Statement of Sigurd F. Olson,
President, National Parks Association,
at National Parks Association Special Conference,
November 17th, 1954, Plaza Hotel, New York City,
on the Dinosaur National Monument Proposal

This conference was called for the purpose of crystallizing the thinking of all conservation groups regarding the proposed invasion of a unit of the national park system, and to alert the nation, through the press, to the danger involved. It is a far more important question than power potential, acre feet of evaporation, or irrigation. It has to do with the preservation of the finest national park system in the world, a system which many other countries are emulating. It has to do with the preservation for the American people of values that cannot be estimated, measured, or spoken of in terms of dollars; values that concern their future happiness and well-being.

The national parks system was established by Congress for the express purpose of preserving outstanding examples of scenic, primitive America. In the law setting up the national park service it was plain that these areas were for the inspiration and recreation of the people, and should be passed on unimpaired to future generations. The entire national parks system, occupying less than one percent of the land of the United States, is a pitifully small remnant of the wilderness continent we once knew.

With our growing population, estimated by 1975 to approach a figure of possibly two hundred million, such areas will become increasingly valuable. Even at the present time with our magnificent transportation system, the means to travel and leisure to do it in, the American people are using our parks in numbers that have never been approached before. The estimate of 1954 visitations approaches the 50 million mark, and those in charge of administration of national parks and monuments are beginning to wonder if the present reservations are adequate to take care of such heavy unprecedented use.
These reservations play a very important part in the recreational and spiritual needs of our people. In a country such as ours, a country of growing industrial expansion, with its attendant pressures and tensions, people need places where they can find release. The tremendous use of parks and wilderness areas, generally, indicate without question a real and vital need.

The wilderness taught Americans resourcefulness, gave them independence, and a love of freedom - freedom to move, freedom to embark on new and dangerous enterprises, freedom to work out their own destinies. In an America where the physical frontiers are largely a thing of the past, where there is less of the old type of freedom, we must have places where we can recapture perspective, and sense the life and challenge of a by-gone age. The mere existence of these areas serves as a reminder of our past, gives us respect for the courage, hardship and vision of our forefathers, and serves as balance wheels to the speed and pressures of a high-powered civilization. It is good for moderns to experience the wilderness. It is part of the cultural background of America.

As our industrial development goes on and on, it becomes increasingly important to preserve inviolate our national parks and monuments and to make them accessible for a people who will need them even more in the future than they do today. These parks have become so closely identified with the way of life of the American people, with the opportunities for them to know personally superlative and unchanged country, that it is inconceivable to think the day might come when we would no longer think their preservation important.

Yet, in 1954, we are confronted with a great threat to the national parks system, the threat of a proposed dam in Dinosaur National Monument, which will destroy irreparably the intangible and physical values of this beautiful area. Not many people have seen Dinosaur (though the number is growing), but many
have heard of it. They know it is a western canyon country which in many ways rivals the world-famous Grand Canyon of the Colorado. They know the present plans call for a dam at Echo Park that would bury this canyon under 500 feet of water. They know after the flooding is complete there will be a tremendous storage reservoir backed up for 100 miles that will change entirely the primitive character of the monument and destroy forever its highest values. Those who have lived in the vicinity of great storage reservoirs know the awful aftermath of fluctuating levels. They know that while an artificial lake will have some minor recreational values, the real significance of Dinosaur National Monument will be gone.

Wilderness and primitive values are tenuous and delicate things. They cannot be tampered with without change. An editorial in the NEW YORK TIMES stated not long ago that tranquility was beyond price. The writer was pointing up the necessity of preserving some places, in a mechanical age, where people can find quiet and solitude. If he had been writing about Dinosaur he could not have stated our objectives more clearly, for what we are trying to preserve there is not only scenery, not only a beautiful canyon, but the feeling of a wilderness country. Any development in any national park or monument which destroys these aspects is breaking faith with the original intent of Congress to pass these areas on unimpaired.

Why are we disturbed about Dinosaur? Why are the conservation groups determined to stop Echo Park Dam? Why have hundreds of thousands of people all over the United States become alarmed at the proposed invasion? Simply because of the realization that through this development the door is opened to invasions of other national parks and monuments. Should Echo Park Dam be built, a precedent will be established that will make it possible to construct dams in Grand
Canyon, Glacier, King's Canyon, Mamouth Cave, Yellowstone and others. And let no one think for a moment that Echo Park Dam is not a precedent. It will give the green light to the previously active proposals mentioned as well as to many other developments planned for these areas. Should Echo Park Dam be built, the magnificent rain forest of the Olympic National Park will not be as safe as it was. Virgin forests in other national parks will be eyed by covetous lumber interests. It will be far more difficult in the future to oppose any plans for commercial or industrial exploitation not in keeping with the original national parks standards. In brief, if Echo Park Dam is built, the sanctity of the entire national parks system will be threatened.

The conservation groups of America, gathered at this luncheon today, are agreed that Echo Park Dam, or any other dam which might despoil any national park or monument, must not be considered. They are in favor of a sound program of development for the Upper Colorado. They are not opposed to any plan which will conserve the water of this great basin and make an equitable distribution of its potential to the west. But they do feel that such a program need not violate any national parks and monuments; that alternative proposals have been adequately demonstrated that will obviate any such necessity, and, incidentally, save the taxpayers many millions of dollars.