

# Our Dynamic, Living Heritage

BRUCE BABBITT

*Secretary, Department of Interior*

**M**ore than any other landscape in the country, the National Mall in Washington, D.C., reminds us that national parks are not merely static places to be seen, but dynamic, ever-changing events to experience.

The National Mall is at once our nation's town common and its symbolic center. And, as new chapters are added to our collective life, the Mall grows and changes to reflect them. Where demonstrators once gathered to support or protest America's involvement in Vietnam, there now stands a monument to that war. Six decades ago, Franklin Delano Roosevelt laid the cornerstone to the Jefferson Memorial; today, workers have broken ground for a memorial to F.D.R. Not only are new memorials and monuments built; even the oldest buildings that border the Mall, the Smithsonian's national museums, each year exhibit different facets of our heritage, attracting public attention and even vigorous debate.

Perhaps the most dynamic event on the Mall is the Festival of American Folklife. The Festival is a living museum of grassroots culture. But more than that, it is an annual gathering, a reunion of the American people and those from around the world. At the Festival, our history is displayed and made as people share their cultural traditions with each other

through performances, exhibits, discussions, and demonstrations. The Festival illustrates that culture is an active, living process — that history does not stop but is continually being created and written by the people.

Because of this, I am troubled by current proposals to close down our national parks. In my mind, we must not only preserve the parks we have, but expand their number. Fifty years ago, for example, there was no Martin Luther King, Jr., Historical Site to be established or preserved, as there is now. Years ago we did not realize the biological bounty of various natural areas worthy of preservation as national parkland, as we do now. And the movement to create urban parks — windows through which Americans can escape the traffic, the noise, and the violence of cities to encounter their natural heritage — has only just begun.

In short, we must recognize the dynamic character of our nation's cultural, historic, and natural patrimony and the need to develop our institutions in terms consistent with it. To close our parks or abruptly curtail their development is to close the book on our destiny; to expand them is to invest in our ongoing experience and stretch our national horizon. In this spirit, then, enjoy the Festival and the Mall in an open embrace of our living heritage.