ABSTRACT

The Bureau of Reclamation, the National Park Service, and the Origins of the National Recreation Area Concept at Lake Mead

Douglas W. Dodd, Ph.D.
California State University, Bakersfield

Today, the United States possesses nearly 40 national recreation areas (NRAs). Administered variously by the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service, and the Bureau of Land Management, the NRAs represent an important (and, in recent years, growing) component in the spectrum of the federal public lands.

The NRAs have been established at different times for different purposes. Most have been created since 1963, when the President’s Recreation Advisory Council recommended establishing national recreation areas to fill the growing nation’s outdoor needs, and to resolve bureaucratic rivalries between federal agencies. In the 1970s, the National Park Service began bringing national recreation areas to urban America, in San Francisco, New York, and Los Angeles. But all of the NRAs trace their lineage back to the Boulder Dam National Recreation Area, established in 1936 by a cooperative agreement between the Bureau of Reclamation and the National Park Service. In 1964, Congress codified the Lake Mead National Recreation Area, establishing the first—and largest—of the national recreation areas.

Much has been made about the conflict between the National Park Service (and their preservationist allies) and the Bureau of Reclamation. These two Interior Department sister
agencies often found that their missions brought them into conflict with one another at places such as Dinosaur and Grand Canyon. Yet, at times, the two agencies also enjoyed a cooperative working partnership.

This paper examines the origins of the national recreation area concept by studying the development of the Boulder Dam/Lake Mead National Recreation Area developed cooperatively by the Bureau of Reclamation and the National Park Service. The Bureau of Reclamation, with its focus on engineering and the utilitarian needs of water and power, was not initially concerned with recreation. Indeed, the act authorizing Boulder Dam did not direct the agency to consider or provide recreational facilities as part of the project. But as construction went forward, public interest in the area’s recreation potential grew. The Bureau realized that it could not adequately manage recreation surrounding the dam and reservoir, and since it viewed recreation as outside its mission, it wanted to turn the job over to another agency.

The National Park Service, meanwhile, flush with New Deal money and an expansionist leadership, was increasingly developing expertise in the management and planning of recreational areas. The National Park Service saw Boulder Dam and Lake Mead as an opportunity to further expand in the area of recreation, and to help establish NPS as the nation’s premier recreation agency. NPS was also interested in educating the public about the mammoth new reservoir and its surrounding desert environment, providing visitor access to the Lower Grand Canyon, and protecting the scenery and natural resources of the surrounding area. The combination and coordination of both preservation and use of natural resources at Lake Mead would establish a precedent for the future national recreation areas that Congress would later establish, beginning in the 1960s.
Introduction

Today, the United States possesses nearly 40 national recreation areas (NRAs). Administered variously by the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service, and the Bureau of Land Management, the NRAs represent an important (and, in recent years, growing) component in the spectrum of federal public lands. The NRAs have been established at different times for different purposes. Most have been created since 1963, when the President’s Recreation Advisory Council recommended establishing national recreation areas to fill the nation’s growing outdoor recreation needs, and to resolve bureaucratic rivalries between federal land management agencies. But all of the NRAs trace their lineage back to the Boulder Dam National Recreation Area, established in 1936 by a cooperative agreement between the Bureau of Reclamation and the National Park Service. The Boulder Dam (later renamed Lake Mead) NRA established a strong link between federal reservoirs and outdoor recreation, and established a limited policy of multiple-use management that would characterize the national recreation areas that followed it.

Origins

When Congress enacted the Swing-Johnson Boulder Canyon Project Act in 1928, it mandated that the Bureau of Reclamation construct a water resources development project that

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*Douglas W. Dodd holds a Ph.D. from the University of California, Santa Barbara, and is a lecturer in the Department of History at California State University, Bakersfield. He wishes to express his thanks for the support rendered to this project by the Department of History, California State University, Bakersfield, and the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, Brigham Young University, which provided funding for research travel.
served multiple purposes. The act specifically identified flood control, irrigation water storage, and hydroelectric power generation. In order to fulfill those goals, Boulder Dam would impound the nation’s largest reservoir, a mammoth pool reaching 115 miles upstream—as far as the little community of St. Thomas, on the lower Virgin River, and Pierce’s Ferry, in the Colorado River’s lower Grand Canyon. Boulder Dam’s reservoir, although intended only to store water earmarked for other uses elsewhere, would undoubtedly beckon visitors who would want to swim, boat, and fish in its waters. But despite this appealing aspect of the project, recreation was not a purpose specified in the Boulder Canyon Project Act. As the dam neared completion in the early 1930s, however, it became increasingly evident to Reclamation officials that recreation would be a significant use of the new federal reservoir.

The Bureau of Reclamation had first noticed the recreational potential of its reservoirs shortly after the 1906 construction of Roosevelt Dam, on the Salt River Project in Arizona. Swimming and boating became popular at the reservoir, and a hotel to accommodate visitors soon followed. Likewise throughout the arid West, local residents found reservoirs to be attractive places for outdoor recreation, despite little formal development of services or facilities by the Bureau of Reclamation.

The Bureau of Reclamation recognized that the Boulder Reservoir possessed significant recreational potential well beyond the smaller reservoirs the agency had built previously in the West. Indeed, the public flocked to the area to witness the construction of the dam as it went forward. Demands for boating, camping, sightseeing, guided boat tours, and overnight lodging soon emerged. The Bureau, however, was not interested in building and operating recreational facilities. The agency saw itself as an organization that constructed and operated water resources

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development projects. The Bureau did not want to add additional functions not directly related to its mission of providing irrigation water, hydropower, and flood control. “The Bureau of Reclamation has neither the necessary experience or personnel to administer the area” for recreational use, the agency readily conceded. Yet the Bureau also understood that recreational facilities would be necessary, indeed, the public would demand them.

If the Bureau of Recreation lacked the expertise or interest in developing the Boulder Reservoir for recreational purposes, the National Park Service had both. Since its creation in 1916, NPS had administered and promoted the recreational use of the national parks and national monuments in its charge. It knew how to plan, design, and construct the necessary facilities and developments, and it had policies and procedures in place for managing and regulating visitor use. Moreover, the National Park Service regarded itself as the nation’s foremost recreation agency, leading the way in outdoor recreation development.

Also since its establishment in 1916, NPS had eagerly sought the growth and expansion of both its territory and functions. The National Park Service benefitted greatly during the New Deal era. Budgets expanded to develop park resources. The Civilian Conservation Corps program provided an army of cheap manpower for needed construction, maintenance, and conservation projects. In 1933, President Franklin Roosevelt greatly expanded the agency’s territory and mission by transferring to it all the national monuments and national battlefields administered by the Department of Agriculture and the Department of War. Under FDR, too, the National Park Service and the Bureau of Reclamation, both in the Department of the Interior, found themselves with an aggressive leader: Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes. Ickes eagerly sought to expand the Interior domain and strengthen its agencies. Ickes especially
advocated the expansion of the National Park System, and eagerly sought out opportunities for
the agency to acquire new lands and new duties.

**Establishing the First National Recreation Area**

Although it would be embraced warmly and vigorously by Secretary Ickes, consideration
of a National Park Service role at Boulder Dam began earlier, during the Hoover administration.
In 1929, the Bureau of Reclamation and the National Park Service began consulting about the
future of recreation management at the Boulder Canyon Project. Every year between 1929 and
1932, at the direction of Secretary of the Interior Ray Lyman Wilbur, National Park Service staff
and consultants made a series of studies and investigations of the area surrounding the planned
reservoir. In April 1930, President Hoover signed an executive order withdrawing from entry
4,212 square miles of the public domain upstream from site of Boulder Dam. In doing so,
Hoover worked to protect an area that the Bureau and NPS had identified as significant for its
recreational potential and its scenic qualities. The Bureau had requested Hoover’s withdrawal
after determining that the lands would be “of greater public value from a scenic and scientific
standpoint than for economic development,” and that the new reservoir, when filled, would offer
“unusual recreation opportunities.” Reflecting the early consultations with the National Park
Service in exploring the matter, the Secretary of the Interior announced that he would
recommend that “at least part” of the area be established as a “national monument or some other
special preserve to be developed and administered by the National Park Service.” It appeared
that the area might become an eventual national monument or park.
Such a park or monument, however, would be controversial. Allowing a dam and reservoir in the middle of a national park area was a source of concern. Only two decades earlier, conservationists and national park advocates had fought a fierce—but fruitless—battle to keep a dam out of the Yosemite National Park’s Hetch Hetchy Valley. Now the Park Service eagerly considered adding a dam and reservoir project to an area of the National Park System. But there were important differences between Hetch Hetchy and Boulder Dam. First, Yosemite was already an existing national park at the time the dam was proposed, while the new area contemplated at Boulder Dam would be created around an existing dam and reservoir project. Second, park advocates believed that placing a dam in Hetch Hetchy would destroy a nationally significant scenic and recreational resource. But a new park area at Boulder Dam would be created to take advantage of a new and manmade scenic and recreational resource: a clear and sparkling body of water in the midst of a scorching and arid desert. The National Park Service regarded the Boulder Dam region as being of national significance, an important consideration because although it was generally eager to expand, the agency had traditionally held high and exacting standards of national park quality, and frequently rejected “inferior” park proposals that fell short.

In 1932, a Park Service study team, led by national park advocate and former congressman Louis Cramton, examined the question of adding such a unit to the National Park System. The Cramton report, as it became known, warned of the dangers that such a move could involve. If the area were to be designated a national park or national monument, it would weaken the protection of other parks against impairment through resource development. Cramton contended that “to deliberately bring into the national park chain and give national park
status to such a dam and reservoir would greatly strengthen the hands of those who seek to establish more or less similar reservoirs in existing national parks.”

The Cramton report concluded that if the Boulder Dam area were added to the National Park System, it should carry some name other than “national park.” A distinction needed to be made between a national park, with its traditional emphasis on preserving nature unimpaired, and an area managed primarily for its recreational value. NPS heeded the advice, and decided that it should instead be referred to as a “recreation area.”

Despite the interest that Reclamation and the Park Service shared in coordinating management of the area, the National Park Service had no authority to do so. Special legislation would be necessary to authorize it to take over the recreation management function at Boulder Dam. In early 1933, the National Park Service Director Horace Albright, Commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation Elwood Mead, and Secretary of the Interior Ray Lyman Wilbur worked to develop a bill that would grant NPS the authority to manage recreation at the reservoir.

The Bureau of Reclamation, for its part, agreed with the National Park Service’s assessment that, although NPS management would be desirable, the lands surrounding the reservoir should not be a national park or monument as traditionally conceived. Mead and Albright made the point to Secretary Wilbur:

It is not logical nor desirable that this area be made a national park or national monument, because (1) its central feature is a man-made work of today, to be administered and changed as the necessities of man may from time to time require, making use primary and preservation secondary. (2) The irrigation and power uses of the reservoir must have priority over scenic values, a policy not to be introduced in national parks. (3) Mining
and stock raising are of more or less importance in this area and should not be prohibited, as is generally done in national parks.\textsuperscript{9}

Mead and Albright identified several recreational activities that the new reservoir would accommodate, including boating, scenic boat tours, wildlife observation, and visiting special points of scenic, archaeological, or historical interest. Fishing, too, would be a new recreational opportunity, as the reservoir would settle out the Colorado’s thick and murky silts, making the reservoir a suitable habitat for the trout and bass that sportsmen desired.\textsuperscript{10}

At the urging of the two agencies, the Secretary of the Interior proposed legislation to create the Boulder Canyon National Reservation, a much larger area than the already-existing Boulder Canyon Project Federal Reservation.\textsuperscript{11} Within both areas, the Bureau of Reclamation would retain its primacy. It would continue to supervise, manage, and control the project for the purposes specified in the Boulder Canyon Project Act. But to the extent that it did not interfere with the primary reclamation purposes for which the reservations had been established, the National Park Service would have authority to “promote and regulate the use of the said reservations by such means and measures as will conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and provide for the enjoyment of the same and the recreational use thereof for the benefit of the people of the United States.” Furthermore, in developing its plans, policies, and regulations, the National Park Service would be generally governed by the provisions of the 1916 National Park Service Act, which established the principle of preservation without impairment.\textsuperscript{12} But there were some important exceptions. The new Boulder Canyon National Reservation would differ from most national parks in that two otherwise prohibited land uses—the prospecting for and development of mineral resources, and
the grazing of livestock—would be specifically authorized in the legislation. Congressional
supporters introduced the bill in both the House and Senate.\textsuperscript{13}

Although Secretary Wilbur’s days in office were numbered—Roosevelt’s inauguration
was only a month away—he lobbied Congress on behalf of the legislation. Writing to the
chairmen of the House and Senate public lands committees, Wilbur made the case for joint
USBR-NPS management at Boulder Dam. “This largest artificial reservoir in the world,” he
wrote, “possesses great recreational and educational possibilities which should be conserved.”
He argued that the Park Service was the proper agency to carry out that conservation, rather than
assigning new responsibilities in the field of recreation to the Bureau of Reclamation. The
present legislation, then, would be the best solution. It would avoid the “building up of
duplicating organizations.” It would also make permanent the areas needed for “reclamation,
power, and park purposes,” while releasing some 1.4 million acres of withdrawn lands, and
restoring them to entry under the public land laws. Passage of the bills, Wilbur told the chairmen,
was “urgently desirable.”\textsuperscript{14} But despite Wilbur’s efforts, however, the bills went nowhere in
Congress. NPS still had no formal role at Boulder Dam, and so the Bureau of Reclamation
would have to respond, grudgingly, to the public’s recreational demands. The issue would
remain for the incoming Roosevelt administration to resolve.

Over the next two years, the engineers and construction companies made remarkable
progress on the dam, and 1935 marked two milestones for the Boulder Canyon Project. In
February, the diversion tunnels closed, and the Colorado River began pooling behind the dam,
forming a reservoir. In September, President Franklin Roosevelt would visit Boulder Dam and
dedicate it to the American people. Although completion of the dam and the filling of the reservoir were now imminent, the recreational issues still had not been settled.

The problem began to weigh upon the Bureau of Reclamation, which increasingly found itself having to grapple with managing recreation and tourism. The filling of the reservoir brought an increasing number of visitors. Tourist travel to Boulder Dam, Commissioner Mead noted, “is greater now than ever before.” Now that a lake existed back of the dam, many of these visitors expected an opportunity to see the upstream face of the dam from water level. The Bureau responded by issuing temporary licenses to “several boat owners of known responsibility,” allowing them to operate on the reservoir. Into the summer of 1935, the flow of tourists did not abate, and visitors placed other recreation demands on the Bureau. The reservoir, which grew in size day by day, held correspondingly greater recreational appeal. The public was eager to take advantage of its swimming and pleasure-boating potential. Walker Young, the Bureau’s Construction Engineer in charge of the Boulder Canyon Project reported that “the reservoir has become a very popular attraction for those interested in boating and swimming.” “Every afternoon and evening,” he said, “the reservoir is used by a large number of swimmers, with a generous portion made up of children.”

But USBR was not well equipped to handle this burgeoning new use. In addition to managing the tour boat concessions, provision needed to be made for boating facilities—such as docks, marinas, and launching ramps—and beach and swimming facilities, such as restrooms, changing rooms, food vendors, and lifeguards. The Bureau fully expected the National Park Service to assume these responsibilities, constructing needed developments, administering necessary concessions, and regulating visitor use and safety on the reservoir. But until Congress
authorized the Park Service to do so, Reclamation had to manage the problem. In August 1935, to help ease the situation, Secretary Ickes approved the Bureau’s request for NPS assistance in developing interim recreation policies. The two agencies cooperated and developed policies that were administered by the autocratic Sims Ely, who embodied “the law in Boulder City,” in his capacity as city manager. Ely already had charge of issuing business permits there, and so simply added similar permits at the reservoir to his portfolio. Granting concessions and constructing improvements at the reservoir would take time, but action on one issue could not be delayed. “The conditions at Boulder Dam require immediate attention or loss of life may result from lack of proper safeguards for boating and swimming,” Commissioner Mead wrote Secretary Ickes. In August 1935, Secretary Ickes approved an emergency request from the Bureau to hire lifeguards and patrolmen to protect recreationists.18

In 1935, the Roosevelt administration reintroduced the Boulder Canyon National Reservation bill. NPS Director Arno B. Cammerer, who had replaced Albright, and Reclamation Commissioner Mead prepared the legislation, and Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes forwarded it to Congress. The new bill contained the same division of powers and provisions of the 1933 version, but with one important difference. Looking ahead, the new legislation would authorize the National Park Service and the Bureau of Reclamation to cooperate, in a similar manner, in planning for and managing recreation at other future federal reservoirs associated with reclamation projects. Again, however, it languished in Congress without enactment. The Park Service still lacked authority to manage recreation at the reservoir.19

Resolution of the problem finally came with the passage of more comprehensive and far-reaching legislation. In June 1936, Congress approved the Park, Parkway, and Recreation Area
Study Act, which designated the National Park Service the nation’s leading recreation agency, and charged it with planning for and administering recreational opportunities. The act directed the National Park Service to undertake a nationwide study of America’s outdoor recreation needs and resources. It also authorized the Park Service to plan, develop, and administer recreation areas in cooperation with state and local governments and —significantly—to “cooperate and make agreements with and seek and accept the assistance of other Federal agencies.”

NPS now had statutory authorization to manage recreation area Boulder Dam. Another change occurred in 1936. In February, the U.S. Board of Geographic names officially designated the Boulder Dam Reservoir as “Lake Mead,” in honor of the recently deceased Commissioner of Reclamation.

Following passage of the Park, Parkway, and Recreation Area Study Act, NPS and USBR officials spent the summer of 1936 negotiating a interbureau agreement to delineate their responsibilities at Lake Mead. A special committee, appointed through the Secretary of the Interior and consisting of a representatives from the Department of the Interior’s Solicitor’s Office, the Bureau of Reclamation, and the National Park Service, met to develop a joint memorandum of agreement. In September, they made their report. Most significantly, the special study committee recommended that the management authority between the National Park Service and the Bureau of Reclamation be divided “territorially rather than functionally.” The Bureau would retain jurisdiction over the administrative and employee community of Boulder City, as well as Boulder Dam and its associated engineering works. The Park Service, on the other hand, would have control over the remainder of the reserved lands within the Boulder Canyon Project Area and the surface waters of Lake Mead. By making such a division, they concluded, “the possibility of indefiniteness and of conflict is materially lessened.”
Although the two agencies would be territorially separate, the Bureau of Reclamation would retain certain rights within the Park Service area. Although all other roads and highways within the area would belong to NPS, the Bureau would retain control over the Lower Portal road, which it needed for access to construct and operate the powerhouse. USBR would likewise retain other facilities running through the NPS area, including telephone lines, water lines, and the railroad line. In the future, USBR would have the authority to construct power transmission lines through the area. NPS, for its part, would gain control over the airport at Boulder City, on the grounds that “the airport will be an important link in the chain of accommodations to travelers desiring to visit Boulder Dam and Grand Canyon National Park.”

The committee also had recommendations for the Bureau of Reclamation’s administration of its portion of the area, particularly as regarded visitor services at Boulder City. They proposed that USBR issue permits for construction of an additional auto court and a campground or “tourist camp.” At the dam itself, the committee recommended that the Bureau continue to allow visitors to enter the dam. Although a private firm had requested a permit to operate a guide service at the dam, the committee believed that such applications should be denied, and that the Bureau operate its own guided tours. The Bureau, they believed, should have “close control” over public contact at the dam and needed to be able to coordinate visitation with dam operations. A concessionaire, however, should be allowed to operate a souvenir stand at the dam.

The committee had few similarly specific development recommendations for the National Park Service, however, and believed that agency should have a “free hand” in developing the area. “The National Park Service for years has been engaged in the planning, development, and
operation of recreational areas...,” the report declared. “For this committee to make detailed
suggestions would not only be presumptuous, but would likewise be unwise.” Yet the committee
did make broad suggestions on certain aspects of the management direction at Lake Mead. In
particular, they asked that the National Park Service request a budget appropriation to purchase
the surface rights to a group of patented mining claims located near the main highway through
the recreation area. They also recommended that NPS open the canyon below the dam, for
purposes of trout fishing and scenic enjoyment.\textsuperscript{25}

Two important policy recommendations in the committee’s report would shape the future
application of the national recreation area concept. The first was that mining and prospecting
should be allowed to continue in the recreation area. Such activities were traditionally barred in
national parks and national monuments under the control of the National Park Service. But the
committee recommended “that the well-known ban against mining and prospecting in National
Park areas be not invoked in this area.” Instead of preserving unimpaired, the national recreation
area would allow some commercial development to the extent that they did not excessively
damage recreational and scenic values. Mining, subject to regulation under the appropriate laws
and administrative regulations, they said, “should be freely allowed except where they will
interfere physically and directly with a legitimate recreational development. This
recommendation is based on the fact that the project area embraces a large part of the States of
Nevada and Arizona, to which mining is of great importance.” The Bureau of Reclamation had
been besieged with protests from local residents and members of Congress from both states,
urging that mining not be banned from the area. By allowing mining and prospecting to
continue, the committee believed that opposition to National Park Service management of the
reservoir could be deflected, and that it would “do much to create good will and will not result in injury to the recreational use of the area.”

Livestock grazing came in for similar treatment. Although the National Park Service banned grazing in parks (or sought to eliminate it where it existed as a prior use), the committee recommended that the agency should authorize grazing in the new national recreation area. “Grazing should be permitted as a gesture of good will toward the project on the part of residents of Nevada and Arizona,” they concluded, noting that there was not much actual risk to the area’s environment, since “the project area is largely arid and affords little opportunity for grazing of stock.” The Lake Mead grazing and mining policies, responses to local environmental and political conditions, proved to be far-reaching and significant, for they established a precedent of recreation-centered multiple-use management for future national recreation areas that would be established elsewhere.

On September 1, 1936, the committee reached final agreement on its recommendations and forwarded them to Under-Secretary of the Interior, Charles West. By October 13, the agencies had developed a memorandum of agreement, based on the recommendations, which Secretary Ickes signed and put into force. Recognizing that “a large number of visitors use the lands and waters of the Boulder Canyon Project Area for purposes of recreation,” and further noting that the National Park Service had substantial experience in “administering areas devoted to recreational uses,” the memorandum set forth policy for the management of Lake Mead and its surrounding lands. Boulder Dam National Recreation Area—the nation’s first NRA—was born.
The final interbureau agreement reflected the recommendation of the committee. The Bureau of Reclamation retained “complete jurisdiction” over the dam and all of its related engineering works, as well as Boulder City. The National Park Service gained control over the remainder of the Boulder Canyon Project Area and the Boulder City airport. Within its large domain, NPS would have “authority over and responsibility for all activities.”

But the Bureau of Reclamation’s needs and interests in managing the project, stemming as they did from statute, could supercede or trump the administratively derived rights of the National Park Service. USBR would retain “the right to determine any controversy which may arise because of conflict between the recreational uses of the Boulder Canyon Project Area and the uses of the project for storage, release and utilization of water.” Accordingly, NPS would have to accept the Bureau’s determination in such matters, or request that the Secretary of the Interior review the decision. Only an order from the Secretary could reverse the Bureau.

With regard to cooperation, both agencies were required to consult with one another before moving ahead on any developments or issuing any permits which might have a negative effect on the other agency or its permittees. All income generated from leases, licenses, or permits would be paid into the Bureau of Reclamation’s Colorado River Dam Fund.

After establishing the general provisions of the agreement, the memorandum detailed the particular functions that each agency would carry out. The National Park Service was charged with preparing plans for the development of recreational facilities, including roads and trails, and with constructing them. It also had responsibility for negotiating contracts with the necessary concessionaires who would provide recreational opportunities such as operation of boating
marinas and private development at bathing beaches, as well as sightseeing tours. NPS would also oversee and regulate any mining or grazing that took place in the recreation area.31

The memorandum also spelled out the Bureau of Reclamation’s responsibilities. The Bureau would operate the dam and its related facilities for the purposes specified in the Boulder Canyon Project Act—flood control, irrigation water storage, and hydropower generation. The Bureau would also continue its management of the community at Boulder City, and provide accommodation for NPS administrative offices there. Reclamation would further establish regulations governing public access to Boulder Dam and its related works, and provide for a “skilled guide and lecture service” at the dam, “as may be necessary to give the visiting public the important facts regarding it, including the history of its construction.”32

With the cooperative agreement in place, both agencies set about promoting the recreational potential of the new Boulder Dam National Recreation Area. The Department of the Interior issued press releases promoting tourism to the region. The Bureau of Reclamation used its publication, The Reclamation Era to spread the news, as well. Several articles appeared in the Bureau’s magazine touting Lake Mead’s proximity to other national parks in the Colorado Plateau region, including Grand Canyon, Bryce Canyon, and Zion, as well as its suitability as a winter resort.33 The magazine also ran an article by NPS Director Arno Cammerer, which highlighted the recreational developments constructed by the CCC, and identified the various boat tours and lodging opportunities that were available. “The great Boulder Dam. . .,” he wrote, “planned originally to provide power, irrigation, and flood control, has now added recreation as a fine bonus for traveling America.”34
The National Park Service was eager to get to work on developing the area. Indeed, more than a year before the interagency agreement had been signed, the National Park Service had established CCC camps (through its state parks branch) near the reservoir and began construction work. Enrollees from camps SP-4 and SP-6 commenced construction of needed recreational facilities, such as a swimming beach at Hemenway Wash. They also constructed a museum at Overton, and assisted with archaeological excavations.  

NPS development activity accelerated in June 1936, after Congress appropriated $10,000 for the Park Service, with Bureau of Reclamation cooperation, to conduct a study of the Boulder Dam reservoir’s recreation potential and to begin making plans for development. The Park Service report on proposed recreational facilities at Lake Mead impressed Congress, which in 1937 made a large appropriation to finance the development. Funding reached $100,000 by 1940. The Civilian Conservation Corps carried out much of the work, under Park Service direction.

NPS and USBR had worked hard to tailor the recreation project in such a way as to avoid political opposition. But they soon encountered a powerful challenge, despite their best efforts. In 1939, U.S. Senator Key Pittman of Nevada threatened to reduce the size of the Boulder Dam NRA. Some Las Vegas interests had opposed the national recreation area and continued federal control over the reservoir area. They saw the development of Lake Mead as unwanted competition and disliked the NPS policy of strictly regulating the business practices—and numbers—of concessionaires. Pittman introduced legislation to grant 8,000 acres of federal land to the State of Nevada, for development as state park. Eighty-percent of the land at issue was located within the Boulder Dam NRA boundaries, and would carve a large section out of the NRA in the vicinity of Las Vegas Wash. Pittman’s bill passed both houses of
Congress. Secretary Ickes, however, strongly opposed the bill. He believed that “gamblers and saloonkeepers” sought the bill in order to have greater access to the Lake Mead/Boulder Dam tourists. Ickes believed that the state park would allow construction of casinos, despite Pittman’s assurances that it would not. Ickes interceded with President Roosevelt, who sided with Ickes and vetoed the bill on August 10, 1939.  

In his veto message, FDR affirmed the area’s “national interest and value,” and the need to protect he land surrounding the reservoir in order to prevent the pollution of the water supply and to enhance the recreational and scenic values created by the lake. Allowing the lands to pass from federal control, he said, would “open the door to uses which might be at variance with the national interest in the Boulder Dam–Lake Mead region.” “All of the people of the United States,” FDR stated, “have a paramount interest in Boulder Dam and its related facilities for water conservation and utilization. Likewise they have a paramount interest in the outstanding recreational and scenic attractions of Lake Mead and the surrounding territory.” Because the area was “worthy of consideration as a possible national park or monument,” had already been set aside for the purposes of recreation and the preservation of scenery, and “attracted thousands of visitors from all parts of the Union,” it therefore constituted a recreational area which was “truly national in character.” To transfer federal lands from the Boulder Dam National Recreation Area to the state would set “undesirable precedent” for national parks and national forests, FDR declared.  

The president had vetoed Pittman’s bill, but the National Park Service remained politically attuned in managing the area. Just as management policies of the NRA had been tailored to suit local interests—and minimize opposition—by allowing mining and grazing, NPS
targeted its development program to satisfy the Las Vegas interests that Pittman spoke for. Although Hemenway Wash, Pierce’s Ferry, and Overton had been identified in NPS planning documents as the centers for recreational development, the agency sought to placate Pittman’s supporters by channeling funding and CCC manpower to construct recreational facilities at Las Vegas Wash—the point of access on the lake nearest to the city of Las Vegas.  

The Boulder Dam National Recreation Area had survived Pittman’s challenge in 1939 and remained intact. But changes lay ahead. Within a decade, its name would change and its boundaries would expand. In 1947, NPS renamed it Lake Mead National Recreation Area. Also that year, a new agreement between NPS and USBR supplemented the original interagency partnership, and authorized the continued role of the Park Service in managing recreation at Lake Mead. Both agencies seemed pleased with the arrangement established a decade earlier, and now moved to extend the relationship further in modification of the original agreement. The 1947 agreement provided for the extension of the recreation area boundaries southward to encompass the withdrawn reclamation lands surrounding the reservoir of Davis Dam, then under construction downstream from Boulder Dam. The Boulder Dam National Recreation Area, as established in 1936, already extended well downriver, to a point within twelve miles of the new Davis Dam, and included a large amount of the area that would surround the new Lake Mohave. Deeming it to be “in the best interests of the Government to provide for unified administration of and jurisdiction over this entire area,” NPS and USBR, with the Secretary of the Interior’s approval, added a second reservoir and thousands of acres of land to what was now called Lake Mead National Recreation Area. Although the area existed by virtue of administrative action
rather than statute, it had withstood a major political challenge, grown in size, and it seemed to have a secure future.

Consequences of the NRA Concept and NPS-USBR Cooperation

The NPS-USBR recreation relationship was a successful one for the most part. The Bureau of Reclamation made clear to the National Park Service that it would, in the words of Commissioner Page, “welcome supervision of recreational activities” on new reservoirs.\textsuperscript{44} Several national recreation areas came about as a result. In some cases though, the National Park Service did not retain management of a recreation area, but instead aided state or local agencies in planning recreational developments. For example, Millerton Lake, behind the Central Valley Project’s Friant Dam, near Fresno, California, became a state recreation area under the control of California State Parks. Cachuma Lake, on the Cachuma Project, became a Santa Barbara County park.\textsuperscript{45}

For the Bureau of Reclamation, national recreation areas served important purposes. They made future reclamation projects more politically appealing by adding outdoor recreation interests to the constituencies in favor of Bureau dams. Potentially, they could also serve as a compromise with conservation and recreation groups worried about the effects of Bureau projects on scenic areas, or could split boat-oriented recreationists away from preservation-minded groups. While recreation would be an important part of many new Bureau projects, the NRA designations (and NPS involvement in recreation planning) would also benefit the Bureau by
freeing it from the burdens of managing recreational use that was inevitable and which the Bureau was not prepared or willing to manage.

The National Park Service benefitted, too. NPS officials believed that the national recreation area designation might be a way to bring under National Park System administration scenic areas that had been rendered unsuitable for national park or national monument status by the construction of reclamation projects. For example, in 1936, the National Park Service hoped to establish a national park or monument in the Sawtooth Mountains of central Idaho—an area which belonged to the U.S. Forest Service. The Bureau of Reclamation notified NPS that it was considering a proposed transmountain water diversion project this the Sawtooths that would dam several of the principal lakes and construct diversion tunnels through the mountains to divert the flow of the Salmon River headwaters into the Boise River and Payette River basins. NPS did not believe that the diversion project was feasible, but considered that if it were eventually built, the Sawtooths could instead become a Park Service national recreation area, thus accommodating an intrusion not appropriate in a national park.46

Similarly, during the 1940s, NPS eagerly cooperated with the Bureau’s Colorado River Storage Project, and determined that after the proposed Echo Park Dam was constructed in the Dinosaur National Monument (on the Utah-Colorado border), the monument could become a national recreation area instead. So too with the Grand Canyon National Monument. The monument included lands that would be inundated by the reservoir of the Bureau’s proposed Bridge Canyon Dam. If the dam were built, the Park Service suggested, the monument could simply transform into the Grand Canyon National Recreation Area.47
The National Recreation Area designation became for the National Park Service a tool to increase or protect its bureaucratic “turf.” It made territorial gains possible in the sense that new areas, containing pre-existing developments that rendered them unsuitable as parks or monuments, might be added to the National Park System. It also protected NPS interests because it helped the agency avoid political conflict with USBR and its powerful constituents by allowing inappropriate developments in national monuments, then reclassifying them as NRAs. Beyond the potential to expand into recreation management around reclamation reservoirs and to accommodate development pressures which targeted parks, Secretary Ickes envisioned the NRA designation as a tool to use in his ongoing war against the Department of Agriculture and its U.S. Forest Service. Ickes had long wanted control over the Forest Service, hoping to add it to the Department of the Interior, or to merge the two into an overarching “Department of Conservation.” Although Ickes claimed that Roosevelt had promised him the transfer of the Forest Service, by 1940, FDR had taken no such action. Ickes then decided upon a strategy of “nibbling” the Forest Service, seeking to transfer the agency’s most scenic lands into the National Park Service. He had succeeded in gaining large tracts of national forest land in the 1933 transfer of all national monuments to NPS, and through the establishment of Olympic National Park (1938) and Kings Canyon National Park (1940). He sought further transfers by ordering the Park Service to prepare proclamations by which the president could use the Antiquities Act of 1906 to establish several new national monuments (drawn from the Forest Service land base) and give them to NPS. Seeking to avoid the political opposition that park and monument proposals often generated, due to the traditionally more restrictive management policies of the NPS, Ickes sought to amend the Antiquities Act to allow the president to use that
authority to establish national recreation areas instead. Based on the Boulder Dam NRA model, Ickes envisioned NRAs as including water resources development, grazing, logging, and mining—uses typically prohibited in national park areas. Such sweeping changes never materialized, but a limited program of NRAs, established by interbureau agreement, continued in the postwar period. But the strategy had its limits: NRA proposals for Dinosaur and Grand Canyon National Monuments set off epic conservation battles to rival those fought over Hetch Hetchy, and dams were never built in either location.

Although it never developed as fully as Harold Ickes had intended, the NRA concept initiated at Lake Mead remained a potent idea in the postwar period. It received further recognition and widespread application in 1963. In that year, President Kennedy’s Recreation Advisory Council issued guidelines for the establishment of national recreation areas. Although national recreation areas surrounding federal reclamation projects—like Lake Mead—had existed for decades under the interagency agreements authorized by the Park, Parkway, and Recreation Area Study Act of 1936, the Recreation Advisory Council guidelines called for NRAs to be established by congressional statute, rather than administrative action. The Council further identified the types of areas that ought to receive NRA designation. These were to be areas in which management would favor recreational development rather than natural resource development or preservation, and in which “natural endowments” were “well above the ordinary,” but still “of lesser significance than the unique scenic and historic elements of the National Park System.”

In shaping the direction of future NRAs, the RAC policy echoed the multiple-use nature envisioned by Ickes and established at Lake Mead. Although the RAC policy directed agencies
administering NRAs to recognize outdoor recreation as the “dominant or primary resource management purpose,” agencies could nevertheless continue to allow commodity production and other resource utilization, so long as it was compatible with recreation and not detrimental to it.\footnote{50} Activities allowed within NRAs but not in parks or monuments included grazing, mining, logging, water resources development, and hunting.

The RAC policy led to a new wave of national recreation areas—some created by interagency agreement, others by federal law. On October 8, 1964, Lake Mead National Recreation Area became the first NRA established by an act of Congress.\footnote{51} Other NRAs surrounding Bureau of Reclamation reservoirs followed, such as Bighorn Canyon NRA, Glen Canyon NRA, and Curecanti NRA. Other NPS-USBR cooperative NRAs were transferred the U.S. Forest Service in the 1960s, such as Flaming Gorge NRA, on the Colorado River Storage Project, Shadow Mountain (now Arapaho) NRA on the Colorado-Big Thompson Project, and the Shasta and Trinity NRAs on the Central Valley Project in California. These Forest Service managed the lands surrounding these recreation areas, and resented its rival’s intrusion into its domain. Consequently, NPS “cession” of some of these NRAs was among the terms negotiated in the so-called 1963 “Treaty of the Potomac” between the two long-time rivals.

The Forest Service also made its own creative use of the national recreation area designation that the Park Service and Bureau of Reclamation had pioneered. In some cases, such as the Sawtooth National Recreation Area (1972), Oregon Dunes NRA (1972), and Hells Canyon NRA (1976), the Forest Service sought NRA legislation from Congress in order to retain control of national-park quality scenic and recreational areas that NPS and conservationists
wanted to establish as parks. In these Forest Service NRAs, multiple-use management would continue, but would be subordinated to the primary uses of recreation, scenery, and wildlife. Congress established yet more NRAs for other diverse purposes. In cases, such as Gateway NRA and Golden Gate NRA (1972) and Santa Monica Mountains NRA (1978), Congress empowered the National Park Service to protect open space and provide outdoor recreation in urban areas of New York City, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. In yet other cases, such as Spruce Knob-Seneca Rocks NRA (1965) and Mt. Rogers NRA (1966), the goal was to promote outdoor recreation as an economic development strategy in Appalachia. Lake Chelan NRA and Ross Lake NRA (1968) represented unusual areas in that they were created as part of a National Park Service complex, allowing the addition of scenic and recreation lands to the North Cascades National Park Complex, while keeping dams, reservoirs, and highways out of the national park proper.

Conclusion

At Lake Mead, the National Park Service and the Bureau of Reclamation cooperated to create a new kind of National Park System unit. The Park Service was able to add new territory and create a new function for its agency. The Bureau of Reclamation avoided having to manage the recreational uses associated with its new reservoir, a responsibility the Bureau did not want and regarded as extraneous to its primary mission. Because Lake Mead, although nationally significant for its scenic and recreational value, was a manmade feature inappropriate for inclusion in a national park or monument, NPS created the national recreation area designation to accommodate it. In the national recreation area, NPS would emphasize outdoor recreation in a
scenic setting over traditional preservation. Such a compromise also allowed other limited multiple uses, such as mining and grazing. The NRA created at Lake Mead in 1936 became a model for other areas established in future NPS-USBR agreements. Beginning in the 1960s, the NRA concept gained currency and resulted in Congress’ creation of numerous new national recreation areas. Today, the National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, and Bureau of Land Management all manage national recreation areas. Despite the broad range of uses to which it has been put, the national recreation area concept originated with the Boulder Dam National Recreation Area, established by the Bureau of Reclamation and the National Park Service at Lake Mead.
Endnotes


4. Elwood Mead and Horace M. Albright, Memorandum to the Secretary, 7 February 1933, Record Group 115, Records of the Bureau of Reclamation, Entry 7, Washington Office, Project Correspondence File, 1930-1945, Colorado River, File 131.24, “Cooperation with National Park Service, through August 1936,” box 229, National Archives and Records Administration, Rocky Mountain Region, Denver.


10. Elwood Mead and Horace M. Albright, Memorandum to the Secretary, 7 February 1933.

11. The Boulder Canyon Project Federal Reservation had been previously established in 1930, by Secretary Wilbur, under the authority of the 1902 Reclamation Act and the 1928 Swing-Johnson Boulder Canyon Project Act. The Federal Reservation was intended to place all activities at the dam site, construction areas, and the community of Boulder City under the direct and exclusive control of the federal government, in order to promote the efficient and orderly progress of construction. Stevens, *Hoover Dam*, 122.


1940,” box 340, National Archives and Records Administration, Rocky Mountain Region, Denver.


23. Kirgis, Moskey, and Schnurr, Memorandum for Under-Secretary West, 1 September 1936.

24. Memorandum for Under-Secretary West, 1 September 1936.

25. Memorandum for Under-Secretary West, 1 September 1936.

26. Memorandum for Under-Secretary West, 1 September 1936.

27. Memorandum for Under-Secretary West, 1 September 1936.


36. Ise, Our National Parks Policy, 369.

37. Ise, Our National Parks Policy, 369.

38. In 1936, one of the Las Vegas newspapers called for a wide-open approach to development at Lake Mead, including gambling and liquor sales with the NRA boundaries. Instead of a limited number of NPS-authorized concessionaires, the paper said that the government should “allow as many resorts to be built as there are people to build them.” The paper denounced the recreation area plan as a federal “take over.” “Just What is the Plan?” Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, 30 January 1936; “Vegas Group On Record Against New Proposal,” Las Vegas Evening Review-Journal, 18 April 1939.

39. Harold L. Ickes, The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes. Volume II: The Inside Struggle, 1936-1939 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), 588, 693. Ickes had a strong aversion to Nevada’s famous vices, and did not want to see them extended to Lake Mead. On a 1939 trip to visit the completed Boulder Dam, he briefly visited Las Vegas, which he described as “an ugly little town where gambling dens and saloons and prostitution run wide open day and night.” “Three quarters of an hour was all we needed to get the savor of this rotten little town,” he said. Ickes was happy to return to Boulder City, which by way of contrast, he called “the neatest and most attractive-looking place in Nevada,” owing to the federal government’s policy of prohibiting gambling, prostitution, and the sale of hard liquor. Ickes, 1954, 580-581.

40. Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Veto Message of August 10, 1939,” Record Group 79, Records of the National Park Service, Southwest Regional Office Subject Files, File 120–Legislation, “Correspondence relating to national parks, national monuments, and national recreation areas, 1927-1953,” Box 81, National Archives and Records Administration, Rocky Mountain Region, Denver.


43. “Modification of Memorandum of Agreement Between the National Park Service and the Bureau of Reclamation Relating to the Development and Administration of the Boulder Canyon Project Area.” Record Group 79, Records of the National Park Service, Lake Mead National Recreation Area Subject Files, 1936-1969, box 4, file 201-15, “Recreation Area Policy,” National Archives and Records Administration, Pacific Southwest Region, Laguna Niguel,

45. Record Group 79, Records of the National Park Service, Lake Mead National Recreation Area Subject Files, 1936-1969, box 1, file 0-41, “Agreement Re: Cachuma Reservoir,” and “Friant and Shasta Dams,” National Archives and Records Administration, Pacific Southwest Region.


50. Dilsaver, 265.

