

and-rescue experts and countless other highly trained citizens who could provide valuable assistance to NPS law enforcement officers if the need arose.

Federal, state and local law enforcement agencies are made up of dedicated professionals. However, even they cannot promise a 10-minute response time in the vast wilderness of a national park. It is also not possible to dial 911 in a national park. Each park has its own unique emergency phone number. The number is prominently displayed around park buildings and at phone booths, but emergencies have a nasty way of occurring some considerable distance away from park gift shops and public pay phones.

I'm a frequent visitor to the Shenandoah National Park in Virginia. I carry my cell phone when I am hiking and fishing the remote trout streams in the park. Unfortunately, the cell phone might as well be an expensive paperweight as there is very little reliable cell-phone signal in the deep stream valleys of the park. I know that my personal-defense handgun is not legal in the park, so it's at home. I'm completely on my own, and I know it. How many less experienced park visitors are aware of their utter vulnerability should they stray too far from park concession stands and public restrooms?

Just for fun, let's rewind the tape to June 10, 2003, and read what Barna said to the *Christian Science Monitor* on the issue of safety in national parks:

"The most [park visitors] used to worry about [was] running into a grizzly bear. Now there is the specter of violence by a masked alien toting an AK-47."

Personal-defense handguns are no match for an AK-47, particularly one that has been illegally converted into a fully automatic weapon. However, depending upon the specific circumstances of the encounter, a handgun might at least give you a fighting chance against an AK-47. If your personal-defense handgun is



**I'm quite certain that the 4,400 victims of violent crimes last year in NPS units would have benefited from having a personal-defense handgun or at least someone nearby with such a weapon. Unfortunately, these people never had a chance to defend themselves because bureaucrats...decided that, in effect, only outlaws will have guns in national parks.**

locked in your car trunk, then you'll probably just become another entry on the NPS daily police blotter.

Unlike the NPS, the USDA Forest Service takes a sensible approach to personal-defense handguns. The Forest Service respects the CCW laws of the states in which the individual forests are located. With 193 million acres of land, the Forest Service dwarfs the NPS. There are approximately 600 armed law enforcement officers responsible for patrolling the vast woodlands.

According to Forest Service spokeswoman Heidi Valetkevitch, the

Service is facing "an exponential growth in marijuana cultivation, methamphetamine production and illegal immigration." The unspoken message here is that if the need arose, the outnumbered Forest Service rangers would not turn down appropriate assistance from owners of personal-defense handguns.

A coalition of gun-rights groups has launched an effort to change the NPS antigun policy. This alliance includes the Gun Owners of America, the

Citizens Committee for the Right to Keep and Bear Arms and gun-rights organizations from more than 20 states. The Virginia Citizens Defense League (VCDL) has asked Interior Secretary Gale Norton to initiate the process required to bring NPS firearms regulations into line with

Forest Service handgun policies. The coalition is urging gun owners to contact Secretary Norton and members of Congress to express support for a revised NPS handgun policy.

Second Amendment supporters no doubt recall that President Bush was reelected last fall with crucial support from gun-rights organizations and individual gun owners. So what does the White House have to say about Barna's antigun statements? Apparently, not much. The White House press office did not respond to my request for a comment. Sometimes silence speaks volumes. ■