



New Mexico State Monuments Director Ernesto Ortega.
Photograph by Eliza Wells Smith, Museum Resources Division, DCA.

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Ernesto Ortega

With Shelley Thompson

This September PBS will air a twelve-hour, six-part documentary series *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*. You'll hear the voices of such well-known actors as Andy Garcia, Peter Coyote, Tom Hanks, Amy Madigan, Eli Wallach, and Sam Waterson. You'll recognize many of the fifty-eight parks you always wanted to visit, if you haven't already: Yosemite, Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon, the Everglades, Mount Rushmore. The faces may not be so familiar. Among them are Park Ranger Shelton Johnson, who grew up in Detroit and is now at Yosemite National Park; Gerard Baker, a Native-American who is superintendent at Mount Rushmore National Memorial; and New Mexico State Monument Director Ernesto Ortega, who previously spent thirty-one years with the US National Park Service.

Shelley Thompson: Ken Burns's work is well-known after twenty-five years of PBS specials—his series on the Civil War, the controversial WWII project, and documentaries on our uniquely American music and our All-American sport. Now he's focused for twelve hours this fall on our National Parks Service (NPS). How did you become involved in the six-year project?

Ernesto Ortega: Luck. By chance I was involved in introducing the idea of National Heritage Areas, a collaborative effort managed by local entities, but affiliated with NPS, who provides technical support and assistance to these areas. Producer/writer Dayton Duncan heard about me through the National Heritage Area program coordinator in Washington, DC. I was interviewed for the series in April 2008.

Thompson: What did you want them to know that perhaps no one else would know to tell them?

Ortega: One of the things we discussed was George Melendez Wright, a young scientist—a naturalist and wildlife biologist. Parks were initially established as areas of natural beauty for

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public recreational purposes and emphasis was placed on making parks safe and accessible for visitors, rather than on preserving these special, often fragile, environments.

Wright initiated scientific studies to examine the flora and fauna of our parks and encouraged NPS towards the understanding that parks served a larger purpose. I feel that George Melendez Wright was the savior of the park system, and its ideal—parks must be safe for wildlife as well as for people.

Thompson: The National Park Service is considered uniquely American. Why?

Ortega: We were the first. In Europe parks were historically for the elite, playgrounds for royalty. In our country parks are enjoyed by all and not by just the most affluent Americans. At our national parks we serve a wider strata of economic classes, and the purpose is not to be private or open to exploitation but to be preserved for all people.

Thompson: Sounds like egalitarianism celebrated in our wide, open spaces, but are we loving our parks to death?

Ortega: This is one of the biggest dilemmas faced today. We have some very fragile ecosystems that require special conservation efforts. The Grand Canyon is an example. Once you could drive right up to the viewpoints. Now they use shuttles to minimize the impact. The carrying capacity of each park must be carefully considered. How many campers, how many backpackers, how many day visitors can the park really handle? At Wind Cave National Park in South Dakota and other cave systems, facilities and development are being curtailed or removed all together from a top the

caves to reduce activity in sensitive areas crucial to the health of the caves their cave resources and their its organisms. Site management and visitor accommodations are very critical issues.

Thompson: How did you come to spend thirty-one years with the NPS?

Ortega: My father was a schoolteacher. In the summers I thinned sugar beets in the Salt Lake Valley, under the hot sun. I still have the 16-inch handle hoe I used. I knew there had to be a better way to make a living, and I knew I was going to college. After college I taught school. When I was working on my master's degree at New Mexico Highlands University, a professor there encouraged me to look into the park service. I did and took a summer job at Fort Union but went back to teaching school in Pojoaque.

Something about the Fort Union job changed me, or it brought out something that had always been there. By each spring the classroom walls would close in on me. I applied at the National Park Service office here in Santa Fe and met a personnel director by the name of José Cisneros [who directed the New Mexico State Monuments system before Ortega]. My first job was at El Morro National Monument—perfect because I focused on Spanish colonial history for my master's. Over time, I worked at six more parks before I returned to the regional office in Santa Fe.

Thompson: Over that time your family grew. What was it like to raise a family in a national park setting?

Ortega: Even if it hadn't been great at the time, the results would have justified the means. My oldest, for example, started school at Big Bend National Park. The park had its own independent

INTERVIEW

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school system, with a school board, a principal, three teachers, and maybe twenty-five students. Every two to three weeks we'd drive over a hundred miles to Alpine, Texas, for groceries. We came prepared with a van, boxes, ice chests. Doctor appointments and other errands had to be coordinated with the grocery trips. My kids have an expanded view of our country, a broad appreciation of our culture and history. The experiences they had while growing up in one park setting and then another and then another made them more versatile. They have very little fear of living in or visiting any part of our country.

Thompson: How does your NPS background influence the way you manage our New Mexico State Monuments system?

Ortega: The principal connecting point is that within NPS there is national monument category. The 1906 Antiquities Act provides that places of cultural and scientific value should be protected. The principal language of that act was written by Edgar Lee Hewett. In 1931, the New Mexico Legislature passed a law with similar language—not surprising since both acts had the same author. In essence I have come from a national system to a state system that embraces the same philosophy of preservation, and whose mandate is to provide for education and the interpretation of the cultural values represented by those monuments. ■

Shelley Thompson's responsibilities with the New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs include deputy director of the Museum Resources Division, director of Marketing and Outreach, and general manager of *El Palacio* magazine.