

Dear National Park Service,

Eric Blair

7 November 2011

I have always wanted to camp out in one of the parks in my city, so thank you for allowing me the opportunity to do so last weekend.

Although it's an oft-used factoid that the National Park Service controls 70% of land in DC¹, as far as I can tell, you don't allow camping² until Maryland or Virginia.

So I was delighted to read about how you were letting tents stand in Macpherson Square, in downtown DC. I could leave the house around eight, take a bike share bike down to a great Chinese restaurant, then afterwards walk down to the square and pitch a tent. I could not imagine a more halcyon evening.

I'd been hoping for a chance to go for a week beforehand, and the night was just that pleasant. I can't really give you a rational breakdown of what makes camping fun (not that you need one), but the process of putting up a house for a night is a much more meaningful way to interact with a park than passing through for a walk or sitting on a bench for an hour. There's more preparation and thought to be had beforehand, and more to remember afterward. Being able to do this here in town made it even more special, and not just because it saved me the tedium of arranging the car trip: I was able to experience a familiar park, which I've walked and biked through countless times, in an entirely new way.

When I arrived, it was dark and the square was mostly sleeping. I put up the tent and got in pretty quickly. At this point, all of my sensory input was audio, being that my view was nothing but the orange walls of the tent. But even just sitting in the tent and reading, I was very aware of where I was, in a manner that's hard to describe from outside of a tent.

Pretty much by definition, camping is sleeping in a non-residential area, so noise is a key problem in any camp site. At car camping sites, the tents are right next to RVs with generators and TVs, and there are no walls separating sleeping campers from the cars with lousy mufflers that might arrive late at night. Sleeping in the backcountry of Shenandoah Park, where you advise us to string food up on tree branches to prevent bears from eating it, the rustling of deer—Oh, please let it be a deer—is enough to wake a light sleeper.

Macpherson Square, of course, has buses every half hour, emergency vehicles, and belligerent drunks. In my neighborhood, not too far from the bars, this argument is pretty familiar:

¹<http://washington.org/planning/travel-professionals/dc-in-a-box/city-fact-sheet>

²http://www.nps.gov/rocr/faqs.htm#CP_JUMP_69604



Figure 1: I'm the one in orange and red.

Loud person A: Get in the car!

Loud person B: No way!

Loud person A: You're too drunk. Get in the car!

Loud person B: No way!

It often runs for half an hour or so. There was one of those going on the night I slept at Macpherson Square.

At 2AM, one guy came by and started yelling *It's 2AM! This is your alarm call. [nasally:] eee eee eee!*. Motorcycles at the stoplights by the square seemed to make a point of revving their engines. Some passers-by were yelling *get a job*. It's unfortunate that so many consider yelling at sleeping people to be a valid form of public discourse, but I suppose it's hard to teach park etiquette to those who are just passing by the park.

I mention the noise not as a serious complaint—I knew what I was getting into when I decided to camp downtown—but as something to consider as you expand your program of allowing camping in walking distance to city Metro stations. I know that at many RV-oriented sites there is a camp host who is authorized to give a warning (or more) to those who are a disturbance; having somebody who can quickly call officers of the United States Park Police when needed would solve these final little issues.

Thank you for allowing me to camp in my little patch of the dozens of mini-parks and 22 full national parks within DC city limits. There's no better way to appreciate that the Park Service serves more than suburbanites who like to drive really far for their recreation, and no better way for me to appreciate DC and its parks. I even finally looked up who James Birdseye Macpherson³ was!

³http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_B._McPherson