

Why aren't the White Mountains a national park?

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Thursday, August 25, 2016

The National Park Service turns 100 today, but that doesn't mean much for New Hampshire's jewel of outdoor recreation – the White Mountains – because they're part of a national forest, not a national park.

That raises two questions that many White Mountains National Forest visitors ask each year: Why isn't this place a park, and what's the difference, anyway?

The answer begins with the passage of the Weeks Act of 1911, five years before the National Park System was born, said Tom Wagner, the White Mountain National Forest supervisor.

Around the turn of the 20th century, conservationists and businesspeople alike were concerned that New Hampshire's woods were being wiped out to produce timber and clear space for farming and grazing of sheep to feed textile mills, Wagner said.

The effect was so marked that practically the only untouched land was in the White Mountains, he said, because of the difficulty of the terrain. Wagner said it was more "liquidation harvest" than forestry, with the untreated slash left behind presenting a fire danger.

Not only that, but during rainstorms, the storm water flowed directly into rivers over the cleared landscapes. Downstream in Manchester, the mills suffered because the Merrimack River was flooded in the spring and drying in the summer.

So when the federal government became authorized by the Weeks Act in 1911 to purchase private land to protect the headwaters of rivers, there was support for the concept in New Hampshire, Wagner said.

The federal government began buying land in the White Mountains in 1914, two years before the National Parks Service was established. By 1918, the White Mountain National Forest was created. Today it includes nearly 800,000 acres in New Hampshire and Maine that are visited by upwards of 5 million people each year.

In other words, as Dave Anderson, a spokesman for the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, put it: "Our White Mountain National Forest is not lesser than the Smokies or Shenandoah. It's actually that it's earlier than" those national parks.

Because of the huge number of tourists, however, the Whites are somewhat more like a national park than other national forests. They're within a day's drive of 70 million people, Wagner said, and there's a national scenic byway going through. For those drivers, "as long as it's beautiful and the bathrooms are clean and you've got a place to pull off and enjoy yourself," they don't care much whether it's a division of the federal Department of Agriculture (like the national forests) or the Department of the Interior (like the national parks).

The Whites also stand out as a destination because tourists have been visiting since long before they ever got the national forest distinction, Wagner said, which is different from many other places.

The recreational opportunities today in the White Mountain National Forest, including four downhill skiing areas, show part of what sets them apart from parks.

"You don't find downhill ski areas on national parks, at least that I'm aware of," Wagner said. "And most national parks, you're not allowed to hunt."

In addition, unlike parks, a sustainable forestry program is practiced on about a third of the forest, Wagner said, so the logging industry isn't shut out.

Anderson said he often corrects people when they mistake the White Mountains for a national park.

"They look at me like, 'Whatever dude. What's the difference?' But the national forest is designed also to be a strategic timber reserve for the U.S. government, just like we have strategic oil reserves," he said. "That gets lost because so many people recreate there."

While the national parks were set aside for preservation, the national forests were set aside "for conservation, or the wise use of resources through a balance of activities and uses. These include recreation, wildlife habitat, water, timber and wilderness," according to the Forest Service.

That's in keeping with the first chief of the Forest Service Gifford Pinchot's motto: "To provide the greatest amount of good for the greatest amount of people in the long run."

Wagner said there's been no talk in his 15 years in the White Mountains of converting it to a national park. Although, over the decades, he said, there have been a few efforts to combine the parks and forest "into a superagency."

"Generally the public has come out and supported the way things are," he said.

Anderson said it's a touchy subject whenever someone proposes fiddling with federal lands, because people get concerned that it would open up a path for "more grazing and drilling and mining and extractive use."

"It's not that people are afraid of the National Parks Service," Anderson said. "It's more that they're comfortable with the U.S. Forest Service, and the U.S. Forest Service is incredibly well thought of. They don't have a lot of enemies in New Hampshire."

Every once in a while, Anderson said, someone will suggest the idea of creating a national park out of the White Mountains.

"Usually that gets defeated rapidly and roundly because there's such a strong coalition for our national forest," he said.

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