

The Natural Resource Challenge & Beginning of the Inventory & Monitoring (I&M) Networks - In Two Pages

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Dick Sellars' seminal book, Preserving Nature in the National Parks, was published in 1997. Dick was a well-respected NPS historian who wrote this book as his primary NPS responsibility in response to Alston Chase's Playing God in Yellowstone, which was highly critical of NPS natural resource management. Dick's time (and the big financial investment in that time for years) was supported by then-Southwest Regional Director John Cook, who was essentially Dick's patron and an advocate to the Directorate that his findings should be heeded.

Preserving Nature was also critical, but it was credible because it was written by a trusted insider. NPS Director Bob Stanton read it and declared that we needed to "rejuvenate" natural resources programs in the NPS. He tasked Associate Director for Natural Resource Stewardship & Science Mike Soukup (in late 1997 or early 1998) with convening a task group from the regions to identify what the NPS should do for that "rejuvenation" effort. As Chief of Natural and Cultural Resources at Shenandoah, I drafted some suggestions (upon request) for Northeast Regional Director Marie Rust to put forward.

I had given this a lot of thought, as my good friend Dick Sellars and I had sat in adjacent offices in Santa Fe for several years while he was writing his book, and we often discussed what we might do to change the NPS if we ever were given the chance. At Shenandoah, my program included one of the first four prototype I&M programs, and expanding I&M Servicewide was an obvious place we needed to go. Soon thereafter, perhaps related to my written suggestions or not, I don't know, Mike Soukup asked me to come to WASO to work on what he called the "natural resource initiative." Dick was an advisor, and Gary Davis of Channel Islands NP (another prototype I&M park) and I facilitated the first meeting.

Our first group struggled. The group had varying backgrounds; some were there to advocate for natural resources, others perhaps to make sure nothing got out of hand. Identifying what the NPS should do was easy, and nothing new. Identifying how to get it accomplished was not easy, however. We wrestled with the research vs. resource management battles of the time and made little progress.

Soon thereafter, three of the most powerful men in the NPS met in a bar. (No, this is not the beginning of a joke.) John Cook, Deny Galvin (Deputy Director), and Bruce Sheaffer (Comptroller) emerged from that libation-fueled meeting with bullet points written on a napkin. They distilled our first NRI draft report down into 12 programs they could get behind, and more importantly, they thought they could build a successful funding strategy around. Deny gave the napkin to Mike, who gave it to me, and we now had a clear direction, though the tactics needed to be developed. I do wish I had saved the napkin.

Abby Miller (Mike Soukup's Deputy) and I were tasked with fleshing out the 12 points and developing proposals and budgets. We formed 12 task groups, co-chaired by a natural resource subject matter expert and a park superintendent. It was my idea to bring superintendents into this as they were the power base of the NPS and nothing would succeed with field support unless we had superintendents buying in. Abby worked closely with half of the groups, and I worked with the other half. We gave them a specific charge and a tight deadline and then aggregated their recommendations, which totaled, if I recall, somewhere in the \$180-200 million/year range. Abby and I eliminated duplication and some suggestions that were not germane or feasible, and (working within parameters from Deny and Bruce) developed a proposal that was in the \$100m range. We developed a crosswalk where we provided rapid feedback to the 12 groups, explaining how we had converted their ideas into the consolidated product, as a means of maintaining the buy-in and connection with the field.

To maintain and expand that field buy-in, and to refine the proposal, I was tasked with carrying the NRI message to every meeting around the NPS whose agenda I could get myself on – natural resources, cultural resources, superintendents, and anyone else. Each group was different and the give-and-take was hugely important in

improving the proposal and building support. As is their wont, many natural resource managers would see that the proposal did not contain everything they hoped for, and often their initial reaction was therefore negative. I spent considerable energy assuaging their concerns and (when needed) offering a stark political reality: compromise was necessary for success. We had the support of the senior leadership of the NPS for perhaps \$100m per year – once we built the foundation, we'd be in a stronger place to come back in the future for anything we couldn't get at this point.

Abby and I developed a five-year funding proposal for what, at that point, was being called the Natural Resource Challenge and which was vetted and refined by Mike Soukup, Deny Galvin, and Bruce Sheaffer and a new, carefully selected, steering committee. We went through countless versions of the budget and narrative, keeping the members of all the teams engaged throughout, which was a huge but vitally important effort.

I recall a breakfast with Bob Stanton prior to a steering committee meeting in Williamsburg, VA, where I offered the suggestion that we expand the Challenge to include cultural resources. After some thought, he responded that the NPS cultural resources programs were, at that time, well-respected outside the NPS and did not need the shot in the arm that the natural resource programs did.

A key strategic move to build support for the Challenge was the informal designation of Doug Morris of SHEN and Don Neubacher of PORE to be the liaisons with Congress. Doug and Don were well-respected senior superintendents with track records of support for strong resource-based management. Doug and Don made numerous trips to Capitol Hill to brief key legislative staffers and members, which was part of Bruce and Deny's strategy to get support for the funding in the NPS budget. Director Stanton also insisted that his entire national leadership team, including all the regional directors, literally sign on to supporting the NRC.

One of the high priorities to implement the 12 points was to expand the national I&M program beyond the prototypes. By this time, the 4 prototypes (SHEN, GRSM, CHIS, and DENA) had expanded (to 7?), including the Prairie Cluster in the Midwest Region. We recognized that it would never be possible to establish I&M programs at the SHEN level for every park, or even every large park. Hence the Prairie Cluster was a compelling model for an I&M network that served multiple parks in a biogeographic area.

Another high priority was to create as many geographically-based Research Learning Centers as possible, but reality dictated that these, too, had to be dispersed and designed to serve multiple parks. There were many maps of biogeographic divisions and at some point we settled on the goal of 32 I&M networks, each of which would have an RLC. Knowing it would be impossible to ramp up all at once, and we had to build a track record of success before we could credibly convince Congress to provide the entire \$100m/year, the plan was to fund several networks a year until all were funded.

Director Bob Stanton announced the Natural Resource Challenge publicly at the 100th anniversary celebration for Mt. Rainier National Park (MORA) on August 12, 1999. The goal was to get \$20m in the FY2000 budget to implement the first steps in the NRC action plan. I wrote the relevant portions of the Director's speech and the press release and co-wrote (with Abby) the action plan. Dick Sellars and I had the honor of accompanying the Director to MORA. In an interesting harbinger of things to come, Jon Jarvis, now the Director of the NPS, served as the host of the celebration and NRC announcement, as he was serving then as MORA Superintendent.

NRC Action Plan: <http://www.nature.nps.gov/challenge/assets/actionplan/>
Press Release: <http://www.nature.nps.gov/challenge/pressrelease.cfm>
NLC signatures: http://www.nature.nps.gov/challenge/assets/actionplan/index_frames.htm