



Professional Report Series – Number 6

Reasserting International Environmental and Park Leadership

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to suggest ways that the National Park Service (NPS) can reinvigorate its international conservation assistance program. It is the product of consultation between former employees of the NPS who had significant experience in international conservation work and current employees of the agency. Its purpose is not to criticize the current efforts of the NPS in the field but to offer recommendations on how the program can be strengthened.

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.

The Author

The paper was prepared for and with the concurrence of CNPSR by Rick Smith, retired Superintendent, Carlsbad Caverns National Park. In addition, Rick has had significant experience in international parks issues for over 40 years.

A Brief History

The U.S. National Park Service was once a leader in the world conservation movement. It sent its employees around the world to assist their colleagues in park planning, operations, concession management, and administration. Many foreign protected-area professionals came to the US to study park operations to determine which strategies in park management could be applicable to conservation issues in their home countries. The staff in the NPS's Office of International Affairs (OIA) in Washington D.C. was composed of senior NPS officials who managed the significant programs and responsibilities of the office. For a number of years, the OIA program received a discrete appropriation from the Congress to promote international protected area management. The OIA chief was a member of the Director's senior staff and regularly attended the Director's staff meetings. The OIA staff often traveled to employee training sessions to promote the idea of international conservation cooperation. Rank and file employees eagerly sought temporary foreign assignments as they looked upon the experience as not only personally rewarding but also career enhancing. The OIA staff could always count on park staffs to host foreign protected area professionals, many of whom stayed in employee housing with their hosts. It was a win-win situation for all.

Why was there such interest in international conservation? There was, of course, the lure of foreign travel. Many NPS employees visited countries they never would have known had they not traveled on an OIA assignment. They came face to face with different cultures, mores, and attitudes. They worked in professional environments distinctly different than those of their U.S. parks. They listened to exotic languages spoken by people of different races and colors. It was probably the quickest way to learn that "this is the way we have always done it in Yellowstone" was not the appropriate response to natural or cultural resources issues in other countries. Park planners from the NPS had to learn that cultural norms influenced planning decisions in ways with which they were unfamiliar. Rangers in the protection and interpretation professions had to learn that approaches to park visitors which were effective in the U.S. were often counterproductive in other countries.

Of course, this travel was not always pleasant. NPS employees sometimes got sick from different water and food. Some cultural differences made them uncomfortable. Living conditions in many of the assigned areas were, at best, marginal. Language difficulties were common, and OIA travelers often could not be confident of the translation services that were available. Yet, the idea of assisting in the promotion of the natural and cultural patrimony of their host countries was enough to help them look past these obstacles and concentrate on their assigned tasks.

NPS employees also eagerly sought foreign assignments because it gave them the opportunity to share what they knew with their colleagues in other countries. The National Park Service has extensive experience in managing national park areas. Its employees are the beneficiaries of these years of experience. Many of the strategies and tactics that have evolved over these years are applicable in the protected areas of other countries, particularly those regarding the management of natural and cultural resources, concessions, leadership and management and protected-area planning.

This was, of course, a two-way street. Those NPS employees on temporary assignment learned new strategies for dealing with conservation issues. Many countries to which they were assigned did not have the economic resources to apply to protected-area issues that were available in the U.S. Foreign protected-area professionals often had to be much more innovative and creative than did their U.S. counterparts due to fiscal or human restraints. Their U.S. colleagues learned from these experiences and often returned to their home parks with less costly ways to deal with issues similar to those they had seen during their temporary assignments.

The Benefits

All of this was enormously beneficial to the U.S. National Park Service. Its employees returned from these assignments with a much broader view of conservation strategies and tactics. They found that the U.S. national park model was not applicable in most places in the world. These employees were much more comfortable with the fact that new parks being created in the U.S. system often did not include wholesale land acquisition; park officials therefore had to promote public involvement and partnering to achieve protection and preservation goals, strategies that were often more aggressively pursued in the countries in which they had worked. They learned that the first excuse should not always be, "we don't have enough money." They also returned much more tolerant of racial and cultural differences, a real plus for the NPS as it pursued its equal opportunity goals and sought to promote the appeal of parks to a broader segment of American society.

OIA's Role

Several of OIA's programs enhanced the Service's role in international conservation. Based on a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Peace Corps, the NPS furnished a full-time employee who worked with the Peace Corps' programming and training divisions to develop natural resources programs and train potential volunteers for service in host countries. This program became the largest natural resources conservation corps in the world. The NPS employed US-owned foreign currencies to enter into cooperative arrangements with India that included cultural resources work on that country's most important icon, the Taj Mahal. The NPS provided significant assistance to countries such as Thailand, Sri Lanka and Panama under agreements with the U.S. Agency for International Development. The NPS, in coordination with its counterpart agencies in Canada and Mexico, offered a biannual mobile parks seminar for foreign protected-area professionals facilitated through the University of Michigan. The seminar traveled through the parks of Canada, Mexico and the U.S., allowing the visiting professionals to discuss common problems with protected-area managers and to observe potential solutions that might be applicable upon their return home.

None of this was accomplished without significant leadership in the Office of International Affairs. At what many observers consider to be the high-water mark for effectiveness in this office, the 1980s, the staff consisted of international conservation experts, desk officers with significant park field experience, and senior managers who were respected by their peers throughout the Service. OIA was the Director's Servicewide program of cooperation and collaboration on an international level. Many of the Department of the Interior's international programs had their origins in the NPS's Office of International Affairs. OIA raised external funds when they were needed, such as when standard budgets wouldn't support initiatives. It used the best and most well-suited personnel overseas, not just those who weren't needed elsewhere or who were being rewarded for other accomplishments. NPS was the most sought-after and respected conservation organization in the world during this time.

A Reduced Role for the NPS

After the 1980's, however, the NPS began to shrink its role in international conservation. In 1993, at the Vail conference to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the establishment of the NPS, the then-Director of the Costa Rican National Park Service, Alvaro Ugalde, noted in his speech that the NPS was no longer a leader in the international parks movement and remarked how much the Service's expertise was missed in places like Costa Rica. Individual parks continued to work with foreign protected areas that shared similar resources. U.S. park rangers actively participated in the programs of the non-profit International Ranger Federation. Foreign park professionals still visited

U.S. parks to seek solutions to resource issues. But these activities were not joined programmatically at the NPS headquarters level as they had been previously.

What caused this decline in emphasis on international programs? In some cases, the NPS Directorate lost interest in or was hostile to NPS international programs. In Congressional hearings, several key Members of Congress all but ordered the NPS to severely limit international work, an example of the failure on the part of the NPS to cultivate allies for such activity. As NPS budget woes mounted, NPS leadership found it easy to reduce spending on international travel and activity. OIA itself suffered a leadership crisis. A former director of the office failed to maintain many of the office's key programs such as cooperation with the Peace Corps.

Factors outside the NPS also contributed to the NPS's decreased role in international conservation. Other federal agencies such as the U.S. Forest Service and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service became much more active in international work, especially as international conservation efforts were directed more toward the "protected area" concept as opposed to the more traditional national park model. NPS employees had less expertise in promoting multiple-use conservation. The large non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the World Wildlife Fund, Conservation International, and The Nature Conservancy also began to play a much more significant role in international conservation. Their employees could travel and work without the cumbersome bureaucratic restrictions that NPS employees often faced. The NGO employees could also be recruited in part because of their language skills, an area in which the NPS has struggled. In many parts of the world, people view the U.S. much less sympathetically and favorably than they did previously. Their governments are less likely to seek U.S. assistance in many areas, including that of conservation.

The Present

Fortunately, it appears that there is a growing realization in the NPS that international work helps the agency accomplish its domestic mission. The NPS, for instance, can better protect migratory species if it maintains sound relationships with its counterpart agencies in other parts of the world. There is a reawakening of interest in programs that promote employee growth and development through international work. Within the NPS, work has restarted on the World Heritage (WH) Convention; the NPS is preparing the U.S.'s first nominations to the WH list in almost 15 years. A number of individual parks have forged close relations with their "sister" parks in other countries, relationships that often include employee exchanges; an example is the sister park program with Mexican parks. Along similar lines, the "park flight" program has facilitated cooperation between NPS and Latin American experts on migratory birds. And the OIA website is arguably the best in the NPS.

The Recommendations

There is, yet, much to be done. The authors believe that the implementation of the following recommendations would significantly reinvigorate the NPS international conservation program.

- **Encourage international conservation work** for NPS employees, recognizing that such experience adds measurably to the knowledge, skills, and abilities that successful NPS career employees apply to their current and future positions.
- **Develop alliances with members of Congress and their staffs.** These are the people who ultimately authorize and finance the work of the NPS. They must believe that international conservation efforts promote sound domestic preservation and protection programs and policies and are not simply foreign boondoggles for NPS employees.
- **Promote an understanding of the importance of international conservation** with the DOI political leadership, particularly with the Assistant Secretary for Fish, Wildlife, and Parks and

his/her staff. Without this political support, the international program will not achieve its goals and objectives.

- **Staff OIA** with a combination of people with international experience and senior managers and leaders. Such a combination inspires confidence in the office's programs and makes recruitment for potential overseas assignments easier.
- **"Sell" international conservation programs** to NPS employees. The OIA staff needs to seek invitations to employee training sessions. They should attend relevant non-NPS meetings such as the annual rendezvous of the Association of National Park Rangers. They should be the principal advocates for international conservation.
- **Allocate a portion of the Centennial challenge fund** to international conservation work. For instance, the NPS could establish a seed fund for parks to use in the development of sister park arrangements. The great advantage of the sister park relationship is that it is more than a "one shot" consultancy. The sister parks work together over a long period of time. The NPS could also earmark funds to establish a volunteer program for park professionals from the developing world. Such employees usually cannot finance the travel expenses to come to volunteer in stateside parks. The result is that most such volunteers come from first-world countries and a large part of the world is excluded from this rich learning experience.
- **Explore with potential partners** the possibility of reestablishing some kind of international seminar. One of the highlights of the previous international seminar was the exchange of opinions and points of view among not only the seminar participants but also with their park hosts in Canada, Mexico and the U.S. This kind of dialog is immensely helpful in promoting conservation across international borders, a plus in a world that is increasingly interconnected.
- **Establish close working relations** with protected-area agencies and their staffs in the Western Hemisphere. These people are in the same business that the NPS is in. There ought to be constant dialog at the program management level.
- **Play an active role** in the work of organizations such as the World Commission on Protected Areas, the Man and the Biosphere program, the World Heritage Center, and the International Council on Monuments & Sites. These organizations provide significant assistance to conservation efforts in many places in the world.

The famous American environmentalist, Aldo Leopold, once said that the first rule of intelligent tinkering is to save all the parts. That's what protected-area and park professionals all over the world are doing—saving all the parts. The U.S. was one of the first nations to embark upon this journey of preserving and protecting its natural and cultural heritages so that future generations could enjoy them. The NPS owes it to the world to share what it has learned in the last 90-plus years. It also should not squander the opportunity to learn from the experiences of others. A vigorous NPS international program would accomplish both these goals; world conservation would be the better for it.