



## Professional Report Series Number 10

### *RENEWAL OF THE PARK RANGER PROFESSION*

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#### **Abstract**

This is one of a series of professional papers developed by the Coalition of National Park Service Retirees (CNPSR). These papers address the broad issues and challenges regarding the future of our country's national parks. This paper invites discussion on one set of critical employees (among many) who will implement that future – the National Park Service ranger.

We believe that there is a critical need to focus now on park rangers, especially those performing resource and visitor protection duties, for the pace of change in the role and image of these iconic representatives of parks is accelerating. There's widespread perception and concern that we are losing something that has for many years contributed to the success of the National Park Service.

Few things remain the same and the nature of ranger work should be one of continuing change as the NPS responds to a wide variety of political, economic, technological, academic, and societal trends. Such change has been occurring for a long time. By the middle of the 20th century, most parks had divided ranger work into two primary areas. One was what we now call interpretation; that is, providing information at visitor centers, leading guided walks and talks, and educating visitors about park resources. The other was what became generically known as protection; that is, protecting park visitors and resources by enforcing laws and providing emergency services. Over recent years, however, law enforcement has become ascendant in many areas, compromising the traditional image of all rangers. This paper focuses on that issue and its resolution.

We believe it essential to acknowledge at the outset that the perceptions of any organization of retirees may be perceived as those of a group of old-timers who simply wish to turn back the clock. A great deal of effort has been made to assure that the perceptions and recommendations contained in this paper present the best possible integration of historic and contemporary observations and opinions.

#### **The Coalition**

The Coalition of National Park Service Retirees (CNPSR) is an organization comprised of nearly 700 former National Park Service employees who, collectively, have served almost 20,000 years within the agency in every capacity and at all grades, including a substantial number of former Directors and Deputy Directors, former regional Directors or Deputy Regional Directors, former Associate or Assistant Directors at the national or regional office level, former Division Chiefs at the national or regional office level, and former Superintendents or Assistant Superintendents.

In our personal lives, we come from the broad spectrum of political affiliations. As park managers, rangers and employees in the National Park Service's many disciplines, however, we devoted our

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professional lives to a common goal – maintaining and protecting our national parks for the benefit of all Americans, both living and those yet to be born. We remain committed to that goal.

This paper is one of a series on critical issues facing the National Park Service as it enters its second century. A complete listing of all current or planned papers appears at the end of this report.

### **The Author**

This paper was prepared by Doug Morris, with considerable advice from many senior colleagues and CNPSR. Doug served as a park ranger in five parks, worked as an instructor at the Albright Training Center, and finished his 40-year career with service as a superintendent at Saguaro and Shenandoah National Parks. Throughout his assignment at Shenandoah, Doug provided long-term assistance to parks in Europe, especially Croatia, and in south and east Africa.

# **Professional Report Series – Number 10**

## ***Renewal Of The Park Ranger Profession***

### **Background**

The ranger profession can trace its history in this country back many years. As early as 1696, there were caretakers of a park-like area in Maryland, and in 1859 men on horseback patrolled New York's Central Park. In 1866, Galen Clark was named "Guardian of Yosemite." His instructions were to protect the resource while providing for its enjoyment – a dichotomy that has challenged park rangers ever since. In 1872, Yellowstone became the world's first national park, and eight years later Harry S. Yount was hired as a gamekeeper.

Prior to 1900, there were only eight national park areas, and the United States Army provided for protection of park resources and visitor assistance in four of these for up to 28 years. The Army's legacy is still reflected in today's parks in terms of uniform and park organizations.

When the National Park Service was finally established by Congress on August 25, 1916, 37 units became united as one national system of parks; all but three were in the western part of the country. Park rangers assumed the roles so ably performed by the military, and were assigned the duties of protecting visitors and resources throughout the newly-created system. Law enforcement has always been an essential part of ranger duties. From the very beginning, poaching, trespass, illegal grazing, and vandalism required their attention. However, parks were invariably remote and crime was minimal, so rangers were also expected to perform a wide range of other duties, including managing wildlife, stocking fish, fighting fires, and giving interpretive programs. And, far more than in today's mechanized world, these tasks were often accomplished on horseback. The image of the park ranger as a friendly and approachable "jack-of-all trades" icon was born.

### **Foundations for Change**

The foundations for transition to the ranger profession of the 21st century began in the 1960's and 1970's, a dynamic period for the nation and for the National Park Service. This was an era of national unrest and civil disturbance that contributed greatly to one of the most significant incidents in NPS history, the "riot" in Yosemite National Park in July, 1970. By then, there was a growing need for professional law enforcement in Yosemite Valley. It was close to San Francisco, Oakland, Berkeley, and Los Angeles. The counterculture of the Viet Nam era was at its peak, and thousands of young people gathered in the campgrounds and elsewhere throughout the summer to exercise their enthusiasm for free speech and free love and their contempt for authority. There was a worrisome increase in theft, drug use, disorderly behavior, and occasionally more violent assaults. Stoneman Meadow, a large clearing on the Valley floor, had been appropriated by scores of "hippies" as a gathering place. The ranger staff, armed only with training, experience, and equipment from a previous era, attempted to implement a decision to evacuate the meadow. The ensuing "riot" was nationally publicized and judged a major embarrassment for the National Park Service.

Other events and trends that would have even greater impact on the role and image of the park ranger were likewise occurring. New recreational areas were established in the cities of New York, San Francisco, Atlanta, and Los Angeles, and the National Park Service was assigned by Congress to manage them. A dozen or more other recreational areas were also established, many of them around lakes created by reservoirs or along popular seashores. Management of these new areas was also assigned by Congress to the National Park Service. While all of these new parks contained significant resources, the main purpose of their creation was to serve as a place for large numbers of people to have fun. Protecting resources and especially visitors required a greater level of law enforcement expertise than had been sufficient in long-established natural and historical/cultural park areas .

The Congress, the Department of the Interior (DOI), and the NPS, all responded to what was happening. The most notable actions included:

- 1971 – Following the Yosemite Riot (and before any policy directives by DOI or NPS), Director George Hartzog ordered that all rangers performing law enforcement attend a comprehensive law enforcement training program. For most, that consisted of three or more months of instruction at what eventually (in 1975) became the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center (FLETC) in Brunswick, Georgia.
- 1974 – The Department of the Interior issued, for the first time, a comprehensive law enforcement policy, Department Manual (DM) 446.
- 1975 – The NPS issued, for the first time, a set of law enforcement guidelines, NPS-9. A much more comprehensive version of NPS-9 was begun in 1980 and completed in 1982. This guideline continues to be updated and refined from time to time.
- 1976 – Congress passed the General Authorities Act, which, among many provisions, provided full law enforcement authority for appropriately trained and designated park rangers.
- 1976 – Director Gary Everhardt established the Ranger Image Task Force and asked this group, chaired by Western Regional Director Howard Chapman, to define the role of the park ranger so that the specialized skills required for law enforcement could be developed without creating a police subculture within the National Park Service. This group was comprised of a widely-respected and diverse set of park managers and veteran rangers. Their recommendations pointed the way toward resolving many of the challenges of that era.
- 1980 – The long-simmering issue about whether and when rangers could carry firearms was finally put to rest with approval of a national policy stating that rangers, when performing law enforcement duties, would wear firearms. Ranger patrol vehicles were also standardized to more closely match city and county police cruisers.

## **Resistance To Change**

Despite these significant changes over a comparatively short time, the role and image of the park ranger did not dramatically change. There are certainly many reasons for such stability, but two seem especially significant.

The first is that the National Park Service has never been an organization with a culture that changes rapidly, and NPS leadership (the directors, most regional directors, and most superintendents) during this period was collectively determined that creation of non-traditional new parks, passage of new authorities, and establishment of new policies concerning law enforcement would not compromise the traditional image of the ranger. Many of them, in fact, began their careers as field rangers and took great pride in their contributions to the positive image of park rangers that they helped create. Midway through the 1970's, prominent leaders in the NPS wrote and spoke passionately of their belief that law enforcement was moving too quickly and too far. They wrote of their concerns about increased specialization, guns, and the lack of balance between law enforcement and all other traditional ranger tasks. And, especially, they expressed concern about the perceived loss of the traditional image of the park ranger. A task force was established in 1976 to address these concerns; it was called the Ranger Image Task Force. Its many recommendations generally focused on actions needed to accommodate the significant changes that were occurring, but retain the best traditions of ranger image. Superintendents and supervisory rangers gave firm direction in order to maintain a traditional ranger program even as park rangers everywhere adapted to the new way of things.

Secondly, there were various iterations of comprehensive ranger training programs at the Albright Training Center at Grand Canyon, Arizona, from the early 1960's until the early 1990's. While training in most skills was generally limited to concepts and perspectives, these courses are long-remembered for their strong and effective promotion of ranger traditions and image. A basic training program was also established at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center for trainees from land management agencies (NPS, USFS, F&WS, BLM) that gave much more attention to skills and techniques pertaining to resources-oriented law enforcement than to those that best serve the urban-oriented crime that continues to dominate the FLETC curricula .

In essence, there was a comprehensive and fairly effective counter-balance put in motion to limit the impact of this comparatively sudden addition of new and non-traditional parks and new authorities and policies. As a consequence, the image and role of the traditional ranger survived, largely intact, for quite awhile.

### **Increasing Specialization**

Clearly, park rangers assigned to law enforcement duties were becoming more specialized. Technology was advancing, training was expanding and providing higher levels of skill, commercial poaching and looting of cultural artifacts were increasing, and public expectations for safety remained high. Concurrently, opportunities for park rangers to perform other traditional ranger tasks were diminishing, as increasing knowledge inspired more sophisticated and complex management of park resources. For example, the need to restore fire to natural landscapes was emerging as an important goal in many parks, and park managers were turning to a new set of experts to implement these politically controversial programs in the most effective fashion possible. Over time, many parks established separate park organizations for fire management. Comprehensive protocols for training and experience were established, which further reduced the opportunities for field rangers to continue their long tradition of fire suppression.

Stewardship of natural resources was likewise becoming far more sophisticated, and more and more parks were establishing resources management divisions where specialists for such activities as fisheries and wildlife management, forestry, air quality, and even bear management were assembled. These positions were filled with people who had achieved advanced academic training and who focused almost exclusively on a particular resources management task.

The outcome of increased specialization in the management of fire and resources almost certainly resulted in better stewardship of park resources. However, this steady withdrawal from many of these traditional tasks added to the perception that rangers were becoming little more than specialists in law enforcement and emergency services.

### **Position Management**

Since its inception, the NPS has diligently applied a variety of position management practices addressing the role and pay of park rangers. Invariably, such efforts were frustrated by the often contradictory task of matching policies developed by the Civil Service Commission (later the Office of Personnel Management) with the diversity of national parks areas and the wide variety of tasks performed by park rangers. There were consequences, good and bad, resulting from each idea that was implemented in the name of progress.

In that aforementioned period from the beginning of the National Park Service through the mid-point of the 20th century, position descriptions for park rangers were generalist in nature. They prescribed a variety of duties and provided for most any task assigned under the "other duties as

assigned” caveat that completed most such documents. They enabled the creation of the traditional ranger image.

The first significant departure from this traditional description of ranger activities was a scheme to split traditional ranger activities into separate categories. Ranger work was classified into two series, the park ranger (025) professional series and the park technician(026) technical series. In theory, higher-graded (usually GS-9) rangers were to be those individuals with the “professional” knowledge and duties involving planning operations, managing staff and budgets, and dealing with management issues. They were invariably college educated and were expected to transfer around the system as preparation for promotion and – for some – advancement to management level positions. The park technicians were to be the people who performed varied field tasks, including law enforcement, search and rescue, EMS, and other visitor services. Generally, these positions were classified at the GS-4 or GS-5 levels. Ideally, the cadre of park technicians would be drawn from local communities; it was believed – or hoped – that these individuals would be satisfied to remain at the “home” park for many years, if not a career.

This scheme failed because it didn’t match the realities of parks or human nature. Even in the largest parks, there were not enough uniformed rangers to maintain a functional difference between the two levels of rangers. The GS-9 was often out in the field performing technical duties alongside the park technicians, and the technicians were sometimes required to handle more professional duties, especially in mid-size and smaller parks. This overlap in tasks was influenced more by park needs and individual abilities and interests than by the language in position descriptions. Nor did this model reflect the basic instincts of supervisory park rangers, who, not surprisingly, selected the best candidates on a list of applicants for park technician positions. The line of candidates who wanted permanent jobs as rangers (whether labeled technicians or not) was long. And mobile people with college degrees, including many with extensive experience as seasonal rangers, soon concluded that the technician series was their quickest route into such a position. It wasn’t long before this experiment ended and most of the park technicians were given the title of park ranger. However, many of those positions converted to park ranger titles continued at the GS-5 or GS-7 level, depending on the work described in their position descriptions. The outcome was a significant bottleneck at the lower grades and substantial concern about the departure of trained NPS law enforcement rangers to similar positions in other Federal land management bureaus where the journeyman grade for law enforcement agents had risen to the GS-9 level. There was a clear need to establish a new structure for describing and establishing pay for park ranger jobs.

The solution to this dilemma was a comprehensive initiative that was first described as “Ranger Futures,” and later labeled as “Ranger Careers.” In essence, leaders in the Washington Office of Ranger Activities took the initiative to work with OPM and write so-called benchmark position descriptions. The goal from the beginning was to establish common language that would accommodate the majority of park ranger positions around the Service. Equally significant, the goal was to upgrade the basic (journeyman) level of park ranger positions to the GS-9 level. It was well known that technical work such as law enforcement, emergency medical services, search and rescue, fire suppression, etc. did not provide for more than a GS-7 level, regardless of the skill level and variety of such tasks performed. So, for each benchmark position, language was added that would allow classification at the GS-9 level. The key words that accomplished this goal were “knowledge of natural and/or cultural resources.” Establishing a set of such benchmark positions that included a requirement for such knowledge and skills seemed completely consistent with the mission of the NPS and the traditional work of park rangers.

Concurrently, the Ranger Careers initiative sought to resolve the belief of many rangers performing law enforcement that position descriptions for law enforcement rangers should contain language that qualified them for special pay and retirement benefits. Accordingly, the benchmark position descriptions for protection rangers were further modified to include both appropriate language requiring resources knowledge to warrant a GS-9 grade and a description of law enforcement duties sufficient to qualify for the aforementioned special benefits. Throughout the Service, most park ranger positions, and those individuals in them, were accommodated by at least one of the approved

benchmark Ranger Careers positions. Many rangers enjoyed the benefits of upgrades and additional pay and retirement benefits.

The consequences of the Ranger Careers initiative have been profound and continue to the present. The most direct outcome was a variety of benefits that were exclusive to rangers performing law enforcement, including better pay and 20 year retirement. While the results of the Ranger Careers initiative can be defended as necessary and long overdue, there appear to be some less positive indirect consequences. Divergent pay benefits and required emphasis on law enforcement duties have combined to create more separation between rangers performing law enforcement duties and the rest of a park staff, including rangers assigned to interpretation/education jobs.

We believe that a more harmful “unintended consequence” of Ranger Careers is a steady reduction in the number of protection rangers moving into park management positions. Understandably, these enhanced benefits provided park rangers filling law enforcement positions with a greater motivation to remain in this type of work until qualified for early retirement. And, as opposed to previous generations of rangers, there is now a disincentive for law enforcement rangers to make a timely transition to other types of positions that will make them competitive for park management positions. Barring establishment of some form of structured career path, the NPS is increasingly deprived of their perspective and skills in senior level management positions.

### **Budget Shortfalls**

A more contemporary and insidious influence on the trend toward a more specialized park ranger has been the dramatic decline in the financial resources available to parks. Budget shortcomings require organizational triage to meet the most critical needs, which begins with preserving life and property – mostly a law enforcement function. There is no longer the flexibility to assign more varied resources stewardship and other visitor service tasks to a shrinking cadre of protection rangers. And so, despite the inclination and desire of many such rangers (and their supervisors) to perform a variety of more generalized tasks, the ongoing budget crisis has left them with little flexibility to do much more than focus on the visitor protection needs of a park.

### **The Challenge**

The Coalition of NPS Retirees believes that the current generation of park rangers, both protection and interpretation, bring the same levels of passion, skills and dedication to their service as rangers did in previous generations. We also note the excellent efforts by NPS leaders and park rangers at all levels to accommodate to significant events and trends with new policies and practices.

But such achievements have not been sufficient to ensure the perpetuation of the highest ideals of ranger traditions and image. The changes that have been made appear to focus, for the most part, on such administrative and structural components as training and certification requirements, position descriptions, pay and retirement benefits, uniform badge design, etc. The result has been a piecemeal rather than holistic evolution of the national park ranger. There is clearly a need to take a step backward and evaluate how all of these changes, cumulatively, have impacted the iconic image of the park ranger.

Even amidst the great diversity of parks and ranger tasks, there can be and should be a well-defined and contemporary model of a park ranger. Such a model cannot reflect the desire of some to simply return to the past, for it must reflect the many benefits of new knowledge, technology and even specialization. It must also reflect the needs and trends of the 21st century. It needs to be one that fully integrates service-wide and park needs, employee needs, position management realities, and the need for accountability. The Coalition believes that such a model can be developed and managed in a fashion that reflects the best of the past, but also the circumstances and needs of the present and

future. The Ranger Careers initiative is a good beginning, but needs to be expanded. Long-term achievement of the goals and ideals of such a model, however, requires leadership at all levels that recognizes and values the significance of the park ranger as a key component of the success of parks and the National Park Service.

## **A Call For Action**

The Coalition believes that there is broad agreement among current and past NPS employees that there should now be strong emphasis given to restoring the ideals of the park ranger image. However, we also recognize the diversity of opinions about how best to accomplish this task, and the limitations of any one group in developing a plan that accommodates divergent, and strongly held, viewpoints.

We call for initiation of a national dialogue to address these issues that we believe remain very significant to the success of the National Park Service. Such a dialogue should be structured, systematic and comprehensive. There should be opportunities for current NPS leaders, park superintendents, protection rangers, interpretive rangers, and other park employees to provide their opinions about the future of the park ranger profession. We suggest, at minimum, that such a dialogue should include in-depth examination of the following questions:

- What should be the ideal model for protection and interpretive rangers? Are there gaps between duties, performance, priorities, attitudes, etc. of current rangers and such ideal models?
- What is the present status and future of the Ranger Careers initiative? Is there a need for additional work to make this program more complete and effective?
- Is there sufficient integration between park rangers performing protection duties and employees in other divisions, including interpretive rangers, resources managers, and maintenance employees? If not, what improvements can be made?
- Do leadership development programs for National Park Service employees accommodate the enhanced benefits provided by the Ranger Careers initiative in a fashion that provides protection rangers with motivation and a path toward leadership and management positions?
- Is the current training program in the National Park Service (including FLETC) sufficient to ensure perpetuation of the best possible model for the park ranger? Is it now time – as many rangers, both retired and current, have suggested – to re-establish a contemporary version of the long-successful residential “Ranger Academy” at the Horace Albright Training Center?
- Is there adequate communication among park leaders and field rangers concerning such topics as ranger image, integration with other work groups, etc.?

We also suggest, perhaps as an outcome of the initial and less formal dialogue, establishment of a Ranger Renewal Task Force. Such a task force would provide even greater focus to the challenge of renewing the ranger profession. The task force should:

- Be led by one or two senior level employees of the National Park Service.
- Include members representing the full spectrum of organizations and groups that have a stake in the outcome, or can bring substantial knowledge and ideas to the discussions. CNPSR would be pleased to participate as a member of the task force.

The outcomes of this national discussion should include, but not be limited to:

- A statement describing a best possible model for the future national park ranger. This conceptual or philosophical model would be consistent with the Ranger Careers initiative and will integrate various specialized functions of law enforcement, resources stewardship, interpretation, education, etc. It would establish the common ground that will guide future modification to policies and practices.
- Recommendations addressing how the NPS should proceed in the future to implement that model.
- A strategy for leadership and accountability at all levels.
- A budget plan that would provide for a more flexible full-service ranger program in all parks.
- An updated training program designed to better ensure establishment and perpetuation of the model ranger.
- A leadership succession plan for the National Park Service that encourages and provides a path for transition of protection rangers covered by enhanced benefit plans to make a timely transition to park management positions.

## **Conclusion**

There is clearly an emotional bond between the people of this country and its parks. There is, as well, a deep affection for those men and women dedicated to protecting park resources, to providing a safe and enjoyable park experience, and to educating and inspiring understanding of park values.

The park ranger in the now-familiar flat hat long ago became the human image of our national parks and other park systems throughout the world. It is clearly time, once again, to assume the burden of leadership in a comprehensive effort to renew the park ranger profession.

## **This Series Of Papers**

The imminent arrival of the centennial of the National Park Service's birth, which will occur in 2016, has led to reflection on its past, evaluation of its successes and failures, and discussion of its future goals and priorities – both within the agency and among its many friends and supporters.

As an organization containing more professional experience and knowledge than any comparable entity anywhere in the country, we believe that we are uniquely placed to offer our professional perspectives on the array of issues that are and will be discussed over coming months and years.

This series of papers offers our professional evaluation of the key issues that the agency is now facing or will be dealing with in coming years. Current papers in the series, either completed or in development, include the following. Others may be added:

- Report 1        *America's Crown Jewels: The National Park System* – A paper on the philosophic and legislative foundation of the NPS and an evaluation of the need for more effective national engagement in protecting parks.
- Report 2        *The National Parks Centennial Commission* – An evaluation of the commission and recommendations on how it should work, what its goals should be, and what issues it should focus on.
- Report 3        *The National Park Centennial Institute* – A paper that explores the need and concept for a formalized academic institute to study a wide variety of park-related issues in order to inform and educate agency staff and political leaders and better manage our parks in a new century.
- Report 4        *Competitive Sourcing, Privatization, and Philanthropy in our National Parks* – A paper on these key issues and the bearing they have on the agency and its efforts to attain its goals.
- Report 5        *The Future of Entrance Fees and Their Connection to Visitation* – An examination of the problem of over reliance on entrance and user fees and the potential fees have to “price publics out of their parks.”
- Report 6        *Reasserting International Environmental and Park Leadership* – This paper looks at the reasons why the NPS has lost its standing as an international leader in parks and what needs to be done to become a more effective member of the international parks community.
- Report 7        *A Renaissance of Park Interpretation and Education Reaffirms the Mission of the National Park Service* – A paper that looks at the present dire straits of the NPS interpretive and education program and calls for a “renaissance” and a renewal of excellence in our on-site and off-site educational programs.
- Report 8        *Toward A Second Century Of Excellence For The National Park System* – This paper presents a ten-point vision of the attributes that the National Park Service needs to have by the time its centennial arrives on August 25, 2016. It also outlines qualities that must be sought and fostered in its leaders for it to retain its integrity, serve the public and meet its goals, and identifies core values that underlie “principled leadership.”

- Report 9 *It Is Not A Matter Of Money – It Is A Matter of Priorities* – This paper exposes the budgetary quagmire the National Park Service finds itself in and discusses ways out of the situation. It also presents a 15 year review and analysis of NPS budgets and compares the Clinton and Bush administration’s budgets.
- Report 10 *The Renewal of the Park Ranger Profession* – A review of the present state of the park ranger profession, which is increasingly called upon to specialize in the narrow niche of law enforcement, and how it might be reformed to better serve the agency in the future.
- Report 11 *Global Climate Change Creates New Park Environments and New Organizational Challenges for Park Science Programs* – This paper looks at the coming changes to our national and global ecosystems and impacts upon society and where our national parks can serve as effective barometers of global change.
- Report 12 *Reassessing the Development Footprint in our Parks* – This paper looks at the planning, development and construction process in the parks, examining the lessons learned from the first century of park development and how they need to be reconsidered for the second century.