

ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION IN THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

The National Park Service has been providing educational opportunities ever since its establishment in 1916. Much of this has been in the form of traditional interpretive programs such as guided walks, evening programs, and exhibitry/media. In the late 1960's, the National Park Service embarked upon a formal Environmental Education Program which was centralized in the Washington Office. Between 1968 and 1975, a series of Servicewide programs were developed. They included the:

- * National Environmental Study Area (NESA) program
- * National Environmental Education Development (NEED) curriculum
- * National Environmental Education Landmark (NEEL) initiative
- * Students Toward Environmental Participation (STEP) movement

With the advent of the Bicentennial of the Nation in 1976, educational priorities changed, and the Washington Office no longer promoted Environmental Education throughout the Service. However, many local park outreach programs continued to flourish during the 1980s and into the 1990s based on the programs listed above.

In 1989, George Bush was sworn in as President after running a campaign based on a strong educational platform. In response to the new "Education President," the Department of the Interior began a program of re-evaluating its role in education.

Once again, the Washington Office is promoting Environmental Education activities across the System by providing budgetary and training support for its field interpreters and educators. National Parks having a natural resource base conduct extensive Environmental Education programs throughout the United States.

In late 1989, the National Park Service formed an Education Task Force. This Task Force outlined four goals for the present and future National Park Education Program:

Goal #1--Promote the parks as learning laboratories to develop greater public awareness, understanding, appreciation and commitment to the preservation and/or restoration of the National Park System and the larger environment on which it depends; and assist the public to see how it fits into the larger global community by moving it from awareness to action on resource protection and management concerns through interpretation of both local and global resource issues.

Goal #2--Promote President Bush's call for an improved education system in this country by assisting teachers in the development of more interactive lesson plans which incorporate park resources; also provide training in education philosophy and techniques for NPS

staff.

Goal #3--Promote and provide NPS leadership nationally and internationally in education programs.

Goal #4--Integrate research and interpretive programs of NPS into the broader education goals of communities and schools through partnership approaches.

These goals are presently being met through the NPS "Parks as Classrooms" Education Initiative, which is in the process of establishing:

- * an NPS Educational Grant Program administered at the Washington level to assist parks in the establishment of new programs and in the development of educational materials;
- * national and regional NPS Education Specialists to provide guidance to parks, to administer grant monies, and to act as liaisons with non-NPS educators and groups;
- * education materials related to the NPS mission to bolster and supplement local park programs;
- * "Demonstration Parks" that operate as learning laboratories for teachers and park employees where educational materials are developed cooperatively to integrate park resources into school curricula;
- * grant programs whereby parks may offer transportation monies to bring students to parks.

The National Park Service is working closely with other agencies in the Department of the Interior, as well as agencies such as the Department of Education and the Environmental Protection Agency, to assure its programs are integrated into the overall Environmental Education endeavor.

Of all the bureaus within the Department of the Interior, the National Park Service is uniquely qualified to help meet and support the education goals of the President and Secretary. Park sites naturally lend themselves to providing environmental educational experiences to schools and other educational groups throughout the country. The Service has a strong and continuous tradition of providing environmental education opportunities to park visitors, the general public, and local schools through its educational outreach programs.

For more information, contact:

Michael D. Watson
Chief, Division of Interpretation
National Park Service
202/523-5270