



Professional Report Series – Number 7

A Renaissance Of Park Interpretation And Education Reaffirms The Mission Of The National Park Service

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Abstract

The importance of units of the National Park System certainly resides in their physical presence and the stories that led to their inclusion in that system. Professional interpretation and education serves as the glue that binds citizens together with their parks and the system as a whole. In large measure, the future success of those parks is facilitated through connecting individuals and groups with the resources and stories contained within the parks as well as the relevancy to their everyday lives and dreams. Yet, park interpreters and educators lack the resources with which to effectively facilitate those connections. The message for a second century of success is in part this: Through interpretation, understanding; through understanding, appreciation; through appreciation, protection.

A multitude of action items already exists to offer guidance and direction for the future. These studies and reports cover a broad spectrum of time, findings and recommendations that the Service should assimilate into a concentrated focus and strategy for the future. An increased effort by the Service to strengthen employee skills required in an increasingly diverse population of park users and supporters is critical to success. Further, the NPS should aggressively build partnerships with academic institutions, sociologists, educators and others to strategically place interpretation and education efforts ahead of the changes that will dramatically affect the parks before they are upon them. Finally, the Service must carry these critical messages beyond park boundaries.

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 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 as Appendix B.

The Author

The paper was prepared for and with the concurrence of CNPSR by Denny Huffman with the assistance of a number of retirees who spent much of their respective careers in interpretation and education within the Service. Those individuals include Anne Castellina, Ellis Richard, Bill Tweed, Tom Vaughan and Mike Watson. Denny Huffman served as superintendent of Dinosaur National Monument from 1987 to 1997 and currently serves on the Executive Council of the Coalition of National Park Service Retirees.

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Introduction

Like an image of the United States made up of hundreds of smaller images, the story of our nation resides in the areas included in the National Park System. From mountains, to prairies, rivers, canyons, seashores, and wetlands, to battlefields, historic sites, and monuments, the endowment of this land is preserved in its system of park areas. In them is the record of what was here to begin with, the saga of what has happened to that legacy since the first inhabitants arrived and indicators of what the future may hold for America's air, water, land and people.

The inscription on the Roosevelt Arch at the north entrance to Yellowstone, the first national park, reads, "for the benefit and enjoyment of the people." The parks were meant to be a living legacy, preserved to inspire and inform members of each generation as they try to achieve their potential, individually and as a nation in an uncertain world. These sacred sites that comprise the units of the national park system are made up of resources of national importance, containing stories, knowledge and wonders that transcend the membership of any one community, state, political party, religion, socioeconomic class or ethnic identity. These stories are not self-evident; they must be facilitated. The critical job of connecting the American people with their past and their future is the role of interpretation and education.

The Critical Nature Of Education And Interpretation

A strong program of interpretation and education will be key to the survival of the national park system in the 21st century. The federal park system cannot prosper in a democratic society without broad public support. Since the time of Steven Mather, the basis of this support has been public use and enjoyment of parks. Traditionally, such use leads to appreciation and ultimately to a personal commitment to protect and preserve.

In the 20th century, this strategy worked well. Indeed, it can be concluded that the National Park Service's long-term commitment to interpretive services played a key role in the twentieth century success of the national park system. The twenty-first century, however, is bringing new challenges to this equation.

A broad suite of societal trends threatens to separate major segments of American society from their national parks. These trends reflect large-scale changes in social demographics, technology, tourism, and cultural focus. Already these trends have flattened and even reversed the decades-long growth in park system visitation. If not addressed soon, the relationship between the American public and its parks will continue to unravel. Such a shift would have very serious long-term impacts on the parks.

A brief summary of these trends underscores the threads that threaten the relationship between the American people and their federal parklands:

- Demographic change – In recent decades, the United States has seen the highest levels of inward-bound immigration since the late nineteenth century. As a result, large numbers of residents have little or no knowledge of our system of national parks. Many of these recent arrivals come from cultures that do not have long-standing national park traditions, where national parks serve as a major destination for their leisure activities. Many do not have skills or interests that lead naturally to national park use. If these residents and citizens are to be engaged successfully in their national park system, they will need to be recruited and assisted to make their transition both comfortable and meaningful.

- Technological change – The advent of the digital age has provided our citizenry with new and powerful outlets for human curiosity. Half a century ago, the recreational enjoyment of nature and history played a much bigger role in our society than it is likely to do in the twenty-first century. Middle class families saw activities such as camping and hiking as important recreational opportunities. Today, much of that niche has been taken over by electronic forms of entertainment, including especially the web and video games. Sally Jewel, the CEO of Recreational Equipment Incorporated, one of the nation’s largest purveyors of outdoor recreational equipment, worries that the average American school child spends more than forty hours a week watching some sort of video screen and less than an hour during the same period playing outdoors in an unstructured manner.
- Changes in tourism – The world of recreational tourism as it existed in the twentieth century is rapidly evolving into new and strikingly different patterns. The causes are both social and economic. Contemporary vacations are shorter – often no more than a long weekend – and the competition for tourist dollars is intense. The tourism industry is far more developed and structurally mature than it was fifty years ago, with the result that there are far more types of destinations and far more choices within each of these categories. National parks must now compete against theme parks and multi-themed destinations like Las Vegas and Orlando. The traditional national park experience assumed a multi-day camping or park lodge experience and time to hike, fish, or swim. Today, even in the largest western national parks, a majority of visitors don’t even spend a single night within the park. These trends in the tourism industry have reduced both the visibility and the importance of the national park system as a part of the national tourism pattern.
- Change in cultural focus – A final trend ties much of the above together and gives it additional urgency. America’s interest in nature-based recreation is drifting away, a trend that is likely to negatively affect place-based history-related forms of recreation as well. This trend, which has been written about at length in such widely known forums as Richard Louv’s book *Last Child in the Woods*, has now been documented by a recent study published by the National Academy. Researchers Oliver Pergrams and Patricia Zaradic, writing in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (“Evidence for a fundamental and pervasive shift away from nature-based recreation,” 10.1073), have documented statistically what they term “a fundamental and pervasive shift away from nature-based recreation” in not only the United States, but also Northern Europe and Japan. They estimate this shift, which began about twenty years ago, has already reduced per capita interest in nature-based recreation by 18 to 25% and shows every indication of continuing.

Considered cumulatively, these trends profoundly threaten the relationship between the American people and their federal park system, a relationship that historically has been the key to the survival and growth of the park system in a democratic society. But what does this have to do with interpretation and education programs in the national parks?

Even more than in its early years, the National Park Service must commit itself to a broad-scale and powerful program of communication with the American public. The agency needs to realize that it is in a highly competitive situation and that it must compete aggressively if the public is going to continue to pay attention to and support its federal park system. In the immediate sense, the agency must help the American public rediscover the skills and attitudes that make national park experiences enjoyable. This involves enthusing visitors about the resources and experiences the parks offer. In the broader and longer-term sense the agency must create, in the face of powerful counter trends, a new generation of national park users.

Interpretation and education provide the agency with powerful tools to pursue these goals. Park visitors and the American public in general have long looked to park rangers as their key to national park access. Few public servants of any sort carry more credibility with the public. The agency can renew this tradition by enhancing its interpretive and educational programming. Good interpretive services within parks provide critical connections between visitors and potential park experiences while educational programming outside the parks (including web services) provides a means for the park system to compete for the attention and affection it requires.

Without greatly enhanced interpretive and educational programs, the social relevancy of the national park system, and even the ideas that underlie it, threaten to become increasingly insignificant as a part of mainstream twenty-first century American culture.

Historical Perspective

Interpretation and education in the park service has developed and evolved over the life of the agency. U.S. cavalry personnel provided guide service and talks to Yellowstone's earliest visitors. Park rangers took over and expanded those duties with the establishment of the National Park Service. Publications were among the first products of the new agency and museums were conceived and established early in the service's history, notably in Yosemite and Yellowstone.

Established in 1916, the National Park Service and its first director, Stephen Mather, recognized the need for interpretation and educational services and established the first position to manage an educational program. Mather was a businessman and saw education as a way to increase visitation to the parks, which in turn would provide popular and political support, which in turn would insure the survival of the new park system. Unfortunately for Mather, Congress at that time disagreed and did not endorse a significant educational mission for the parks. Always the visionary, Mather paid the salary of his new Chief of Education out of his own pocket.

In 1954, as the National Park Service looked ahead to its 50th anniversary in 1966, it obtained a grant to examine the state of educational programs throughout the nation's national park areas. The result, published in 1957, was *Interpreting Our Heritage* by Freeman Tilden. This short book, the cornerstone statement of educational efforts in the National Park Service, also institutionalized the shift from more traditional park educators of the past decades such as park naturalists, historians, and archeologists to the future education employee now officially described as an interpreter.

This shift away from a more classical approach to education in the parks was intended to achieve a more inspirational, energetic and insightful presentation accessible to the wide range of park visitors and was an effort to better define, focus and democratize the park service's educational mission. The word "interpreter" was applied to any park ranger in any park area engaged in educational activities such as campfire programs, guided walks, museum exhibit programs or development of informational brochures and pamphlets. The traditional naturalists, historians and archeologists hired for educational programs in natural, historical and cultural parks were gradually phased out in favor of this universal interpreter.

The use of the word "interpretation" instead of "education" reflects a long history of the educational mission in the national parks and confusion about that mission. The need for some kind of educational service to park visitors was recognized as soon as there were park visitors. The history of these efforts to provide interpretive or educational services is a history of experiment, creativity, introspection, reform, crisis, confusion and success. Sometimes in its history, interpretation clearly jumped on an educational fad, such as its embrace of living history in the 1960's and 1970's. Environmental education, on the other hand, has developed and matured under the leadership of interpretation in the National Park Service and remains one of the great achievements of educational programming throughout the national parks.

With increasing visitation and decreasing real dollar budgets, pressure on the National Park Service to manage its mandate of preserving fragile resources grew. All park operations came under increasing scrutiny to show tangible results in support of the park's mission. Whereas in the early founding years, guide service and educational programs were accepted almost intuitively as beneficial to a visitor's experience and even necessary to their understanding and appreciation of that experience, in later years there was a growing expectation that there should be more tangible evidence of the contribution interpretation made to the management of the park. Interpretation was described as a "management tool," one of a number of activities by which park managers could sustain their park areas and support the mission of the National Park Service. This theme of accountability became even more pronounced with the emergence of ecosystem concepts that began to define efforts to conserve our natural and cultural heritage. Today this competition for dollars in every park's operation is intense, and every operation is questioned for its utility in contributing to the management of every park area. While a clean restroom or well-maintained visitor center is obvious, interpretation and education efforts do not lend themselves to such quick and easy analyses. Impacts on the American public may take years to manifest themselves. Yet, their importance in sustaining public support for the future of parks is unquestionable.

The approaching centennial of the 1916 creation of the National Park Service opens another opportunity to look back at this history and reaffirm the role of education throughout the national park system. This seems an appropriate time to ask what the educational mission of the National Park Service is, how to measure its success and to define it as in fact, an original and core activity of the National Park Service. The Centennial Commission has an important opportunity to provide positive answers to these questions.

Current Status

The National Park Service probably does not need to define or invent more plans for its interpretation and education programs. There are already lots of good ones around. The Service held several symposiums and conferences in the last ten years about the state of interpretation and education. Prominent leaders, both within and outside the service, made significant recommendations with detailed action plans. They are comprehensive, forward thinking, and relevant for the future. The most significant of those findings and suggestions are included as an appendix to this paper and beg your further review.

Despite these efforts and contributions from sources both within and without the National Park Service, it is not consistently obvious that the Service recognizes and values interpretation and education as a core component of its mission. It is equally obvious that interpretation and education have not kept pace with its expectations and potential.

To do so, an environment of learning, support, and development among the leadership as well as the interpretive and education staff must exist. Roadblocks and barriers to success must be overcome. Too many staffs are well below their "critical mass" to take on the requirements of a robust, innovative, nimble organization that deals with new audiences, new technologies, and maintains the best practices of the past.

In the 1980s and into the 1990s, ten regional teaching teams delivered a national interpretation and education skills curriculum to employees throughout the parks. Not only did professional NPS interpreters and educators attend these workshops, but also employees from other park operations and from partners such as cooperating associations and concessionaires. Today, very little of this Servicewide, comprehensive training and development occurs. The training and development program for interpreters finds it difficult to hold national and regional training because the budget has fallen dangerously behind what is needed. Parks are strapped to even allow employees to be away from their jobs when such training is offered.

And yet, the Service has a defined set of core competencies and approved standards of performance for interpretive and education practitioners that are recognized as valid and reliable throughout the government and academic worlds. A stellar training curriculum based on these competencies exists, but is offered on a minimal, haphazard basis. The competencies and curriculum are considered cutting-edge and innovative and await adequate funding and a major green light for implementation.

To meet the needs for the next hundred years, park staffs and our partners not only need to be reinforced with a diversity of new employees, but be involved in a rigorous, focused, on-going interpretation and education training and development program. Nobody can envision with certainty what challenges will be present in 2016, let alone the next one hundred years. Eight years ago, no one heard of iPods, Facebook, YouTube, or Wi-Fi. Changing demographics and audiences require interpretive and education personnel that can research cultural characteristics and fashion programs that address them in the context of park resources. Only a professional, healthy, and motivated workforce can meet such challenges – that does not exist today. The overarching focus must be on ways to reinvigorate the interpretive and education environment and support the training and development of a professional workforce that will be required to meet the challenges of the next one hundred years.

Conclusion

There is only one thing we can be sure of in our second-century: There will be no National Park Service in 2116 if the areas of the national park system are no longer relevant to the lives of Americans. The grand vision symbolized by the creation of Yellowstone National Park will be found only in history books, but will no longer be a tangible reality in our nation. Again, legendary Freeman Tilden: “Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile. If the parks aren’t personally meaningful, they’re not relevant.” Connections to park resources are facilitated by quality interpretation and education, and life-lasting, life-changing forces are at work in such encounters. If we are to preserve the parks it will require a fully funded, well-trained, robust, innovative, and nimble organization that is flexible and able to adapt to changing audiences and issues. To achieve this lifeline will require a reasoned strategy, well supported by all tiers of leadership, and with a timeline that understands it will not happen overnight but is an investment for the long term. With support, the parks can remain relevant and their future secured.

Recommendations

- The National Park Service must commit itself to a broad-scale and powerful program of communication with the American public.
- The Service should review the historic findings and recommendations contained in the appendix to this paper as well as contemporary information and develop a single long-range strategy for implementation.
- The NPS should aggressively build partnerships with academic institutions, sociologists, educators and others to strategically place interpretation and education efforts ahead of the changes that will dramatically affect the parks before they are upon them.
- A clear message must be sent throughout the Service that all employees are interpreters and educators as part of their duties.
- Leadership across all levels must support and encourage interpretation and education beyond park boundaries, including options for those who access parks digitally.

- Investment in training, professionalism and certification of park interpreters and educators must be considered essential to the long-range survival of parks, not optional.
- Reinvestment and flexibility must be developed to support regional teams in teaching an updated interpretation and education skills curriculum to employees and partners.
- Interpretive and educational offerings must be free to all interested parties without the application of special fees or other obstacles.
- As a core and essential operation, professional uniformed personnel who represent the Service first and foremost should perform interpretive and educational offerings.
- The Service must embrace the broadest use of available communication options and technologies to reach the diverse public where and how it gets its information.

Appendix

Symposia And Conferences Over The Last Ten Years On The State Of NPS Interpretation & Education

1. *Findings and Recommendations; Education Initiative Symposium (September 25-27, 1997)*

- NPS natural and cultural resources are at the heart of what has been called the nation's greatest university without walls.
- The NPS has always provided authentic learning experiences through access to natural resources and original documents and artifacts.
- Recommendations:
- Expand the relevance of the National Park System to an increasingly diverse population.
- Offer better access to cultural and environmental stories and reach people who may not visit the parks.
- Increase connections between the National Park Service and educators.
- Increase the skills of NPS employees and the effectiveness of NPS programs.
- Help build a national ethic of resource stewardship.

2. *Renewing Our Education Mission; Report to the National Leadership Council (June 2003)*

Vision: Interpretation and Education is a primary organizational purpose of the National Park Service, essential to the achieving our mission of protection and preserving our nation's natural and cultural resources.

National Strategic Actions:

- [Establish] Asset Mapping
- [Upgrade] Program Evaluation
- [Require] Comprehensive Interpretive Plans
- [Require] Interpretive Development Programs
- Identify Strategic Education Partners
- Design and Produce a Business Plan for Education
- Recognize and Share Best Practices
- Significantly Expand Use of the Internet
- Expand State NPS Education Program Guides
- Develop a Communications Strategy

3. *Learning Together: Proceedings, Evaluation, and Applying Lessons Learned; NPS Interpretation and Education Summit (October 2006)*

The overarching goal of the Summit was to generate useful dialogue about "creating a culture of evaluation" within Interpretation and Education characterized by continuous learning and decision-making based on audience analysis and outcome data.

- Major Theme 1 – Participants seemed enthusiastically engaged in the concept of creating a culture of evaluation.
- Major Theme 2 – Participants voiced concern about how such a change will be implemented.

4. *Interpretation and Education Program Business Plan: Helping People Enjoy, Care About, and Care for National Parks (Fall 2006)*

Interpretation & Education Program Business Plan Objectives:

- Provide an overview of the I&E Program and a synopsis of its funding history.
- Present a picture of current I&E Program operations.
- Identify I&E Program priorities and strategies and establish a framework of investments that will invigorate and strengthen interpretation and education programs Servicewide.

Executive Summary Highlights:

- Between Fiscal Years 1999 and 2004, the cost of employing a full time interpretation and education position rose 19.8 percent.
- This increased cost, over the same time period, outpaced the inflation-adjusted Operation of the National Park Service (ONPS) budget growth of 16.9 percent.
- Between FY 1999 and FY 2004 the I&E Program experienced a loss of 205 full time interpretive positions Servicewide.
- Much of this reduction occurred through the loss of temporary and seasonal positions, affecting public access to interpretation and education rangers at peak seasons.
- While permanent and temporary positions were reduced, lower graded public contact positions increased.
- Many interpreters, educators, managers, and leaders are concerned the professional standards and expertise of ranger interpreters and educators are being threatened.

Recommendations:

- Create I&E core function statements and operating standards.
- Commit to staffing levels that support core function and operating standards.
- Develop a more effective and comprehensive inventory of I&E practitioners and data collections system.
- Leverage partnership relationships.
- Add Volunteer Coordinators.
- Create a distance learning platform.
- Simplify the Peer Review Certification Program and require employee certification.
- Evaluate I&E Program Effectiveness.
- Study National Park Service audiences.
- Create I&E Technology Strategy.
- Upgrade interpretive media.
- Sustain and enhance an informed leadership.
- Fund interpretive planning.
- Embrace efforts to create a culture of philanthropy.

5. *Interpretation and Education Renaissance Action Plan (Fall 2006)*

This renaissance will serve millions of additional visitors, helping the American public engage with relevant meanings, so that they might come to support and care for parks.

Action Plan:

- Engage people in order to make enduring connections to America's special places.
- Use new technologies.
- Embrace Interpretation and Education Partners.
- Develop and Implement Professional Standards.

- Create a culture of evaluation.

Findings and Strategic Recommendations:

- Develop core operating standards and measures for delivering quality interpretation and education programs.
- Provide staffing and operating resources necessary to achieve program standards.
- Expand Interpretation and Education partner training and credentialing programs.
- Adopt a program of evaluation to achieve greater accountability and program improvement in Interpretation and Education.
- Improve interpretive media to meet Twenty-First Century standards.
- Encourage and adopt innovation interpretive and educational technology.
- Design Interpretation and Education programs to serve all Americans.
- Enable Interpretation and Education partners to effectively support the NPS education mission.
- Create and support organizational change

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.