

‘Selective Disobedience’

Bill Wade: An Interview
with Brenna Lissoway



John W. “Bill” Wade was raised at Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado, eventually following in the footsteps of his ranger father in a career with the National Park Service. During his 32 years with NPS, Wade worked at such varied sites as Yosemite National Park, the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area, National Capital Parks, and the Albright and Mather Training Centers, ultimately retiring as the superintendent of Shenandoah

LISSOWAY: Is there anything about your time at Great Smoky Mountains that you would like to talk about?

WADE: I actually was, if you want to call it, guilty of monkey-wrenching there one time. It’s an interesting little story. On the road that runs between headquarters in Gatlinburg and up to Cades Cove, the road parallels and sometimes crosses what’s

National Park. Between domestic assignments, Wade completed international park assignments that included a Fulbright lecturer position in New Zealand and a project in the Caribbean. In this excerpt from interviews conducted in 2012 and 2014 for the ANPR Oral History Project, Wade discusses some of the moments in his career when he chose to challenge authority in the pursuit of resource protection.

called the Little River. And it’s a very, very nice river. It gets a lot of use both for fishing and recreational use, and some swimming and diving. There were all along the Little River nearly 30 of these little pullouts for one or two cars. Down by the river was a little wooden frame set on a post in the ground and a little box next to it. This was supposed to post the fishing regulations for the park and the creel census forms.

The fishermen were supposed to fill that out when they finished fishing and leave it there. It was supposed to help determine how many fish were taken. I watched the whole process for quite some time. First, we weren’t getting any creel census forms back to speak of. So I’m questioning in my own mind, what good is this? Secondly, whenever you’d go try to post the regulations, somebody would rip them off. Also, Smokies is a fairly rainy place and so we tried all kinds of different things — laminating them — but, pretty soon they’d crinkle up and it just looked like a mess.

I proposed taking them all out. I said, “what good are they doing us?” I tried several times to get the chief ranger to agree to take them out. They were kind of an eyesore. They couldn’t keep them up to date; they really weren’t serving much of a purpose. But, no, couldn’t take them out, (it was) tradition.

Several months after that, another ranger and I, one late evening, got a pickup during a slow period and went along and pulled every one of those things out, threw them in the back of the pickup and took them to a place where we left them where it was unlikely for anybody to find them. And you know the interesting thing?

Nobody ever said a word about them being missing. The chief ranger never commented. Nobody ever raised a question about it. It sort of solidified in my mind that sometimes you just have to be selectively disobedient. If it's in the best interest of the resource, just do it. So we did it. We didn't get in trouble. We didn't have to go put them back up. The resource and the whole scene along that road was better off as a result of it.

Do you want to hear the other selective disobedience story?

LISSOWAY: Yes.

WADE: (When I was superintendent of Shenandoah National Park) we were grappling with all of these air quality permits. We had this one air quality permit that was really close to the southern boundary of the park for a coal fire-powered generating plant. The modeling showed it was just going to blow right up into the park, so we did everything we could to try to get the state to modify the conditions. They would only go so far; that wasn't far enough for us. They weren't going to budge any more.

At the time, James Watt was the Secretary of the Interior, and he had a guy in the deputy assistant secretary for fish, wildlife and parks position who came out of the petrochemical industry in Louisiana.

According to the air legislation (the Clean Air Act), there is a federal land manager designation and it says that the federal land manager has the authority to appeal any state permit to EPA (Environmental Protection Agency). Interior had administratively assigned the federal land manager

designation to this deputy assistant secretary. I tried to get them to agree to issue the appeal to EPA. We're right down to the wire because there's a deadline under which you have to file the appeal. The last week or so, I'm on the phone constantly trying to get hold of this guy, or somebody in his office and talk to him. I'd already made the case of why I wanted to appeal it. No response. I mean, they were just stonewalling me.

Under my interpretation of the Clean Air Act, the way it's written, it literally says, I'm the federal land manager. So legally, I'm (the superintendent) the federal land manager. Administratively, this other guy was, and obviously, they didn't want to appeal it.

Last minute, last afternoon, nothing from them. So, I put the appeal together, gave it to a ranger and said, "You've got to get into the EPA office by 5 o'clock in the afternoon." The ranger said sometimes he was running lights and siren taking this appeal into EPA. We got it in there and, of course, the media went crazy. I understood later that the assistant secretary [of Interior] wanted to fire me. The director wanted to fire me. One thing led to another and because this permit appeal was obviously going to drag things out for a considerably longer period of time, the company that wanted to build this plant lost its financing. They simply had no way to build it. The issue just disappeared and the appeal never really had to be heard.

I did get a written reprimand from the regional director which I have proudly displayed next to being named the National Park Service superintendent of the year for natural resources the same year, and

the Mather Award from NPCA (National Parks Conservation Association) for doing that same act. So it worked out okay. That one, I felt, was worth falling on my sword. That was important enough to me to protect that park.

Bill Wade retired from the National Park Service in 1997 and moved to Arizona where he was a co-founder of the Coalition of National Park Service Retirees. He remains active as a domestic and international trainer and consultant on park-related issues.

Brenna Lissoway is the archivist for Chaco Culture National Historical Park.



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— Erika Jostad, ANPR President