businessman who used his marketing genius in the Borax industry. Donald Scott, a former ranger at Alcatraz and a Mather historian compared Mather to a Steven Jobs or a Walt Disney because “he was a tremendously driven man in the best sense. He believed when you did something, you did it thoroughly” (qtd. in Siber 29). Because of Mather’s ideas like the now-famous 20 Mule Team brand, Borax became a staple in every American household. Despite all of his

success, Mather was unsatisfied. He wanted a higher purpose and to make an impact.

Mather met a famous naturalist, John Muir, during one of his explorations of the mountains. Muir impressed upon Mather the grave threat to the wilderness. It wasn't until two years later in 1914 that Mather took action. Siber, in her article, "The Visionaries" writes that, "Mather was so inspired by Muir's devotion and horrified by the persistence of loggers eyeing the sequoias of Yosemite that he sent an indignant 26-page missive to Franklin K. Lane, the secretary of the Interior and fellow Berkeley alumnus, detailing the sorry state of the national parks" (29). Lane famously wrote back saying, "Dear Steve, if you don't like the way the national parks are being run, come on down to Washington and run them yourself" (qtd. in Siber 29). Although hesitant to accept his offer of working for the government, Mather so was driven by his desire to make a change that he accepted and moved to the capital.

Stephen Mather went on to use his business background, his connections, and his success and fortune to start a publicity campaign for the creation and preservation of the National Parks Service. He became very involved in his social life and made an active effort to entertain. Looking through old newspaper articles from Mather's time shows various news blurbs that chronicle his efforts. One article tells how he and his wife hosted a dinner party with nearly five hundred representatives and capital employees. All of this socializing was for the bigger purpose of National Parks. So, after the dinner he hosted, "motion pictures of the scenery of several national parks were shown" ("National") in order to remind the guests why they were really there. Mather also led a conference on a horseback ride through Washington, D.C, which another newspaper article documented. This was to show them their wilderness

surroundings and also the Washington Zoo. But again, this was for the greater goal of the National Parks so, “after their three-hour trip on horseback, the conference returned to the Department of the Interior, where they discussed road building in the national parks, the elimination of dust on highways and problems of road maintenance” (“Executives”). Mather was so dedicated to his cause that he used every resource he could find to broaden the reach of his campaign. His determination, perseverance, and cunning business expertise allowed him to be successful in his goal.

Stephen Mather’s expeditions and lobbying for a National Parks Service helped create and maintain the great American resource so many people today know and love. On their official website, the National Parks Service released a report titled “Rethinking National Parks Service” that focused on the purpose and prospects for the National Parks. The report states that, “parks are places to demonstrate the principles of biology, to illustrate the national experience as history, to engage formal and informal learners throughout their lifetime, and to do these things while challenging them in exciting and motivating settings”. These parks are sanctuaries of learning and exploration that are woven into the American identity. National Parks have grown to encompass more than 380 sites in every state but Delaware (“Rethinking”), far exceeding Mather’s original vision of National Parks. Those hikers, tourists, and campers using the parks every day gain a deeper knowledge and receive a greater connection to our roots from their visit, even if it’s subconsciously. Stephen Mather recognized the need for institutions like National Parks in order to educate the public but also to put on display the wilderness he loved so much.

But in order to create those institutions, Mather needed to use his business background. While he directly did not support the National Parks with his business, he used his connections and monetary contributions to set the idea in motion and start the inception of National Parks. Today, companies and their employees in the business world similarly utilize their business backgrounds and power to give back to the community. A term used to describe this role is Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Anne Lawrence and James Weber, in their textbook *Business and Society: Stakeholders, Ethics, Public Policy*, define CSR as how a “corporation should act in a way that enhances society and its inhabitants.” By utilizing his corporation’s power and network for the creation of the National Parks Service, Mather enhanced society and its inhabitants. Scott Campbell, an instructor in Management at American University, says that, “companies can bring both resources and skills to bear in a volunteer capacity that can be incredibly beneficial to the local community.” A company’s involvement in the community and other organizations is incredibly crucial for not only the monetary impact, but the time given and their direct involvement.

Not everyone, though, shares this same opinion about companies’ involvement in other aspects of their community. In their article, “What’s wrong with Corporate Responsibility?” Corporate Watch states that, “CSR diverts attention from real issues, helping corporations to: avoid regulation, gain legitimacy and access to markets and decision makers.” Although some corporations or businesses may have ulterior motives, Scott Campbell counter argues that the majority of businesses operate positively and have “benefits for the community and broader society for which they operate. Their general goodwill and reputation helps the brand, also helps with recruiting and making it more attractive place for

people to consider employment.” Creating a positive environment where donations are made for the greater good attracts similar people. Stephen Mather was motivated by wholesome ideals and the outcome was something that continues to benefit the greater good today.

Like Stephen Mather’s contributions to the National Parks Service, there are other companies making impacts today. They are part of a corporate partners group in the National Parks Foundation. Of the many companies that contribute, included on that list are American Express, REI, and Subaru. Similar to Mather, these businesses recognize the power and impact their companies can make on the National Parks and act on their corporate responsibility. In a press release on American Express’s website, they announce that, “at American Express, we believe that serving our communities is not only integral to running a business successfully, it is part of our individual responsibilities as citizens of the world. The mission of our program is to bring to life the American Express value of good corporate citizenship by supporting communities in ways that enhance the company’s reputation with employees, customers, business partners and other stakeholders.” Throughout the rest of the press release, they continue to say they will award over two million dollars to the National Parks Service. REI thinks similarly to American Express in how they act on their corporate responsibility. In an article from *Outside* magazine titled “REI Expands Offerings for National Parks,” the CEO of REI, Jerry Stritzke, is quoted saying, “REI is aiming to connect people everywhere, including our community of 5.5 million members, with America’s greatest natural spaces—in particular the hidden gems...We’re channeling a good portion of our support for the centennial into stewarding these places so that their beauty can be enjoyed for generations.” Stritzke and Mather both shared a common goal of

preserving these parks and using their resources to ensure their protection.

The president and chief operating officer at Subaru, Thomas J. Doll, also shares this longevity outlook for the wilderness. On Subaru's website, writers Diane Anton and Michael McHale detail Subaru's commitment to giving back. Doll is quoted saying, "at Subaru, we are dedicated to making a positive impact on the world and preserving our environment and we want to help ensure that the national parks are around for at least another hundred years." Subaru has been an active contributor to the National Parks: from donating vehicles to be used at the parks, to backing the promotion "fee-free" day, to donating nearly three million dollars through their "Share the Love" campaign (Anton and McHale). These CEO's and people in charge at these companies and Stephen Mather all shared the same vision. Even if they lived over a hundred years away from each other, they can still share the same goal and use their business resources to fulfil that goal. Without the help and monetary contributions these companies give, the National Parks service would lose out on crucial funding they would not be able to receive elsewhere.

But there are dissenters to this idea of a corporation's involvement because it can create a conflict of interest. People fear that these parks could become overrun with commercialism and advertisements from contributing corporations. A columnist for the *Washington Post*, Joe Davidson, writes that a 2009 Government Accountability Office "lists several potential risks to NPS from these donor relationships, including, partner exerts undue influence over Park Service priorities, public confidence in the Park Service is compromised, and Parks and Park Service become commercialized". They fear that these parks have become

too dependent on corporate funding and thus can become more easily controlled by these businesses.

The counter argument is that “while allowing corporations and other donors to get too deeply involved in any government service presents conflicts of interest, the Park Service apparently felt it was driven to this point because of inadequate government funding” (Davidson). This funding helps preserve and maintain the institutions and learning centers that are the National Parks. There are also objectors to how the parks should be funded. In an article in the *Daily Signal*, Robert Gordon expresses his stance on the National Parks Service. He says that “at time when we have \$18 trillion in debt and 623 million acres already under federal control, having a special \$900 million annual fund dedicated to purchasing yet more land is unnecessary. We need less, not more, federal land.” Though he is right about the debt part, he forgets the utter importance and impact these parks have on our social identity. Mather knew the importance of using resources in a way that benefits the greater good as do these present day corporations.

National Parks continue to grow more important in twenty-first century terms. In an article titled “Will Future Generations Preserve the National Parks?” Michael Sainato and Chelsea Skojec impress upon us the necessity of National Parks today. An imperative element to the future preservation of parks is for the new and younger generations to get involved. The CEO and President of the National Park Foundation, Will Shafroth, believes that today, “industrialized societies’ belief systems assert humanity’s dominion over nature — an attitude manifested in extensive land development and increasing urbanization that have led to widespread destruction of the natural environment. The younger generations are losing their connections with nature, with potentially

adverse effects on the conservation efforts that have protected parts of the natural world from destruction. And without their participation, the livelihood of the U.S. National Park Service — the largest U.S. conservation system, with more than 84 million acres of protected land— is in jeopardy” (Sianato and Skojec). We need a present-day Stephen Mather to continue the fight for the preservation of National Parks.

Long ago, Stephen Mather had a mission of creating a government protected parks service so that current and future generations alike could reap the benefits of the wilderness. He used his business network and personal corporate responsibility to launch a campaign for the creation of these parks. Over a hundred years later, the National Parks Service has become a staple of the American identity and has served generations after generations. Corporations and the people in business today share the same corporate responsibility Mather had and because of their donations and support, the National Parks is able to operate more effectively. But it is still important that future generations have the same passion for preservation that corporations today and Mather a hundred years ago had. National Parks help shape the American culture into what it is today and without Stephen Mather, none of this would have been possible. He is the reason those campers and tourists can enjoy Mt. Whitney and those hikers can walk cleared trails or grab maps from the Welcome Center.

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