Cancel rehab for battlefield earth

Although John McCain led the charge against "earmarks" – the practice of allocating specific taxes for specific purposes – both candidates for the US presidency went on record against them. I propose that the Obama Administration may save good money by eliminating the earmark awarded to the National Park Service (NPS) for the "rehabilitation" of the battlefield at Gettysburg. This is a non-partisan issue. Earmarks, awarded by the Congress for special projects in members' districts, at once subvert the appropriations process and encourage graft and waste. Eliminating this one would spare 345 acres of historic woodland currently targeted for removal by the NPS.

When the armies of Northern Virginia and the Potomac met at Gettysburg in July 1863, the battlefield they created touched 900 acres of woodland. Since then, it has grown to encompass nearly 2,000 acres. The NPS has put the battlefield into "rehab" in order to make it look as it appeared just before the fighting began. Using a method of "terrain analysis" borrowed from scientists at the US Military Academy at West Point, it has targeted, uprooted and destroyed 231 acres of woodland since 2001. The macerated trees are first designated "non-historic" – meaning, not present during the battle. Those allowed to live are called "witness trees".

The rehabilitation ranked as the second-highest priority in the NPS' general management plan of 1999, but it has proceeded quietly, without organised opposition. Perhaps this is because it borrows a technique taught at West Point, and thus dons a cloak of academic respectability. Historians, generally speaking, have approved of the project. I learnt about it by chance during a recent visit to Gettysburg, where I was born and raised. From my mother's home on Seminary Ridge, setting forth for my customary battlefield walk, I soon sighted something incongruous: swatches of felled trees, cut and stacked alongside the road.

Learning that the rehabilitators were rebuilding fences and replanting orchards only deepened the shock. The logic appears glaringly cracked: if the goal is to make the battlefield look as it appeared when 165,000 soldiers met in the Gettysburg epic, then why uproot the "non-historic" trees while leaving in place the non-historic roads? And what about the 1,300 monuments?

"It is one of those things which seems like a contradiction at first," NPS regional director Don Barger conceded to The Christian Science Monitor earlier this year. Nonetheless, the mission of the NPS is to make Gettysburg's tourists "almost feel the bullets", Mr Barger maintained. "That is what you want to have happen in a battlefield."

If rehabilitation grows into a public issue, it will surely be an international one. The US is preparing for the 150th anniversary of its Civil War by rebuilding Vicksburg National Military Park, as well as Bull Run and Antietam. Canada's National Battlefields Commission is studying the model. And "heritage tourism", the ideology behind the rehabilitation, is spreading everywhere: the past is profitable and illusions of authenticity sell well.

Ending this earmark may not be enough to remind Gettysburg's pilgrims that history lives also in nature, that sublime experience requires not illusions of authenticity, but the capacity for reverence among ruins. Still, it would be a good-enough new beginning.

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