

Interviewee: Curt Sauer (CS)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Curt Sauer discusses working at Joshua Tree National Park and shares park history, early 2000s

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TM: Today is Friday, October 30, 2020. This is a Part 10 interview with Curt Sauer. My name is Tom Martin. Good morning Curt, how are you today?

CS: Good morning, Tom. I'm doing well.

TM: Good, good to hear it. Curt, may we have your permission to record this oral history interview over the telephone?

CS: Yes, you may.

TM: Thank you so much. So, at the end of the last interview, I was thinking the Rocky Mountain boy with the green pine needles stuck in his hair has shown up in the desert. You'd mentioned there were a couple of issues that you had to deal with at Joshua Tree. Maybe you could pick that thread up?

CS: Well, let's see. I think one of the issues was bringing the divisions together. I had mentioned in the previous interview that one of the reasons I was sent down there for my original two-month training assignment - which turned in to eight or nine months - was that the division chiefs were rotating each month as acting superintendents and things weren't working out well. So, I had to bring them together. There were a couple of strong personalities that had very diverse perspectives on where the park should go. The Chief of Maintenance was emphatic that maintenance was what ought to be running this park and where the money should be going; and the Chief of Interpretation felt that they were underfunded and understaffed. They had several outreach programs and education programs that he wanted to further. The Resource Management division was led by an old-timer that didn't really provide much direction. He was sort of sidelined by his wife being very ill with cancer, and in my opinion had given up on working. He was showing up for work - he'd go up in the park for hours on end. Finally got a report that he was up there taking a nap; which he was probably up all night taking care of his wife. So, there's just all this personality stuff and all this human trauma stuff going on. The Chief of Administration, Monica Rapp, had been a budget technician at Grand Canyon when I was there. She was a go-getter and had worked her way up since Grand Canyon. So, you know, it was bringing folks together to accomplish our important tasks. That took several years to get everybody on the same page. During that time, we brought in a new Chief of Resources who ended up hiring some outstanding resource managers in biology and botany; started addressing some of the concerns of pollution from the Los Angeles basin and its effect on the desert ecosystem of the park. The park had two deserts. The Colorado Desert on the east-south side down around Cottonwood, it's a subset of the Sonoran Desert; and the Mojave Desert; the southern reaches of the Mojave Desert which stretches all the way up into Nevada over into the Great Basin.

And then we had, as every park does I think, relationships with the surrounding communities. The former superintendent Ernie Quintana who did an excellent job, one of the things that he did do while he was there was he had put in probably fifteen different funding budget requests—and he did that over the course of the six years or so that he was there—which all came to fruition under my time as superintendent. So, the lesson for superintendents – and certainly a lesson for me – is that while you’re there and trying to deal with the current situation, you need to look towards the future and put in your funding requests. The way the park service budget process works, you can put in the requests and you will never see them. But the next superintendent or the superintendent after you will see those funding requests.

We might get to that in a bit, but as far as the community goes Ernie Quintana grew up in Twentynine Palms. He went to high school in Twentynine Palms, which is where headquarters is located for Joshua Tree National Park. So he was in tight with the city leaders, who were all basically from his high school era. About twenty miles to the west is a town called Yucca Valley which he didn’t... Wouldn’t say he didn’t pay a whole lot of attention to but the relationship with Yucca Valley was totally different. Yucca Valley was a town, Twentynine Palms had become a city, and the people that were on the boards and the elected officials were all the same era and had all gone to rival high schools. So, there was this rivalry – it appeared to me – between the town of Yucca Valley and its high school seniors that had graduated and moved up and become town leaders, and the city of Twentynine Palms which had the same vintage high school people. It just seemed to me like that there was this rivalry. So, one of the things that I needed was support for the entire park from all of the surrounding communities. Of course, on the south side of the park is the Coachella Valley which is I think eleven different cities, which basically was ignored. And again, headquarters for the park was on the north side, south side didn’t get that much attention. So, it was a time of trying to build those relationships and trying to strengthen the support from Yucca Valley. We already had strong support from Twentynine Palms.

So we expanded our interpretive program into the Yucca Valley area; started reaching out more to their school districts, enhanced our educational program. When I moved there, there was an artist-in-residence program. Artists would put in their applications and be able to come to the park for a week or two and live up in the park and do their various art mediums. Then we would take those pieces of art and display them in the towns. We expanded that artist-in-residence program as part of our educational outreach. And, eventually, the division chiefs started working together. Then of course because of Ernie Quintana, who as I mentioned in the previous interview was the fellow that had been appointed the Midwest Regional Director. But because of his active involvement with future budgeting needs, during my eight-year tenure - I’d say in the fifth and sixth year - we ended up receiving a couple of million dollars. Most of it went to the maintenance of the roads and the campgrounds, but a lot of it went to interpretation and resource management. So, we had a pretty spiffy-looking park, and it was well-funded for about three or four years. One of our advocates made a comment to me one time, probably in about 2008, she said, “You know, Curt I’ve been to a lot of national parks but Joshua Tree National Park is one of the better organized and cleanest national parks I’ve ever seen.” We had upgraded the roads. And there was also 2008, that was the era of big downturn in the economy in this country, and there was a program to – I forget what it was called - rebuild America or something. So there was a lot of money put into infrastructure. Because of Ernie, and because of the economic downturn, and the actions of Congress, and our ability to get some of that infrastructure money, Joshua Tree was pretty much brought up to a high standard with the exception we never got around to building the new visitor center at Cottonwood on the south side. We knew the visitation was going to be coming from the south side and we just couldn’t get to that. Now, visitation is about 30% from the south entrance and... Well, I

shouldn't say now, when I left in 2010, visitation was about 30% from the south side and 70% from the north side, and most of that was through the town of Joshua Tree, the unincorporated village of Joshua Tree which is about 14 miles west of Twentynine Palms. So, during my tenure we had outstanding support from the people of Twentynine Palms, not so much the city government; the town of Yucca Valley; the people of Joshua Tree. Interestingly Joshua Tree was full of climbers. When I got there, about 15% of the visitation was from climbing. Didn't start off real smoothly because we were in the process of enforcing the backcountry wilderness management plan and climbers couldn't put up new routes that included installing fixed anchors.

TM: So, bolts, in other words. Is that right, bolting?

CS: Mm-hmm.

TM: How did you handle that? Because that is a "permanent structure" in a wilderness.

CS: Right. It was handled by the chief ranger and her district rangers who had a pretty good relationship with the climbers. The Joshua Tree search and rescue team was supervised/organized by Jeff Ohlfss, but it was primarily rock climbers that lived in the area. And we're talking climbers that had been there for twenty-five years, who came in the old days, Yosemite Valley climbers, many of them in the winter. Well, they lived in the campgrounds. And in the winter, they would move to Joshua Tree which was much warmer and still be able to climb. They didn't have big walls to climb, but they had hundreds of routes on the various hills, mountains, and boulders. They just settled there. They ended up going, "You know what, we kinda like Joshua Tree." There were a lot of fresh climbers coming in and they would join the Joshua Tree search and rescue team. They were primarily the ones that did the searches and the rescues because we only had, what, 10 rangers for the entire park.

TM: How many acres is the park?

CS: 794 when I got there. It was 850, maybe, when I left.

TM: This is thousand acres?

CS: Yeah, 850,000. Those numbers are off somewhat.

TM: Which is roughly 10 rangers for almost a million acres. That's...

CS: Not much, is it?

TM: That's not much.

CS: A lot of it is uninhabitable. Another program we had... I got there in 2002. In 1994 was the Desert Protection Act. It changed Death Valley from Death Valley National Monument to Death Valley National Park and added, I don't know, 500,000/a million acres to Death Valley. It changed Joshua Tree National Monument to Joshua Tree National Park and redrew the southern boundary. Added, I don't know, 200,000 acres. It also increased the visitation. It's an amazing thing and I think the park historians can point to it. Every time you change a National Monument to a National Park, your visitation increases. We went from just under a million in '94, it's now 3 million visitors at Joshua Tree National Park in 2018. But, you know, people want to go see their National Parks. Well, there's no difference. It was a National

Monument before, it doesn't have the attraction because it's not a Park. And, you know, some of the National Monuments and National Historic Sites in the Park Service system are just outstanding. People figured out that they could stay away from the National Parks after one visit and go to the National Monuments and the National Historic Sites. There's a whole treasure trove of history and ecology throughout this country that most people never go see.

Anyway, so the Desert Protection Act changed that, and in about 2000 there was a land acquisition program. There's always a land acquisition program for National Park service areas. There were a couple hundred thousand acres of private land inside the national park. The reason being that in the 50s and 60s, the Homestead Act was still in place. I don't think it was technically the Homestead Act, I forget the name of the law, but you could homestead 5-acre parcels. Also in that time if you look at Life Magazine – I found a Life Magazine from the 1960s in the barn of the historic ranch that we had – and it actually had an advertisement. So Life Magazine was national, and there's many advertisements throughout that era of a time when lands could be purchased. Unsuspecting people from areas that were not familiar with the geography/geology of the Mojave Desert would buy these 5-acre plots. Well, then the Wilderness Act came around and Joshua Tree National Monument became a national park and you could no longer build roads. Most of the land that was purchased on speculation didn't have any road access, there's no water, there's no utilities, and there's no way to build a road to get to your land. So, a lot of these people passed their 5 acres, or their 160 acres onto their grandchildren.

In the early 2000s, there was a program on a regional level managed out of San Francisco with some wealthy donors that donated millions of dollars for land acquisition inside Joshua Tree, Mojave National Preserve, and Death Valley national parks. So, I came down there in 2002, Ernie briefed me a little bit. I don't remember him ever telling me about quarterly meetings in the region for this land acquisition program. So in about 2003, maybe 2004, I got a call from the Director – actually it was the Deputy Director of the National Park Service at the time, who was John Reynolds, who had been my Superintendent at North Cascades. He's in Washington D.C., but he came out to quarterly meetings in the regional office for land acquisition. Those meetings were about distributing funds for additional private lands to be purchased and added to the national park. He said, "So why aren't you coming to these meetings?" "What meetings?" So, I started going to those meetings every quarter in San Francisco/at Oakland at the regional office. Out of that, the fellow that was running the program and funding it, had retired from the Bureau of Land Management. His name was Ed Hastey. He had been one of the ardent opposition people for the expansion of Joshua Tree National Park, the Mojave Preserve, and Death Valley, and the Desert Protection Act because all of the lands in Mojave were BLM land that they were going to lose and the Park Service was going to take over.

Just an interesting little background story: John Reynolds was either the Director or the Deputy Director of the regional office in the 90s when the Desert Protection Act came in, and Ed Hastey was in charge of the BLM for the state of California. Even though they had strong opinions/opposite opinions about the Desert Protection Act, Ed Hastey ended up retiring from the BLM and managing the monies from these donors; and John Reynolds was on the board of the National Parks Conservation Association. The National Parks Conservation Association was the organization that was handling the land acquisition. Probably in 2004 or 2005, Ed Hastey found an organization called the Mojave Desert Land Trust which was based out of Joshua Tree and had recently been formed by residents of Joshua Tree, Yucca Valley, and Twentynine Palms to become a land acquisition group. So, Ed Hastey decided that Mojave Desert Land Trust could do land acquisition less expensively administrative costs than the National Parks Conservation Association. So, he decided that Mojave Desert Land Trust – MDLT – would be the main lead in processing all these land acquisitions using private donations. Well it just so happens that I was

at the formation of the Mojave Desert Land Trust meetings, and I knew all of the MDLT board members. So, we ended up getting a lot of money because the MDLT was focused on Joshua Tree, and then Mojave Preserve and Death Valley. So, it kind of flipped from Death Valley, Mojave, Joshua Tree to Joshua Tree, Mojave, and Death Valley. Not that we purchased more lands, because the Mojave Preserve was just full of private lands. And the same story, you couldn't get to your land. There were no roads. There was no water. All the cattle leases from the BLM had already sewn up all the access to the water areas, and the ranchers weren't going to give that up. So, the land owners had been contacted by the Mojave Desert Land Trust. It might take 6-months it might take 3 years, but they finally came around saying, "You know, there's nothing we can ever do with this land. We're paying property taxes on it. We might as well sell it." So, a lot of these acreages were bought for \$500/\$850 an acre and then they would sit in ownership with the Mojave Desert Land Trust until such time as Congress would act and add these lands to the park on various bills. That was a large program for the three park service areas, which when I got there I knew nothing about and ended up being fortunate enough as a superintendent to have the Mojave Desert Land Trust take over as the primary manager of the private money.

TM: Yeah, it's nice to have a partner be able to do all that and line that all that up and get Congress to go ahead and run the legislation to expand the park. My question is, how did you manage to have the resources to then manage that land? You mentioned you got 10 rangers for 800 thousand acres. I always think of these as you need two things, if you're going to increase the size of a park or you're going to make a park out of whole cloth or a Monument or a National Recreation Area, where's the money to run it?

CS: Well, in this particular situation, all of the lands that we were acquiring was already inside the national park boundary. You go down into the Pinto Basin, which is in the southeast side of the park, generally speaking, there were thousands of acres. One piece of land that's been acquired was actually a turkey farm in the 60s. They had this idea that they'd grow turkeys and take them to market down in the Coachella Valley. Well, then the commercial turkey farms took over and they weren't able to provide enough turkeys so they went out of business. So there's 160 acres of former turkey farm in the middle of the desert. So they ended up selling out. It didn't increase the perimeter of the park, it just increased the federal ownership of the lands that were acquired.

TM: I'm assuming that there would have been structures there that needed to be... I mean the land needed to be remediated, if you will, and brought back to some semblance of desert. The government is then responsible for cleaning that up. I could be wrong, maybe when the turkey farmers left they took everything with them.

CS: They took everything of value.

TM: Okay, yeah. And what they left...

CS: ...is now a historic site.

TM: Okay! Alright!

CS: Which consists of a couple of dilapidated buildings, a large fire pit, and some bizarre small trail system around the fire pit that is delineated by whisky and wine bottles. Because, in the 60s in Pinto Basin, you only went out when you needed to. And, apparently, you went out when you were low on whisky and wine. Yeah, it's an interesting place. And, you know, the shacks have fallen down. Oh, here's

an interesting story for you. Joshua Tree is just so interesting if you take the time to learn the history. I was fortunate that the Chief of Interpretation was basically a historian – Joe Zarki. He, maybe five years ago, wrote a book after he retired on the history of the park. He filled me in on a lot of stuff. One of our premier historic sites was a place called Keys Ranch. Bill Keys is just an amazing, interesting story. I may have the dates off a bit. Bill Keys came out to the Joshua Tree area when he was about 12 years old, from someplace “back east” which could be Ohio, from all I recall, and he ended up... I guess we’ll talk a little bit about the history of Joshua Tree. After the... What’s the gold rush that was...?

TM: 1849? Sutter’s Mill and all that?

CS: Yeah, all that stuff. After that era there were a lot of miners that just didn’t fit back into society; had no desire to go fit back into society, I’d believe. There was an interpretive display we had down in the Cottonwood visitor center, it was the Second Gold Rush. Nobody ever talks about the Second Gold Rush of California but it was in the Mojave Desert. There are all kinds of mines in Death Valley, Mojave, Joshua Tree, many BLM lands. In the Joshua Tree area they were primarily gold mines. Still have one active on the north boundary. Bill Keys came out in about 1910/1920, someplace in there, and there was a lot of mining active. One of the places is what’s now known as Keys Ranch. There were a couple of brothers that ran some mines. They were making a “pretty good living”. There were lots of cowboys that were raising cattle. The cattle that they raised they had gone to Arizona and rustled and moved them back up into the Joshua Tree area because nobody would come up there. In the summer times when it got so hot, they would move the cattle up to Big Bear area which is a much higher elevation and cooler and then bring them back down.

So, there’s this little mining industry, little, and this little cattle ranching industry, with some old timers that are pretty crusty. The Lost Horse Mine, this fellow found the Lost Horse Mine. The story goes that a couple of the brothers that were running what is now Keys Ranch rode over to his mine which is, I don’t know, 10 miles away, claimed that they were looking for a lost horse and claimed that he drew a weapon on him so they killed him. And, of course, they immediately filed a new claim for the Lost Horse Mine. The Lost Horse Mine was one of the more productive mines in the Joshua Tree area. So, during all this time that’s going on, Bill Keys ends up kind of being the hired hand of Keys Ranch – which wasn’t called Keys Ranch at the time. Well, these brothers - one of them would stay up in Joshua Tree and the other one would head into town whenever they needed supplies. He would show up in town with gold belt buckle and cane with gold on the top of his cane and tell his brother when he got back that yeah he’d taken care of all the bank notes and everything was good. Well, he never was paying off the bank loan. So, eventually the bank foreclosed and they hired Bill Keys to be the caretaker. Bill Keys was the caretaker for, I don’t know, 10 years/12 years or something. And the bank never paid him! So, the bank ended up making an agreement with Bill Keys that for back wages they’d just give him Keys Ranch. So, he took it, and then he started homesteading.

He was smart enough to realize that you needed water. This was in the 40s. So, he started homesteading all the water sources. Well the water sources, obviously it’s going to be in a drainage. The cattlemen had built little cattle troughs, or catchment basins. Then they would move out and take their cattle up to Big Bear in the summer. Bill Keys would homestead—and I’m greatly simplifying this—but he would homestead 160 acres, or he and his wife would homestead 320 acres, and he’d fence it. So, when the cattlemen came back, they no longer could access their water sources. So, they were kind of irritated with Bill Keys. And, of course, they cut the fences and they went in anyway and Bill Keys said, “You can’t do that,” blah blah blah. Well as the story goes, one of the cattlemen happened to be the brother of the sheriff in Twentynine Palms. He and his fellow cattle people hired the sheriff’s brother to

go up and “caretake their land and take care of Bill Keys.” So, Bill Keys was coming back from one of his mine sites, driving in his, I don’t know, 1940s Ford pickup. He had driven up this road and when he came back there was this Joshua tree laying across the road blocking access. He got out and started to move the tree, and the fellow took a shot at him trying to shoot him. Bill Keys ran back to his truck, grabbed his rifle and returned fire and killed the guy. He said, “You know, I really got to take this guy down to Twentynine Palms, turn him in because he’s dead, but I’ve got some chores to do first.” So, he went about doing his chores, and then he drove his truck down into Twentynine Palms. Not right away but within a week, the sheriff arrested him for murder for killing his brother. Well, it went to court in San Bernardino County. During the course of the trial, it turns out that Bill Keys had shot his rifle in San Bernardino County, but the person that he shot was in Riverside County. It was right on the county line. So the murder trial had to be moved to Riverside County; and Riverside County was more impartial than San Bernardino County because the sheriff’s brother was no longer important to them. So, Bill Keys was convicted of manslaughter. This is just one small story about Bill Keys because he ran an incredible operation. So, he ended up going to San Quentin. He always maintained his innocence that it was a valid gunfight and the other guy had shot first. Who’s the author of Perry Mason novels? Whoever that author is...

TM: I don’t know.

CS: Hmm. So, this guy was a lawyer. He and some of his lawyer friends had started a group, pro-bono, that they referred to as The Court of Last Resort and they took cases from people they thought had been wrongly tried. Well, this guy was one of the first people to have a recreational vehicle. He had built a house/a small cabin on the back of a flatbed truck. He’d drive it up from the L.A. area/Pasadena area and come out and visit the Joshua Tree National Monument, which was formed in 1936. He was friends with another miner. They were sitting around the campfire one night and the miner told him about the story of Bill Keys so he went over and met Mrs. Keys and got the scoop, and he and his group of lawyers that worked pro-bono started working on getting Bill Keys out of jail. They finally got to a point where they were able to get a pardon for Bill Keys for manslaughter from the governor of California. So, they went to Bill Keys in prison, and said “We’ve got a pardon, you’re free to go.” Bill Keys said, “Pardon still means I’m guilty and I’m not guilty. I’m staying here.” So, he stayed in prison for another 3/4 months until his wife wrote him a letter and said, “Bill, you need to come home. I can’t run this by myself and we’re going to lose the ranch.” So, Bill Keys got a pardon from the governor, came back out to Keys Ranch. That’s just one of the stories of Bill Keys.

It just goes on and on. Now when folks visit the park, they look out from Keys Ranch after they go on a tour, and they see nothing out there. But when Mr. and Mrs. Keys were there in the 40s and 50s, there were miners and there were miner families. Mrs. Keys was adamant that the kids could have an education. So Bill Keys built the first schoolhouse in this area of the county at Keys Ranch, and the kids would walk or ride their mules into school. During the garden-growing and fruit-growing time period, the kids were sent home at the end of each school day or every other school day with stuff from their garden and stuff from their fruit trees because the other miners and their families were trying to make a living, but they didn’t have any water... Bill Keys had probably 40 acre-feet of water. He had 6 wells on his primary homestead that were 40 to 50 feet deep that he’d hand-dug and lined with fired brick that he built himself. So these folks would come out and start mining, and then they’d fail at the mining because they weren’t finding any gold, and they’d just leave everything.

They bought their mining kits out of the Sears catalog, and they were delivered to Twentynine Palms when these families would show up. So they’d have everything they needed to mine and homestead,

they'd go bust and they'd leave it and leave. Bill Keys would go out to the abandoned mine sites and take all the stuff that had been abandoned and bring it back to Keys Ranch. Then he started selling used mining equipment and beds and cooking utensils to folks that wanted to come in and try mining again. When they did mine and they had some ore, they had to take it to Bill Keys because he had the stamp mill to crush the ore. So, Bill Keys was a businessman and his wife was taking care of families' kids as best they could.

That went on until the 60s and Bill Keys was falling into poor health. None of his kids wanted to live there, and the Park Service wanted to acquire the property but they didn't have the money. So, Bill Keys ended up selling it to a group of investors who intended to create a resort. As the story goes—see if I can remember his name, recently died, Glen Campbell—one of the investors, I was told, was Glen Campbell. He and his associates in the Los Angeles/San Diego area ended up buying the land and then, as they found out there wasn't enough water to suck out of the ground to have the type of the resort they wanted to build. So, that – I think it was 320 acres – was eventually traded to the National Park Service for some surplus government land outside of San Diego. Which is where Qualcomm Stadium now sits. The Park Service got a historic ranch site, and San Diego got a football stadium, and the investors made out quite well.

TM: Curt, I've got a question. You mentioned the MDLT and \$500 an acre. Was that \$500 what the MDLT, what the land trust was paying people for their land or was that what the people had paid to get the land originally? They're homesteading so I'm assuming there is no payment, you just have to meet some requirements, unless there was a payment requirement.

CS: I don't know what you paid. You probably paid \$10 a year to file/\$5 a year to file. You got the land "for free," but you had to do improvements on the land each year.

TM: Right. But there's no water and it's not like you're going to start growing wheat or something like that. There's no rain, it's very dry country.

CS: Right. And, what Mojave Desert Land Trust paid was the fair market assessed value for that acreage. And again, there's no water, there's no road, there's no utilities.

TM: Right. No power.

CS: The only way you can get to the land is by walking. You can't drive across wilderness areas. And you can't fly in. You'd have to take a helicopter and be 500 feet above ground level until you got over your particular 5 acres or 160 acres and then you could go straight down. And then when you got out, you'd have to have a helicopter come back in and pick you up or you'd have to walk, you know, 8 miles through the desert. No electricity, no swamp coolers, no water. That land's not worth much. But it's worth a lot to the ecosystem. It was just another land speculation fiasco.

TM: Which is interesting because I think of these basically private in-holdings in wilderness areas. They typically become resorts, top-end homes for really wealthy folks, because there's an access road. That's sort of the cherry-stem concept. Without that road, I really see your point. Yeah, if you want to fly in with a helicopter and build some sort of home in an in-holding... But that's going to be your way to get in and get out. Hmm, interesting.

CS: Yeah. Most of the people that come to the park have no idea that is or used to be private land; that all looks like desert. Most of the people never access those areas of the park. They go to Keys View and you can overlook the Coachella Valley with its eleven cities – or however many there are – and you can see through the Banning Pass down into the L.A. area. You can stand three miles north of the San Andreas Fault. I'm sure that most people never realize that they're three miles away from one of the major fault lines in Southern California. I mentioned this before, but even with 3 million visitors there's enough access. If you get away from where most of the folks go, Barker Dam and Keys View, Lost Horse Mine, you can hike all day and never see anybody. So, it's still, for the most part, an intact ecosystem. I mentioned earlier the impacts from pollution. The L.A. area is cleaner air quality-wise than it was in the 60s. They've moved a lot of the industry that was causing pollution, trucking and what-not, out of the L.A. area but it's still in the L.A. basin. The winds are primarily onshore, they blow the pollution through the Banning Pass area over into the Coachella Valley. Then when the temperatures of the lands change in the Coachella Valley, it's still hot on the north side of the Coachella Valley and it cools because of the San Jacintos on the south side of the valley. So, the winds actually shift and start blowing to the north-northeast into Joshua Tree National Park depositing elevated levels of nitrogen and carbon. That's actually affecting the vegetation in the national park. Which is one of the reasons – along with climate change – that the fires have been more aggressive in their burning in Joshua Tree. So, fire ecology is being changed by, whatever, 40 million people in the greater Los Angeles area.

TM: Something like that.

CS: So, getting the Division Chiefs to work together was a start. Figuring out all this other stuff about lands and changes to the ecosystem. The Joshua trees are dying off at lower elevations of Joshua Tree. You know, some of the larger Joshua trees I've ever seen are up towards Big Bear at 6,000 feet. The highest altitude in Joshua Tree is right up about 5,200 feet. The Joshua trees in the lower elevations are not as healthy. It's true throughout the Mojave Desert. We'll see, in a hundred years from now Joshua Tree National Park might be renamed Mojave Desert National Park, I don't know. Maybe 200 years.

TM: Yeah, which is an interesting question of, how do you manage a national park with climate change, ecological fragmentation? When climate change is enough, the key species of a park move. They either try to climb elevation or they simply die out. Is it the agency's responsibility to keep those species alive? How does that work and what sort of intensive management practices are you going to use in wilderness - no mechanized machinery - to keep that going.

CS: The Joshua tree cannot survive without a moth. One species of moth pollinates the Joshua tree. So, as temperatures warm - or maybe in a thousand years as they cool, who knows – birds are migrating at different times of the year. They're arriving in their normal time and the food supply is already grown or has not yet started to fruit. So they're changing migrations. And if this moth changes its migration and its reproduction cycle, will it coincide with the Joshua trees' reproduction cycle? So, it's not just the Joshua tree, it's everything that the Joshua tree is dependent upon. How scientists are going to figure that out, I'm not real sure.

TM: Well we're talking change to an entire ecosystem. There's a lot of moving parts there that have to work together.

CS: So there was always something to do at Joshua Tree. Lots of fires, lots of interaction with the surrounding communities. Lots of maintenance activity that occurred upgrading the infrastructure. Then there's the Fee Demonstration program, or the Fees program, which went into effect in 1996 when we

started charging entrance fees to almost all National Parks and National Historic Sites, except certain things like Statue of Liberty and the Washington Monument. When I got to Joshua Tree, we had 5 campgrounds around the perimeter of the park and 3 campgrounds up in the main part of the park which were not being charged fees. The climbers were still using those national parks as their personal campgrounds, not paying any fees and just basically living there. So, I said to the management team, "Why aren't we charging fees for the campgrounds in the upper part of the park?" The answer was Ernie Quintana didn't want to charge fees and irritate the climbers. I said, "Well that's nice. Let's go take a look." So one New Year's Eve, I think it was the probably the second New Year's Eve that I was there, I went out on patrol with my chief ranger. All the rangers were on duty because New Year's Eve in Joshua Tree National Park was a major party. So, we're cruising through the campground and there's all these bonfires going on. Nobody's paying fees. At one point we drove through a campground and a couple of beer bottles hit the patrol car, thrown by drunk climbers. I said, "You know, this is kind of like out of hand." The chief ranger said, "It's been out of hand for years. There's nothing we can do. We don't have enough people." I said, "Okay, that's fine." So, I decided that we would start charging fees in the upper campgrounds; \$5 a night to try and get a handle on a rather chaotic scene. That went over the climbing community like a lead balloon. We were out on patrol another night, pulled into another trailhead and there's 3 cars parked there, obviously they're camping close by. Eventually they showed up. One of the climbers was a doctor who claimed that he couldn't afford \$5 a night and I was trying to destroy climbing in the national park. I looked in the back of his rather ritzy SUV—I forget what model it was, and I know about climbing gear. I'm looking in there and it's like, "You've got over \$2,000 worth of climbing gear in the back of your \$40,000 SUV, and you're telling me you can't afford \$5 a night?" "Well, it's just not fair that you're charging us to camp here. We've been camping here for years." "Okay." So, we implemented that, and it stood. We received probably 20 letters a week from families that could now access the national park in the winter and actually had a place to go in the campground. We placed the same 14-day limit that existed in the lower campgrounds, and families were able to start coming to the park in the winter and utilize their campgrounds rather than it being reserved for campers that were using it as their winter residence.

TM: That was one of the questions that I was going to ask. There is a 14-day limit on camping at one location on federal land, I think, if I get that right. So, were these people – if they were confronted, they'd just pick up and move to the next campsite over or a quarter mile away for another 14 days and sort of kick that back-and-forth?

CS: Well, if they were confronted and told they needed to leave the thirty-site campground and they needed to leave Hidden Valley, they'd just drive over to Jumbo Rocks or go down to another campground down towards the Pinto Basin for 14 days. Then they'd come... So, just different management issues at Joshua Tree. And now, the visitation of climbers is about 20-22%. Apparently, they came up with an extra \$5 a night, which I think now is \$10 a night if I'm not mistaken.

TM: So that \$5 went to 10?

CS: After I left, I believe it went to \$10. It might still be \$5. Like many other National Parks, we raised quite a bit of money from entrance fees, camping fees, backcountry camping fees which I implemented at Olympic National Park against the wishes of the assistant superintendent but with the support of the superintendent. So, there's a lot of money being generated by the users. I still to this day believe that Congress should adequately fund the national parks and that they should be free, but that's not happening. The money that parks are generating from user fees is being utilized by the National Park Service. I personally believe that there are too many restrictions on how those fees could be used. When

it first started, superintendents kept 80% of their fee revenue and 20% went into a pot in the region for those National Park Service areas that were not charging fees. And the superintendent could decide where that money was going to go. Over the years since 1996, what, 24 years now, Congress has weighed in, different regional director and regional management teams have weighed in, and in my opinion the superintendents are no longer able to take that money and utilize it efficiently for their national...

TM: How's it divvied up now? I mean, if it was 80% goes to the park where the fees were generated and 20% goes to other regional parks, what's happening with it now?

CS: Well, one of the things that happened with it in Yellowstone and Yosemite was there were so many court cases against trying to upgrade/improve/stabilize historic sites that they got locked up in court and they couldn't spend the money. In other National Park Service areas, if you didn't meet certain criteria, instead of keeping 80% of your monies, you were reduced to 60% and 40% went into the fund. This is just my personal bias, which maybe harkens back to the assistant superintendent at Olympic telling me I wasn't a "team player" many years ago. You lose another 20% of your funds and it goes to other National Park Service areas as distributed by the region, who are people that used to work in parks but now they work in the region. They can take years to make a decision about what the priorities are. So, the money sits there. Then Congress looks at the total fund in Washington D.C., says, "You guys have millions of dollars and you're asking for more in the budget. We're not giving you anything." That's just my personal, unbiased opinion. I think the system should be returned to its original policies of 1996/'98 and the superintendent should be able to utilize the funds. If they're caught up in court, okay, fine, you can have the money. But, take money away from the National Parks that are raising the funds... Or maybe they need to redistribute it and make it 50-50. As long as the monies that are taken out of your park... The people coming to your park expect you to take care of it. In Joshua Tree, if you pull up to a trailhead that's clearly overrun now, and the two double Port-a-Potties haven't been pumped for a month... The people should not have to put up with that. That's their user fees. They're using their park and their park needs to take care of those pit toilets. They need to be pumped every week because that's the visitation level or you need to put in some more pit toilets. Your money's going to D.C. in Washington for larger projects. If I was in D.C., I'd think that these projects to take care of, I don't know, Statue of Liberty, Independence Hall, those are pretty important. So, it's something that we learned over the years. There's always somebody that you work for and they always have a higher priority. And to them, it's legitimate and you just have to deal with it.

TM: Yeah, it's a really fascinating issue of the National Park Service not getting adequate subsidies/fiscal year subsidies. So Congress comes up with the ability for the park to collect money locally and it does that. But then that money goes off elsewhere and then Congress starts saying, "Well, gee, you're making a lot of money doing that because we didn't give you the funding to start with. So, now we're going to want a piece of that pie." The tax-paying citizens look at this and go, "Well, wait a minute, isn't this double-taxation? I mean, I'm paying federal taxes and then I have to pay again when I go to a federal facility to recreate there, or to visit and study..." Contemplate the many reasons why people go to visit their federal lands and national parks.

CS: I'll give you another perspective on that argument. I don't know what the costs are right now but, I think in 1996 I think the Park Service budget was about \$1.2 billion. I think it's over \$3 billion now. I had a ranger at Olympic National Park sit down, and I don't know exactly how he did it, but he calculated the amount of money paid by all the taxpayers into the federal treasury from income tax. Then he calculated the percentage of the budget that went to the National Park Service. It came out that each

citizen paying taxes was paying 1.3 cents per year to support the national parks. I even used that in an argument several different times when people were like, "I pay taxes!" I'd pull 2 cents out of my pocket and hand it to them and say, "You can keep the change. That's all you're paying. Less than 2 cents for all the national parks." I don't know what it is now. Who cares. 6 cents?

TM: It's funny because I think that just to play devil's advocate what that individual would do is say, "Well, as a taxpayer I want to give you 4 cents out of all I pay, so that we don't have to pay \$10 a night to camp!" So, there's always these fascinating different ways of looking at it. But yeah, you're exactly right. If you look at where does a tax dollar go, how it gets split apart to the different parts of the government. Park Service gets next to nothing, sure.

CS: Yep. So, anyway. Fees. Those have been contentious since they went into effect in '96, but it's not like entrance fees weren't being paid back in the 40s, 50s, and 60s, and certainly the 70s when I started. You paid to get into Rocky Mountain National Park when I was there in the 70s. I think it was \$2 a day. Now it's \$25 or \$50, whatever.

TM: Very interesting. Well, we've been yik-yakking now for, oh my gosh, about an hour and fifteen or so? Maybe this is a good time to wrap up this interview. I was thinking maybe if you're willing to do one more interview, sort of a general retrospect and views looking back and views looking forward about where you think the National Park needs to go. Course, I might ask you about more stories about Joshua, too.

CS: Yeah, we can do one more.

TM: Alright. Well, thank you so much. With that, we'll conclude Part 10 Oral History Interview with Curt Sauer. My name is Tom Martin. Today is Friday, October 30, 2020. Curt, thank you so very much.

CS: You betcha, Tom.