

THE  
INTERPRETIVE  
CHALLENGE

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NATIONAL PARK SERVICE





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**CONSIDER THE SEQUOIA CONE**

*Not a beginning, not an ending,  
it is a sequence in the continuity of yesterdays  
and contains the seeds of tomorrow.*

**LIKEWISE, CONSIDER INTERPRETATION**

*Not just appreciating the past, not only understanding the present,  
it is an enrichment of the mind and spirit  
and contains a mirror of our future.*

Printed at no expense to the federal government through the generosity of the following:

Arizona Memorial Museum Association  
Jefferson National Expansion Historical Association  
Sequoia Natural History Association  
Southwest Parks and Monuments Association  
and the  
Parks and History Association



## THE INTERPRETIVE CHALLENGE

As the National Park Service approaches its 75th anniversary, existing and new pressures increase the difficulty of meeting our dual mandate – to preserve the resources of a diverse park system while providing for public enjoyment. Today, as it has been throughout the Park Service's history, interpretation can be a powerful tool in helping achieve this crucial mission. Yet if interpretation, that unique function of NPS operations that interacts among the resource, the visitor, and park management, is to be effective, it must meet the highest standards of the profession.

Responsibility for meeting this challenge falls to managers at all levels within the National Park Service. Field interpretive specialists, park superintendents, regional directors, and the NPS directorate have renewed intensive and spirited efforts to revitalize interpretive programs and activities. Everyone agrees that the most important aspects to interpretive excellence rest within the parks themselves. The leadership of park superintendents, the personal efforts of park employees, and the subtle but powerful messages conveyed in the quality of facility design and maintenance all affect park visitors.

Field interpreters and superintendents agree on the organizational and programmatic issues of greatest importance in helping to improve interpretation. The common recurring issues and concerns identified include

- research, planning, and development for interpretive techniques and programs
- the quality of interpretive services and media
- the role of interpretation in park management
- interpreter training and supervision
- interpretive media production and rehabilitation

*The Interpretive Challenge* presents a strategy to address and resolve five areas of concern – professional excellence, evaluation, education, program integration, and media. Specific goals and the actions needed to attain them are presented. Many of the goals identified within these challenges can be achieved, over time, given present levels of funding. However, it is estimated that bringing all units of the national park system to a desired standard of quality interpretation within the next five years will require additional funds including the allocation of fee money.

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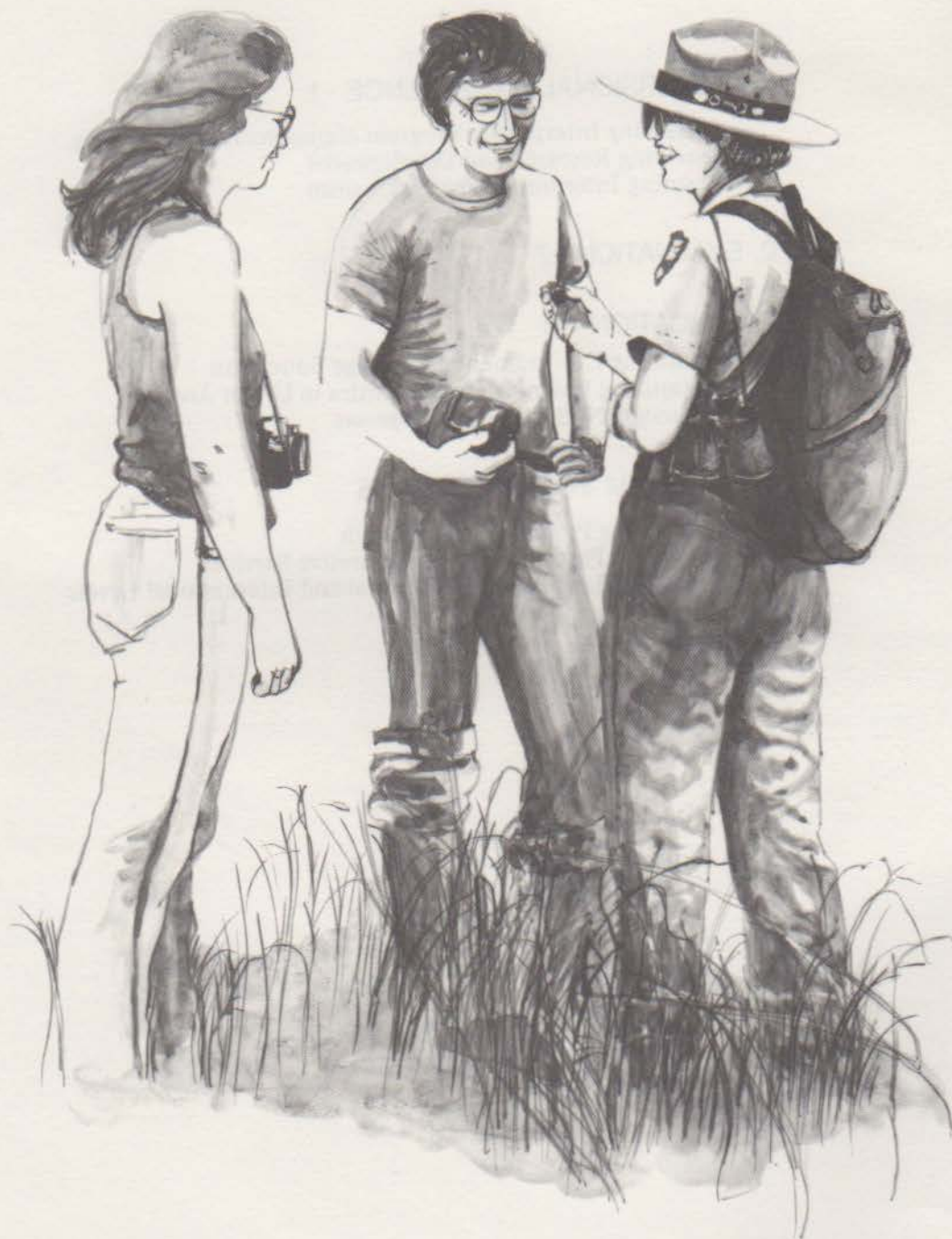
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## INTERPRETIVE CHALLENGE 1

## PROFESSIONAL EXCELLENCE

Interpretation is a professional activity requiring individuals who respect park resources and visitors, who possess knowledge from which to interpret, who skillfully communicate, and who contribute to the growth, development, and advancement of their profession. This first interpretive challenge addresses the need to provide adequate research and development regarding interpretation, to maintain interpretive professionalism, to improve interpretive fiscal and personnel management and staffing, and to expand career opportunities in interpretation.

### ENHANCING INTERPRETIVE PROGRAM MANAGEMENT AND STAFFING

Often the success of the National Park Service and its interpretive operations falls largely on the shoulders of the front-line interpreters, many of whom are temporary, seasonal, or volunteer. These employees deserve the best training and supervision possible.

All employees provide or may be called upon to provide some level of interpretation to park visitors. Similarly, park interpreters are members of the park operations team. As such, they should be skilled in program integration and administration.

As visitation continues to grow, added duties impinge on the entire park staff. Interpreters have been assigned new responsibilities and other responsibilities have been expanded. There is a need to support these new responsibilities with formal training, developmental experiences, and career opportunities. The interpretive staff needs to be free to effectively and efficiently exercise their primary responsibilities.

#### GOALS

To establish and/or maintain interpretive operations that will be managed and supervised by qualified interpretive managers in all parks, regional offices, and the Washington office.

To improve the overall performance of interpreters

#### ACTIONS

Review, evaluate, and comment on all proposed conversions of interpretive staff organizations at all levels and the selection and placement of individuals in interpretive program management positions

Establish minimum standards of training and experience needed by interpretive managers and supervisors to ensure that applicants possess minimum qualifications to carry out the NPS mission and the individual park's interpretive programs

Reclassify positions based on redefined work responsibilities using the current personnel system

Increase the number of supervisory and operational positions and improve the supervision of increasing numbers of employees and volunteers

Reconvene the Interpretive Training Committee to analyze, assess, and update the 1985 plan for recommended core competency training programs for interpreters



Develop new correspondence courses in cooperation with the Employee Development Division

Train interpreters to become more knowledgeable and effective in the budget formulation process

Produce a film that clearly defines the work of a park ranger to attract and recruit outstanding candidates for seasonal and permanent interpretive positions

Institute new awards and honors that recognize the outstanding contributions of interpreters, program managers, and interpretive planners and designers

To improve the quality of professionalism and supervisory capabilities of mid-level interpretive managers

Initiate a two-year interpretive development program to prepare interpreters for management positions

To plan, program, and monitor fee income money to meet park interpretive goals

Prepare an annual plan and priorities to achieve servicewide projects

Prepare an annual park program to guide expenditure of fee monies for enhanced interpretive media and expanded visitor services



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## THE INTERPRETER'S DILEMMA

*Park interpreters share a common dilemma: resource issues are readily identifiable; finding optimal ways to communicate these issues is far more complex. Optimal solutions are dependent on easy, frequent*

*communications among practitioners – in print, in cross-training, in task-oriented workshops, and in daily contacts.*

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## PROVIDING RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

There is a need for a focused and coordinated effort to provide the following:

- research about visitor values, travel patterns, demographics, interests, potentials for learning, and media preferences
- effective evaluation of interpretive services
- experimentation with new media and communications techniques
- advance planning for interpretive problems and concerns, using people who are most knowledgeable

### GOALS

To analyze information about visitors' needs and activities, convey the implications, and integrate this knowledge into interpretive planning, training, and park operations

### ACTIONS

Establish an Interpretation and Visitor Services Institute (IVSI), managed by Interpretation, in close cooperation with other operational areas, which will emulate the organizational concepts of cooperative park studies units and will be the focal point for work of many groups and individuals

Coordinate and optimize the application of the NPS Visitor Services Project as a part of the IVSI

Conduct research regarding visitors' understandings and insights after visits to park areas

Support sociological studies relevant to local population perceptions of the national park system and develop strategies to build bridges between these populations and local park areas

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To review and evaluate interpretive products and services produced or provided by other public organizations and appropriate private institutions

Seek and develop innovative interpretive techniques and media

To analyze state-of-the-art information processes and services

Increase use of computers and pertinent software in park interpretive operations

Study the feasibility and desirability of interactive computer systems for use by park visitors

Study various desktop publishing softwares and determine best method of use for interpretive park operations

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#### IN SEARCH OF PROGRAM RELEVANCE

*National celebrations and servicewide initiatives should be planned to ensure the best and broadest applications. Key interpreters from parks of various resources and themes will use the Interpretation and Visitor Services Institute to foster and examine approaches to interpreting special initiatives. Celebrations and servicewide themes must be*

*integrated with and relevant to existing programs. In this manner, such temporal events are blended with, not superimposed upon, continuing, primary, site-specific interpretive efforts. The institute will, among many other tasks, enhance development of specific how-to recommendations suitable for implementation, evaluation, and refinement.*

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## ENSURING INTERPRETIVE PROFESSIONALISM

The conduct of successful, fundamental interpretive operations is dependent upon having an adequate number of highly qualified interpreters, tightly managing collateral duties, and offering development programs for continued professional growth and satisfaction. There needs to be a renewed servicewide effort to fill positions with the most highly qualified candidates who have good communication skills and knowledge about the resources specific to that park. Matching qualified interpreters with duties that relate to their field of expertise and enhancing in-house communications among interpreters offer greater likelihood of successful interpretation. Efforts to strengthen and maintain quality interpretive operations need to recognize that parks have differing requirements.

### GOALS

To ensure a better match between the capabilities and interests of the interpretive specialist and the requirements of the work to be performed

To enhance ability to carry out our domestic mission through professional growth of employees

To foster an exchange of ideas and interpretive methods

To improve training-by-detail assignments for interpreters

### ACTIONS

Conduct a work-force planning effort to determine attrition rates, project career opportunities, profile a qualified interpreter, design a leadership program for eventual organizational needs, and ensure that recruitment activities reach all populations

Establish professional contacts with the National Association for Interpretation and Heritage Interpretation International

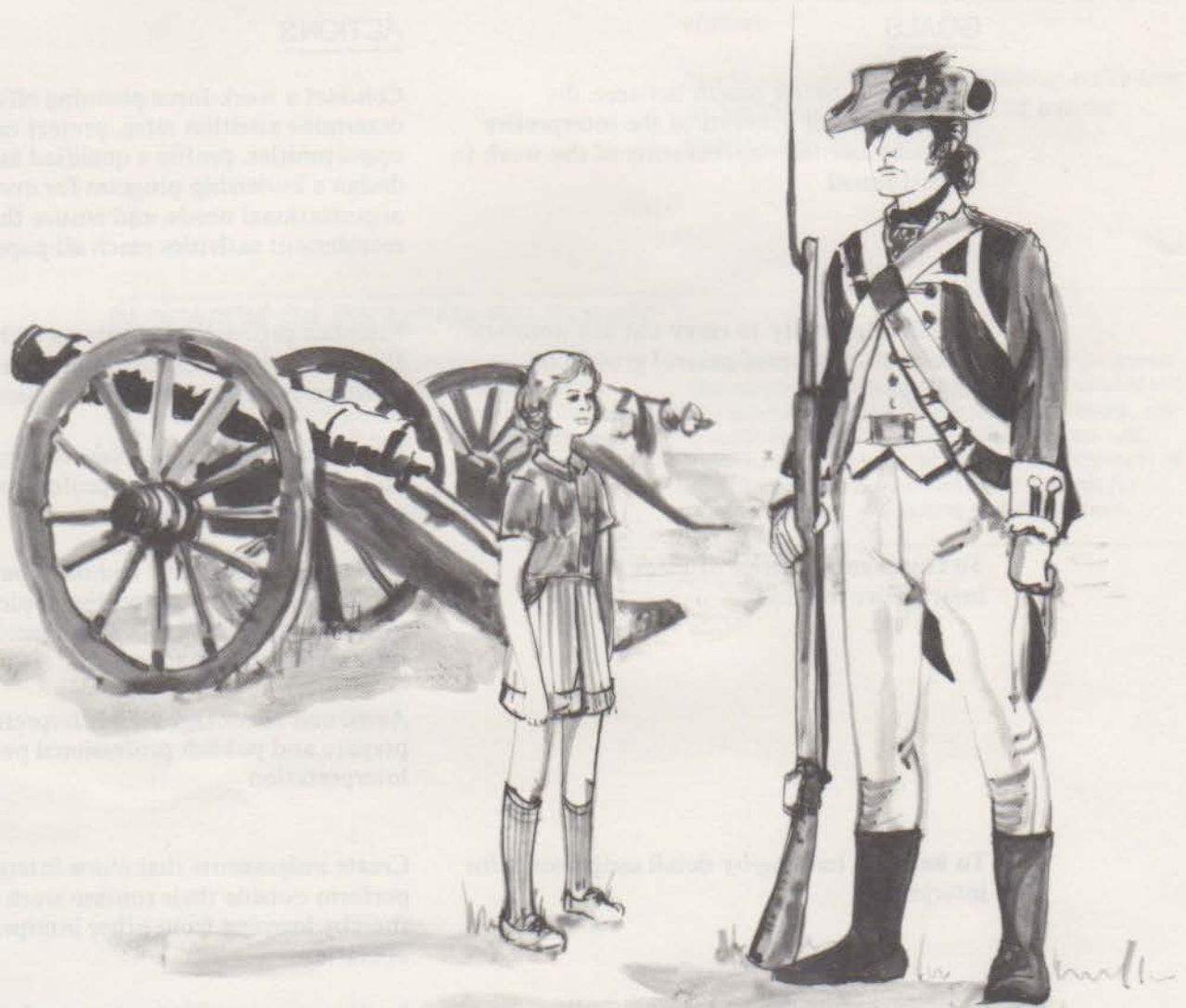
Participate fully in professional organizations and provide leadership at professional workshops and conferences

Publish an interpretive technical bulletin that focuses on timely interpretive topics and provides new techniques and a means for informational exchange

Assist and encourage NPS interpreters to prepare and publish professional papers on interpretation

Create assignments that allow interpreters to perform outside their routine work areas and thereby learning from other interpretive operations

Institute servicewide temporary details in regions and Washington to improve and develop management potential







## INTERPRETIVE CHALLENGE 2 EVALUATION

Interpretation deals with *impact*, *understanding*, and *goodwill* – impact of programs on visitor values and enjoyment, impact of visitors on resources, impact of interpreters on park management; understanding of visitors, understanding of resources, understanding of the National Park Service and its goals; and goodwill between people and organizations. The problem is how to measure impact, understanding, and goodwill.

The park superintendent is the key to any evaluation program. When asked, a superintendent should be able to define the standards of quality interpretation and identify what is needed to meet those standards.

### GOALS

Bring interpretive services throughout the national park system to a consistent level of quality

Develop a system that provides periodic feedback about the quality of personal and nonpersonal interpretive services and other interpretation

### ACTIONS

Ensure essential interpretive services are consistent with NPS "Management Policies" and NPS-6, "Interpretation and Visitor Services Guidelines"

Identify the criteria that contribute to high-quality interpretive services

Incorporate well-articulated standards for interpretive services in the existing "Operations Evaluation Manual," "Annual Statements for Interpretation," and the Maintenance Management System

Ensure regional office interpreter participation in the current Operations Evaluation process

Foster better use of interpretive resources through the Operations Evaluation system

Collaborate with professional interpreters inside and outside of the National Park Service to determine parameters and techniques for evaluation

Measure the effectiveness of interpretive services and analyze operational trends from the standpoint of management, education, and inspirational values

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Initiate a quality promotion program throughout the parks to define, encourage, and pass on the best ideas

Analyze the performance characteristics of various media

Evaluate relationships between prime visitor interpretive sites (e.g., park entrances, overlooks, and visitor centers) and the appropriateness of traditional media

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## QUALITY PROMOTION PROGRAM

*Pervasive in its absence, quality assessment is the most notable and, as yet, unmet challenge to improving the effectiveness, efficiency, and reliability of interpretation. As the communications arm of the National Park Service, interpretation must be carefully evaluated to ensure success, continuity, and professional growth.*

*A team would travel from park to park and inquire, observe, listen, and respond to reflections in quality*

*as perceived by the interpreters and the visitors. Such a team would*

*record and organize a fund of knowledge about what is working, what is not, and under what circumstances it might,*

*reaffirm and complement the operations evaluation process, and*

*positively reinforce accomplishments of the park staff.*

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INTERPRETIVE  
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## INTERPRETIVE CHALLENGE 3 EDUCATION

Interpretation is partially defined as an educational activity. The *Interpretive Challenge* gives us the opportunity to align ourselves with educational objectives, both in the formal classroom setting as well as in the park. We need to take advantage of research and learning strategies developed in successful park programs and the academic community. We need to promote more National Park Service educational programs that will truly be effective in schools and communities. Finally, we need to make available the tools and resources interpreters must have to present critical environmental issues, integrate our programs with urban communities, and implement successful community outreach programs.

### PROMOTING ENVIRONMENTAL/HERITAGE EDUCATION

Educational programs based on national park resources and themes can help people understand and appreciate their dependence on and interrelationship with their environment and history. Such education is a logical activity in the unique classrooms found in national park settings. Interpretation, including seminar/field study programs and other in-depth educational opportunities in both history and natural history, provides the medium with which education and learning can bridge gaps among people, parks, and their respective futures.

#### GOALS

To strengthen the long-term importance of education to the NPS mission

To increase coordination of education programs within local school systems

#### ACTIONS

Examine the successful NPS education programs and publish an analysis of the reasons for success

Work with conservation organizations and state park systems to promote coordinated educational efforts

Continue to support Junior Ranger programs in parks, with emphasis on urban parks

Convene a task force to outline a strategy for developing and integrating education programs throughout the national park system

Develop training seminars on instituting educational programs in natural, cultural, and recreational areas

Encourage park-to-community coordinators, foster teacher workshops, and assist with appropriate program development

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## DISCOVERY

*Environmental/heritage education audiences are primarily children and those who care for them, and environmental/heritage education techniques honor those audiences.*

*Beyond these basic criteria, nothing about NPS environmental/heritage education is mysterious . . . except perhaps the results. Fundamental understanding and commitment to preserving this country's resource heritage are the goals. The long-range ramifications of such a goal are permanent, but elusive.*

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## MAXIMIZING LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES IN URBAN AREAS

Urban parks are logical areas for educational programs that are designed to bring parks and park values to many people. There are many populations that can be invited to participate in park activities through outreach programs, enriching the quality of urban life while building constituencies for park and environmental stewardship. Urban parks can function as bridges between urban populations and the overall national park system.

### GOALS

To assist in implementing the recommendations of the Urban Superintendents Conference (New York, 1987), including the Park Heritage Gateways program

To introduce urban visitors to the national park system and the national park idea

To complete the Park Heritage Gateway pilot effort and determine if expansion of this program is appropriate

### ACTIONS

Participate on the task force to deal with problems of continuing to attract quality employees for urban park assignments

Develop and issue a position paper regarding marketing as it relates to the National Park Service; develop and make available strategies using proven concepts for implementing a positive marketing program in the Park Service

Produce a quality audiovisual program and systemwide publication to describe the national park system to visitors

Participate in special training and information dissemination programs as proposed at the Urban Superintendents Conference

Study the potential for urban open spaces to become natural and cultural laboratories/learning centers as part of NPS education outreach programs



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## ENHANCING NPS OUTREACH PROGRAMS

Outreach programs that interpret beyond the park boundaries are a recognized way to make friends in the local communities and provide valuable feedback to park managers by establishing two-way communications. Outreach programs need to be emphasized and established at all levels throughout the National Park Service.

However, outreach includes far more than Park Service employees traveling beyond the boundaries of their parks. It includes any and all efforts designed to disseminate information beyond the park boundaries, e.g., mass media, informational mailings, traveling exhibits, audiovisual programs, public workshops, and assisting visitors who are planning trips to national park areas.

Friends groups are a unique manifestation of outreach — unique in that the community comes to the park rather than the park to the community. Friends groups exist to help park management by garnering public support, financial assistance, and/or volunteers. Interpreters should take an active role in establishing Friends groups and guiding their activities.

Programs that address special populations are also an important extension of interpretive outreach efforts.

### GOALS

To involve interpretive operations in all outreach programs

To ensure that all people have an equal opportunity to enjoy park resources and participate in their presentation

### ACTIONS

Use existing training programs to convey the importance of outreach activities in interpretive efforts and solicit selected parks to test and strengthen or establish outreach programs

Expand cooperative efforts with the travel/tourism industry to promote year-round travel and travel to cultural and lesser known parks

Use mass media to increase a broad base of public support for the national park system

Cooperate with the private sector to provide a traveling exhibit of significant artifacts representing the diversity of resources within the system and conveying the importance of the NPS mission

Incorporate Friends groups sessions in interpretive training courses

Foster NPS cultural resource media and programs that are factual, balanced, ethnographic presentations

EVANSTON AND OUTRIGG PROGRAM

The Evanston and Outrigg Program is a unique and exciting opportunity for students to learn about the history and culture of the Evanston area while also enjoying the thrill of outrigger canoeing. The program is designed for students who are interested in outdoor activities and want to learn more about the local community. Students will participate in a series of lessons that cover the history of the Evanston area, the culture of the local Native American tribes, and the basics of outrigger canoeing. The program is led by experienced instructors who are passionate about sharing their knowledge and skills with the students. The program is a great way for students to learn about their local community and enjoy the outdoors at the same time.







## INTERPRETIVE CHALLENGE 4

### PROGRAM INTEGRATION

Program integration and servicewide thrusts are opportunities that must be carefully planned, energized with adequate resources, and backed with appropriate delegations of authority. Coordinated interdisciplinary programs will result.

#### MAXIMIZING PROGRAM COORDINATION

Interpreters are often called upon to champion special initiatives. These special initiatives must be integrated with basic, necessary interpretive operations. Coordination at the Washington Office level, with appropriate funding and staffing throughout, is needed. Several very important initiatives are already established or about to begin and need immediate thoughtful attention. Coordination among scientists, resource managers, visitor service rangers, maintenance specialists, designers, planners, and interpreters needs to be enhanced throughout the National Park Service.

#### GOALS

To ensure better coordination and cooperation among all professionals involved in park operations and research

To maximize the opportunities for interdisciplinary planning and design teams

To raise sensitivity and awareness of the influence of the facilities, signs, and quality of maintenance on visitors' perceptions

#### ACTIONS

Support an interdisciplinary approach in all regions and parks for program integration

Involve interpretive staff in resource management and research activities and involve researchers and resource management staff in interpretive programs

Develop interpretive programs and media to address resource and visitor safety issues

Establish a priority system that integrates special interpretive initiatives (such as air quality, genetic diversity, and Columbus quincentennial) with existing Harpers Ferry Center (HFC) program priorities

Sponsor servicewide interregional, interdisciplinary workshops to achieve better communications among scientists, visitor service rangers, resource managers, interpreters, planners, and designers

Integrate HFC and Denver Service Center (DSC) work programs to ensure that park planning and development projects meet park management objectives and enhance interpretation

Include interpretive representation on planning and design teams, as appropriate

Conduct a study on visual quality and use the findings in training, planning, operations evaluations, and developing servicewide standards



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## ENHANCING PARTNERSHIPS IN INTERPRETIVE SERVICES

NPS areas have successfully provided field seminar programs, which offer courses of several days and deal with numerous subject areas. They are often sponsored by nonprofit institutes or by cooperating associations and usually require a fee from participants. Currently, almost all deal with natural areas.

Similarly, many NPS concessioners provide recreational and other services to park visitors that the National Park Service itself cannot offer. Opportunities exist in these activities to interpret to park visitors.

### GOALS

To foster interagency cooperation in developing interpretive programs and facilities

To increase interpretive activities through cooperating association and concessioner programs throughout the national park system

To increase field seminar and similar study programs

### ACTIONS

Institute formal contact with appropriate agencies to promote joint interpretive publications, facilities, and programs

Conduct a national workshop of NASA scientists and NPS interpreters, scientists, and resource managers to explore opportunities for joint research and interpretive projects and for sharing technology

Expand interagency training programs and establish personnel exchange programs with other agencies

Involve interpreters in advance planning and require that new concession contracts include appropriate interpretive services

Provide interpretive training to appropriate cooperating association and concessioner employees

Use visitor data collected by concessioners to improve interpretive programs and market national parks

Establish new NPS field seminar programs, especially ones dealing with cultural resources

Develop a nationwide strategy to promote the programs

Assist in curriculum design, administrative support, and accreditation of the programs



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## PRIDE OF SERVICE

*First-time visitors, international visitors, seniors, cultural minorities, single-parent families – virtually all kinds of visitors come to parks with high expectations based on the favorable reputation enjoyed by the National Park Service. Those expectations include easily obtained information, reliable guidance, and interpretation. Park Service employees, volunteers, concessioners, and cooperating association employees are “partners”*

*in the parks, with shared – often equal – responsibilities for knowing and interpreting primary park themes and resource issues. Visitors have “awareness rights” regarding risks to be taken, opportunities to be seized, and responsibilities to be exercised. And such awareness should be readily available from every service function in the park. Neither park resources nor park visitors deserve any less.*

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## PROMOTING LEADERSHIP AT NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LEVELS

There are many undiscovered opportunities for cooperative ventures in interpretation between the National Park Service and states, federal agencies, and countries. An alliance of these governmental entities would be helpful to promote interpretive efforts.

### GOALS

To identify and offer learning experiences, provide information, and promote a conservation/preservation ethic in this country and abroad

To participate in, sponsor, and cosponsor national and international events and programs that involve or lead to protecting the world’s natural and cultural heritage

### ACTIONS

Take a leadership role in the exchange of information and ideas within the Park Service and with organizations external to the Park Service

Seek a leadership role in planning and celebrating the 75th anniversary of the National Park Service

Identify visitor facility projects with other federal agencies that are suitable for joint media interpretation

Send an NPS delegation to the Second World Congress for Heritage Interpretation and Presentation

Work with other countries to identify issues, propose actions, and implement strategies that require cooperation to interpret global natural and cultural resources

Sponsor, with other appropriate agencies, a North American conference on interpretation







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## INTERPRETIVE CHALLENGE 5

### MEDIA

The Park Service has traditionally relied on interpretive media, films, exhibits, publications, and museums to complement the personal services activities of interpretation. The commitment to interpretation has resulted in a multimillion dollar capital investment. The maintenance and rehabilitation of these facilities is absolutely essential to meeting the public's right to quality. In fact, now that the park visitor is paying an entrance fee, it becomes doubly necessary that interpretive media be maintained at the highest standard. It also means that new media must be designed for longer life and heavier use and that publications must be up-to-date. People responsible for design and maintenance of media need to receive training specific to new media technology.

Today, many park visitors encounter deteriorated facilities and outdated interpretive media. NPS records of interpretive media projects suggest that it will take more than \$60 million to reach quality standards. Entrance fee legislation is designed to provide the necessary funding. The Park Service needs a plan that will ensure the wise expenditure of these funds.

Changes in the ethnic makeup of the population and recent regulations dealing with accessibility for the impaired have highlighted the need to upgrade media and facilities and create new media formats.

#### GOALS

To staff and operate the HFC as necessary to meet the increased demand for media planning, design, and production

#### ACTIONS

Rehabilitate or replace unsafe and inadequate HFC preservation, training, and conservation facilities

Establish a post-installation review of HFC projects to determine effectiveness of media

Provide HFC with adequate computer capability for planning, design, word-processing, and data-base management

Increase the number of contractors available for planning, design, and exhibit production and rehabilitation

Increase the capability of HFC to produce new publications and print greater quantities of publications

Increase HFC capabilities for conservation of exhibit artifacts

Complete the *National Park Service Atlas*, for publication in 1991, as an anniversary project

Study and prepare a development program to upgrade park entrance facilities and major interpretive structures in parks

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**To achieve quality interpretive facilities and media in all parks**

**To redefine the role of HFC**

Establish a servicewide system, monitored by HFC, that promotes understanding of and accessibility to all interpretive media

Establish, in all regions, cyclic maintenance programs for interpretive facilities and media

Study the advisability of establishing and operating a western field office for media planning and design

Publish a servicewide assessment of NPS interpretive facilities and media and integrate it into the Maintenance Management System

Design and produce packaged training materials for park personnel to improve preventive maintenance/operations of interpretive media

Plan, schedule, and fund media rehabilitation programs in packages that complete the entire needs of a park

Establish a management advisory group of park and regional officials to provide feedback to HFC regarding how well park interpretive media needs are being met







