The Organic Act of 1916 is the foundational law that dictates how the NPS manages Yellowstone. Under the Organic Act, the NPS is required to conserve the scenery and wildlife within the national parks while also promoting recreation for park visitors. The mandates for conservation and recreation can be contradictory because conservation often comes at the expense of recreation and vice versa. As interpretations of the Organic Act have changed over time, management strategies in Yellowstone have also changed, directly affecting park ecosystems.

The paradoxical mandate to promote conservation and recreation enlarges the NPS's decision-making power because nearly any management decision falls in one of these two categories. NPS officials, as federal bureaucrats, have wide discretion in managing Yellowstone for two other reasons. First, oversight from Congress and the president is generally limited. Second, NPS officials are not elected, so they do not have to respond to election pressures like politicians.

Although NPS officials have wide discretion to implement nearly any policy they choose, they make policies to please congressional leaders and the public. Park managers respond to political pressures because they are rationally self-interested individuals. Like all people, they strategically make decisions to benefit themselves, maximize their budgets, and promote their preferences.

NPS officials have completely reversed several far reaching policies regarding wildfire and wildlife over the past century to reflect the changing preferences of politicians, bureaucrats, and the general public. When the NPS began managing Yellowstone in the early 1900s, NPS leaders promoted recreation over conservation because the public demanded it. After the environmental movement began in the 1960s, the public

MANUFACTURING YELLOWSTONE
PART 1: INSTITUTIONS AND INCENTIVES IN PARK MANAGEMENT

As the National Park Service (NPS) celebrates its centennial anniversary in 2016, the Institute of Political Economy (IPE) at Utah State University examined how NPS officials have made management decisions in Yellowstone National Park over the past century. In its report Manufacturing Yellowstone, IPE found that drastic changes in NPS management can be explained by contradictions in the Organic Act of 1916 and the political incentives of park managers.

KEY FINDINGS

The Organic Act of 1916 is the foundational law that dictates how the NPS manages Yellowstone. Under the Organic Act, the NPS is required to conserve the scenery and wildlife within the national parks while also promoting recreation for park visitors. The mandates for conservation and recreation can be contradictory because conservation often comes at the expense of recreation and vice versa. As interpretations of the Organic Act have changed over time, management strategies in Yellowstone have also changed, directly affecting park ecosystems.

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demanded more conservation-based management, so Yellowstone managers changed policies to reflect these new preferences.

One of the biggest policy reversals was fire management. The NPS originally suppressed all fires in Yellowstone because tourists did not want to visit a burnt park. After nearly a century of fire suppression, forests became artificially dense and the forest floor became overgrown. Yellowstone’s historic megafire in 1988 was exacerbated because park managers had suppressed all natural and man-made fires for decades. After 1988, the NPS began allowing naturally caused fires to burn for two reasons. First, fires promote ecological health, and second, the NPS wanted to avoid megafires in the future. The NPS still suppresses man-made fires in Yellowstone because these fires are politically unviable, despite the fact that Native Americans set fires in Yellowstone for thousands of years.

Management of several animal species have also made complete policy reversals as political preferences have changed. The NPS once allowed and even encouraged feeding bears in the park, but now feeding bears is a violation of park policy. The NPS actively exterminated wolves from the park when they were considered a threat to livestock, but in the 1990s, the NPS reintroduced wolves to the park. Park managers originally introduced invasive fish species into Yellowstone’s waterways to promote recreational fishing, but now the NPS is working to eliminate invasive fish species.

Beginning in the early 1900s, the NPS actively managed elk populations by killing and relocating excess elk. These management strategies were meant to prevent populations from growing too large and overgrazing Yellowstone’s ecosystems. In the 1960s, many Americans became outraged when mass media coverage showed park managers killing animals in the park. A political firestorm ensued, and congressional committees pressured the NPS to alter their elk management techniques. NPS officials yielded to the political pressure and ceased all active management of elk. Artificially large elk populations have now overgrazed many of Yellowstone’s rangelands and river ecosystems.

Some people may assert that changes in park management have occurred because park managers understand ecology better now than they did in the past. The scientific field of ecology can explain the complex interactions between organisms and their environment, but ecology cannot tell us what the “best” ecological state is. Ecological outcomes can be widely considered better or worse than others, but each outcome depends on personal preferences. Choosing ecological outcomes is a political decision, not a scientific one.

Because park managers respond to political incentives and do not have perfect knowledge, negative consequences arise from even the most well-intentioned policies. Yellowstone’s current management policies are designed exactly for the outcomes they achieve. Achieving different outcomes in Yellowstone will require a political push from Congress and the public. As the public’s preferences change, we can expect that management strategies in Yellowstone will also change.