Parks Group Responds to Reports of Interference With Park Staff Performance Reviews - National Parks Conservation Association

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Executive Summary

This article addresses reported interference by National Park Service (NPS) leadership in the performance review process for park staff. The National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA), through its President and CEO Theresa Pierno, argues that NPS officials have directed park superintendents to assign the majority of employees a rating of 3 on a 1-5 performance scale, regardless of actual performance merit. The NPCA contends this practice is arbitrary, unfair, and inconsistent with the agency's own evaluation standards. Key evidence cited includes Washington Post reporting, statements from park superintendents questioning the fairness of the directive, and the broader context of significant workforce reductions — the NPS having lost more than a quarter of its staff since January. The NPCA frames the alleged rating manipulation as a potential precursor to further mass layoffs, describing it as an attempt to manufacture justification for terminations. The article concludes with an implicit call to accountability, positioning the practice as an abuse of the performance management system at a time when remaining staff are reportedly carrying substantially increased workloads.

Key Insights

1. NPS officials are reported to have instructed park superintendents to rate the majority of staff at a 3 on a 1-5 performance scale, irrespective of individual performance merit.
2. The alleged rating suppression follows a period of significant NPS workforce reduction, with the agency reported to have lost more than a quarter of its staff since January through mass firings and pressured buyouts.
3. Several of the NPS employees terminated earlier in the year had recently received positive performance reviews, raising questions about the relationship between formal evaluations and termination decisions.

Practical Takeaways

- Centralised directives to constrain performance rating distributions can conflict with an agency's own evaluation standards and undermine the integrity of the appraisal process, particularly when employees are carrying elevated workloads due to staffing shortfalls.
- Performance review outcomes can serve purposes beyond individual development — including workforce reduction justification — making the independence and integrity of the evaluation process a matter of organisational governance and legal exposure.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The article references specific, verifiable external reporting (The Washington Post) and includes direct quotes from park superintendents, lending some factual grounding to the claims. The specific detail of a mandated rating of 3 on a 1-5 scale is concrete and actionable for analysis. Limitations: The article is a press release from an advocacy organisation (NPCA) with a declared mission to protect national parks and a clear institutional interest in opposing NPS staff reductions. It does not present the NPS or administration's position, response, or rationale. No primary documents, data, or independent verification are provided beyond the reference to external reporting. The causal claim — that rating suppression is a deliberate strategy to facilitate future firings — is speculative and presented as assertion rather than evidenced conclusion. Bias: The language is explicitly normative and advocacy-oriented ('unconscionable', 'cannon fodder', 'pulling the rug out'), which is consistent with a stakeholder communication rather than an objective analysis.

Organizational Practice

NPS leadership reportedly directed park superintendents to assign the majority of employees a performance rating of 3 on a 1-5 scale during annual performance reviews, irrespective of individual performance levels. This occurred in the context of significant workforce reductions and elevated workloads among remaining staff. Some superintendents raised internal concerns about the fairness of the directive relative to actual employee performance.

Strategic Implications

The reported practice illustrates how centralised control over performance rating distributions in public sector organisations can decouple formal appraisal outcomes from actual performance data, potentially eroding trust in the evaluation system. It also signals that performance review processes in government contexts can become instruments of workforce reduction strategy rather than solely developmental or accountability tools. The case draws attention to the tension between managerial discretion in rating and institutionally mandated distribution controls, particularly during periods of organisational restructuring.

Validation Status: passed
