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STUPOR OVER STUPA AFFLICTS PARK SERVICE — Leadership Paralysis on Handling Religious Displays in National Parks

Washington, DC — Despite years of litigation over religious displays on federal park lands, the National Park Service has yet to decide on a policy for addressing these questions, according to internal documents released today by Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER). A Buddhist stupa on the grounds of the Petroglyph National Monument in New Mexico and bronze plaques with biblical verses on overlooks at Arizona’s Grand Canyon National Park are just the two latest examples of NPS indecision.



The Petroglyph National Monument, whose purpose is to preserve thousands of prehistoric and historic petroglyphs and other archeological sites, purchased land in 1996 that contains a 9-foot stupa, a structure for worship containing Buddhist relics. Since that time, NPS has owned the stupa but has avoided the question of whether a Buddhist holy site should be on federal land:

- NPS never undertook a legal review of its default decision to allow the continued existence of a permanent religious display on federal lands;
- In response to a 2010 rumor that the park would remove the stupa, the agency put out assurances that “there are no plans for the stupa”; and
- In June 9, 2010 e-mail, NPS Director Jon Jarvis cautioned subordinates “I would be silent to the future disposition [of the stupa].”

In a September 29, 2010 letter, PEER asked NPS officials how they intended to resolve what appear to be clear First Amendment violations in both Petroglyph and Grand Canyon. In a response dated March 3, 2011, NPS Regional Director John Wessels indicated that the matter was now before Director Jarvis who “intends to review these religious expressions in these two parks.”

“The Park Service has been promising to consult with agency lawyers for months but still has not apparently done so,” stated PEER Executive Director Jeff Ruch, noting the Park Service just endured nearly a decade of litigation, including a decision by the U.S. Supreme Court, on a cross in the middle of California’s Mojave National Preserve. “When it comes to religious displays, Park Service leadership reacts like a deer in the headlights – afraid to move but frozen in an indefensible position.”

At Grand Canyon, bronze plaques that belong to a religious group, the Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary, were removed by NPS officials, on advice of agency lawyers, on July 14, 2003. But on July 18, 2003, then-Deputy Director of the NPS, Donald Murphy, wrote to Sister Daniella of the Evangelical Sisterhood asking that they bring the plaques back to the Grand Canyon “so that they may

be returned to their original location and condition.” He then promised to undertake “the more in depth legal and policy review that should have taken place prior to these actions (removal of the plaques) being taken.”

As with the Petroglyph stupa, no such legal or policy review has occurred and the plaques remain today.

“PEER has no hostility toward religion but we are concerned about the appropriate use of federal lands in the national park system,” Ruch added. “What will it take to get National Park Service officials to respect the U.S. Constitution?”

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[Read the Park Service briefing statements on the stupa](#)

[See e-mails among NPS leadership on stupa](#)

[View the PEER letter on the stupa and Grand Canyon plaques](#)

[Look at NPS response to PEER letter](#)