

How to move forward with COVID-19

Your Turn

Michael Rains
Guest columnist

Contemplating the next months of virus measures, it seems clear that a more innovative approach for managing the virus is needed. Short of draconian isolation methods like those employed in Wuhan, the virus will continue to survive and reemerge at will. And as for China, it is not at all entirely clear that their methods will not result in other serious outbreaks around that vast country.

An innovative, even radical approach is required to manage our way through this invisible enemy.

First and foremost, the country should embark on modifying existing facilities to specifically treat COVID-19 patients. I hesitate to use the word hospital in this context only because the myriad of regulations and requirements if applied would sink this innovative approach before it could ever gain traction.

What would these facilities look like? Here's my example of something that could provide expert care and be implemented in months.

Around the country are empty (or largely empty) malls, big box retail stores and the like. All of these building shells would provide an instant conditioned envelope for modular patient en-

losures built inside. Those enclosures could be constructed of modular office walls or perhaps metal framed drywall. No ceilings are needed or desired so that the already installed building sprinkler system could be credited for fire safety.

These patient enclosures would contain only the essentials for treating COVID-19, including oxygen support, ventilators and IV systems. A more robust wiring system would be installed in the overhead by trained electricians, but once completed; each patient enclosure would be simply supplied by an electrical extension cord properly secured.

Regarding the most critical aspect of support, oxygen, modern hospitals are required to have an expensive and well-engineered system of bulk supply, installed supply piping/tubing and a myriad of sensors and valves to isolate the system in case of a break or leak. Such a system is neither necessary or desired as it would prevent the rapid completion of such a facility. Instead, smaller oxygen storage bottles could be safely placed in each patient enclosure and connected to critical breathing apparatus. Yes, this approach would require periodic change out of storage bottles (something that could be handled by a team dedicated for such), but the simplicity of this approach would provide for quick deployment of such a facility and trumps more elaborate systems.

The design of a generic COVID-19 treatment facility could be fast tracked with the best and brightest this country has to offer. The overriding goal is providing COVID-19 treatment in rapidly deployed facilities across the country. Each municipality or region would receive federal funds for their facilities based on population density. Those design features and supplies for the facility that could not be reasonably procured or produced locally, would be managed and supplied at the federal level. For example, if the aforementioned oxygen bottle approach requires a floor fastened cage, those cages and fasteners could be supplied by and through a federal managing agency.

Regarding these facilities, it is strongly recommended that health care workers (and support personnel) all be provided the most effective protection available. If those happen to be self-contained breathing suits that can be disinfected and reused, we should be willing to go that length. Once implemented, our goal should be no health care workers infected.

The ultimate purpose behind such an approach is to provide all COVID-19 care outside of our hospitals. This allows our health care system to return to some level of normalcy but more importantly it would provide an abundant supply of treatment capacity in short order;

something that will help break the back of the justified public fear of this disease.

With such treatment facilities, the government can begin to implement well-reasoned steps for reopening much of America's economy. One example might be to require all persons to wear an N95 respirator while in public if 6 foot distancing cannot be attained. Another example would be the abundant staging of hand sanitizer stations throughout our public spaces.

The third leg of this approach would of course utilize expanded and more rapid testing. There is no doubt we are closer on this front than weeks back but undoubtedly more work remains, particularly with regards to speed and accuracy of results.

Without the above approaches of 1) rapidly deployed treatment facilities dedicated to COVID-19, 2) cautious but gradual opening of the economy and 3) widespread testing, our country may well be mired in this war for several years or more. The effects on our economy and our overall well-being may well be more than we can withstand.

Michael Rains is a retired professional engineer with a background in risk management. He lives with his family in Asheville.

Decision to close the Smokies builds on legacy of paradox and radical thinking



Your Turn
Frances Figart
Guest columnist

It was surreal to read the words that headlined a solemn press release from Great Smoky Mountains National Park: Park Closes to Support Regional Coronavirus (COVID-19) Prevention Efforts. The same day, Grand Teton and Yellowstone made the same choice, following the decisions of dozens of other national parks to close to the public.

Why? The answer lies in a paradox described by conservationist and landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. when the National Park Service formed in 1916: "The new agency should manage the parks for the enjoyment of the American people and at the same time keep them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."

In the first 15 years of the 20th century, the United States had only 12 national parks – Yellowstone, Sequoia, Yosemite, Mount Rainier, Crater Lake, Wind Cave, Mesa Verde, Glacier, Rocky Mountains, Haleakala, Hawaii Volcanoes, and Lassen Volcanic. Each had formed because a handful of radical people started a small, local movement to protect land that had won their heart, and they couldn't stand to see it go unprotected. There was no park system to guide them, no leadership in place to standardize their structures, regulate their staffing, or inform their decisions.

With the formation of the NPS, now for the first time there was one governing body responsible for helping parks make good decisions. At its helm was Stephen Mather.

"The national parks are an American idea, the one thing we have not imported," wrote Mather. "They came about because earnest men and women became violently excited at the possibility

Now, just as it did a century ago, the NPS is facing difficult new challenges and adapting to unprecedented definitions of normal. As in the days before a National Park System, each park has had to evaluate its own unique circumstances and decide the best way forward within that iconic paradox epitomized by Mather and described by Olmsted.

of these great assets passing from public control."

Mather was a man of strong conservation values. He was also a person who knew how to market parks in order to get people to start traveling to visit them. He embodied the two contradictory notions – enjoyment and protection – that form the paradox on which the NPS was built.

The early days of the NPS were fraught with difficult decisions for how each park should best meet the challenge of the paradox. The people attracted by Mather's promotional genius began to enjoy parks by bringing their motor vehicles into pristine lands and parking and camping willy-nilly all over them. They brought food and waste, which attracted animals and compromised their wild nature. In order for park lands to be enjoyed, visitor centers, parking areas and bathrooms had to be built – and maintained.

Once again, it took a few visionary radicals to look into the future and see what would be sustainable for parks. Advocates like George Melendez Wright had to voice the needs of wildlife to remain wild, not fed like spoiled pets. The Antiquities Act had to be invoked so that cultural and archaeological sites on public lands would be protected in the face of development.

When in 1934 more than 500,000 acres spanning Western North Carolina

and East Tennessee were set aside as a park, it was once again thanks to a handful of radical thinkers – men and women who were passionate about the land and refused to see it destroyed. Great Smoky Mountains became the first park in close proximity to many major population centers and one of the largest protected areas in the eastern United States.

Fast forward 85 years to 2019. Last year, the Smokies welcomed more than 12.5 million visitors! Mather would have been proud. But with the spring equinox having just passed, as we enter what would normally be our busiest season of the busiest year in history, the park is empty.

Why? Only weeks ago, as the pandemic was ramping up, parks were being heralded as the best places to be during this time of social distancing. It seemed logical that the enjoyment of the American people could be fulfilled by parks, even in the face of a global health crisis. People could be out of doors, on trails, alone or with close family, enjoying their social distancing while being rejuvenated by the healing connection to nature.

But Great Smoky Mountains National Park is the nation's most visited park. Along with a backlog of maintenance and a legacy of public accessibility with no entrance fee, the Smokies' biggest issue is overcrowding of popular places

like Cades Cove, Laurel Falls and Alum Cave. The stress on these spots requires many staff in tight quarters to manage. Staff also struggle to maintain visitor centers, parking areas and bathrooms March through October. This overcrowding issue was top of the list to be addressed by park management before the COVID-19 outbreak.

Now, just as it did a century ago, the NPS is facing difficult new challenges and adapting to unprecedented definitions of normal. As in the days before a National Park System, each park has had to evaluate its own unique circumstances and decide the best way forward within that iconic paradox epitomized by Mather and described by Olmsted.

Today, however surreal and strange, park leaders have had to recognize that keeping parks open actually poses a threat to the very people charged with protecting them. And that threat presently extends both to families in local communities and to the families of those who work in the parks – those whose service is called upon to protect the Smokies and all our national parks, not just for today, but also for tomorrow.

To make hard choices and face inevitable criticism, today's leaders have had to be radical. Thankfully, excellent role models for them to emulate from national park history are not in short supply. One of those who advocated for the protection of the earliest parks said, "We are not building this country of ours for a day. It is to last through the ages." That radical was Theodore Roosevelt.

Frances Figart is the Creative Director for Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and the editor of Smokies Life, a biannual journal created for GSMA's 34,000+ members and available at smokiesinformation.org. She can be reached at frances@gsmassoc.org.

Coping with social distancing and a change in routine

Your Turn

Micah Krempasky
Guest columnist

I pride myself on routine. I wake in the wee hours of the mornings. My coffee is set to brew precisely two minutes before my alarm chimes. While I sip my hot brew, I turn on a single lamp, sit in the corner spot on the couch and read my morning emails. A few minutes later, I don my pre-chosen workout clothes and head to the gym where I am greeted by my always present, somewhat obsessive 6 a.m. crew. Afterwards, it's back to the house to start the rest of my day.

This is my routine. I do it every day. In this order. I don't veer from it—and when I do, everything feels off.

Despite my best efforts to avoid it, my life has changed. My routine has been totally disrupted. My beloved coffee creamer is out of stock, my favorite couch is strewn with homeschooling materials and my gym is closed. This list goes on and on...

Routines keep us grounded and disruption in routines can cause significant stress. On top of that, the current pandemic has our minds riddle with fear: Am I going to get sick? Can I pay the bills? What if I lose my house? When will I see my friends? How will this affect my parents? My children? My neighbors? Additionally, we don't have access to many of the things we use for coping. Parks-closed. Theaters-closed. Social gatherings-cancelled.

So, what do we do?

There isn't a one-size-fits-all answer nor is there a well-defined algorithm for how to behave in this ever-changing situation. However, gratitude is something we can easily incorporate into our lives and it is a very effective coping strategy. Despite all the interruptions, threats and fears, we still need to find reasons to be thankful.

So, take a moment.

Take a moment to appreciate the sounds of laughter outside as kids enjoy their days in less structured ways. Enjoy the smell of the freshly cut grass that you finally had time to mow. Savor the pleasure of a previously elusive afternoon nap.

Take a moment to organize your junk drawer. Write a letter to a friend. Make a soufflé.

Take a moment to watch these videos. We hope they will inspire you to practice good self-care and to focus your energy in a positive way. And, if you recognize that you or someone you know is really struggling, the videos include resources to help you access needed care.

In the end, uncertainty remains. However, taking care of our emotional health – in addition to our physical health – will allow us to be far more effective in navigating this uncertainty.

Dr. Micah Krempasky, MD is a Psychiatrist with Mission Hospital Behavioral Health. Contact him at 828-213-4696 or visit missionhealth.org/covid-19 for more.