

FINAL NARRATIVE REPORT

EVALUATION OF INTERPRETIVE SERVICES IN THIRTY SELECTED SITES
IN THE NORTH ATLANTIC REGION
OF THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Conducted June/July 1980

Prepared By:

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and
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Under-reaction may result in discounting of observed shortcomings. After all, what can anybody from outside the sanctum of the agency know? They obviously suffer from lack of touch with the problems we face. The result of this line of reasoning is to do little or nothing. Therefore, this approach is likewise not recommended.

Whatever is done, this investigator is struck by one fact. Over the past 15 years of involvement in several regions of the National Park Service as well as other park and recreation and law enforcement agencies, great similarities have existed.

Problems were not that different. And by their very nature, the solutions proposed have been almost mirror images. The main variations have been in their application to specific areas and minor differences in cause.

In other words, region by region, area by area, we continue to reinvent the wheel!

And perhaps even more discouraging is to know that initial surges of zeal toward changes and improvement have all too often been short lived. Once the first spurt of energy has been expended, programs and approaches seem always to drift back toward a middle ground--that grade C category--rather than continue toward excellence.

So, the challenge is to enter this phase of improvement steadfastly determined to make significant and lasting alterations.

Lastly, it is important, after changes have been implemented, to re-examine the entire situation from a similar vantage point. If this last step is omitted, there is no way to accurately assess any improvement which may be forthcoming.

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said the audits were once during the season and others said during previous summers they were never audited. One audit during a season provides no means for observing improvements, and zero audits casts serious doubts upon the validity of rehire decisions.

2. Coaching. Coaching is far different from supervisory critique. Critiques imply dangerous decisions revolving around rehire. Coaching is cooperative and basically nonthreatening. But, it means repeated work with interpreters to assist in their personal growth and development. It is time-consuming. However, the rewards are great. Not only can presentations be technically improved, but rapport can be built which will go a long way toward overcoming morale problems.
3. Training. Training opportunities should be conducted not only at the start of the season but at least twice as the summer progresses. Principles of communication, interpretive philosophy and Park Service goals should be intermixed with discussions of agency and site planning.
4. Pre-Season Materials. Packets of information sent to new and returning seasonals ought to contain not only information on the site but also details concerning those items mentioned above. Tape recordings of talks, tours, etc., might also be included. Many sites do send out information but it is of limited scope. Inclusion of communication and other information would enable seasonals to come to the job better prepared and more nearly ready to begin.

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Urban Areas. Especially in the permanent ranks there were a significant number who felt trapped by duty in the urban areas. Evidencing that initial information had led them to believe urban assignments were steppingstones and of short duration, they now found themselves essentially locked in. However, it was interesting that there were both permanents and seasonals who expressed a preference for urban work assignments. Every effort ought to be expended to use these people. A good percentage of the quality problem is tied to basic dissatisfaction with duty locations. Care should be exercised to prevent spreading information which leads employees to wrong assumptions regarding urban assignments.

Supervisory Cooperation. The difficulty created by supervisors unwilling to consider seasonal ideas has already been mentioned. It is very serious in some areas. There were a few sites in the New York metroplex which were deeply distressed and apparently rightfully so. When supervisors isolate themselves in their offices, seldom are seen on site, and never wear the uniform, it gives rise to deep resentment.

It is not essential for supervisors to become difficult and lose interpersonal skills but too often it seems to go with the job. Open communication is imperative in any organization. But, it is especially necessary when working conditions are less than adequate. It was the investigator's feeling that a number of the concerns expressed by seasonals could be dealt with quickly by the simple expedient of open dialogue.

Purpose and Scope of Study

Interpretation and allied services form one of the most significant public contact arms of National Park Service operations. The purpose of the study was to determine the quality of personal and nonpersonal interpretation in the Region.

Procedures

Under the original agreement, personal forms of interpretation were to be examined. However, as time permitted, nonpersonal forms were also to be evaluated and observations made relative to general site operations. Originally, no attempt was made to provide sites with detailed information as to the dates of proposed visits. In any research, the more those being studied know about the purposes and procedures of the study, the more likely they are to behave in artificial ways. In order to minimize conscious or unconscious attempts to "put the best foot forward" during evaluation, only general information was provided. For example, supervisors were initially told only that visits would occur sometime during June and July. However, such nonspecific information would have made it difficult, if not impossible, to assure close-out discussions with supervisors. So, most were advised within a day or two of the actual dates.

In most areas it was possible for the investigator to spend a significant time (as long as a full day and in some cases two) before those conducting programs became aware of his identity. This relative anonymity was important to minimize nervous tension and thus aberrant responses in those being observed.

Except in the rare case where the supervisor was absent during a visit, the investigator discussed observations with them prior to leaving the site.

supervisors looking at a program which lives and breathes for only a short time and which deals with a severely limited clientele group must have some difficulty taking it seriously.

In many of the sites literally masses of the visiting public are being ignored in order to cater entirely to schools. Is it necessary to become so single-minded? Surely, many of the families and others visiting the areas would find it rewarding to engage in some of what interpretation could offer.

Cooperation Between Divisions. Although there was no indication of active undermining of each other's roles, it was apparent that communication and cooperation among Interpretive, Protective and Maintenance divisions is less than would be ideal. Efforts should be made to assure that any and all uninformed people are fully aware of the interpretive program. The visitor should not be faced with personnel who are ignorant of this facet of the operation.

As in many NPS sites throughout the United States, there is an undesirable feeling of superiority/inferiority existing in many areas. Too often the interpreters are looked down upon. The problem is a complex one with interpreters feeling rangers are animals and rangers regarding interpreters as slightly or extremely strange.

This kind of atmosphere tends to reflect unfavorably upon anyone who promotes or sustains it. The cost is applied to all involved in that it lowers the effectiveness of the entire operation.

However, if interpretation is to assume its rightful role, it is imperative that the problem be faced, brought into the open and discussed so that remedies might be developed. Representatives of each of the three divisions must be involved in the deliberations and the meetings called in a climate of mutual desire for improvement.

GENERAL STATEMENTS

Agency Visibility

If the National Park Service in the North Atlantic Region were a corporation dependent solely upon public knowledge of their existence, they would likely be on the verge of bankruptcy. It is very possible to enter the majority of sites, participate in activities and leave having gained no knowledge of what agency is responsible. From circuses where only a very weak and marginal identification with the NPS occurred through guided walks to nonpersonal devices such as signs and exhibits, the National Park Service is almost invisible.

The National Park Service has only in relatively recent years made its appearance in the eastern metropolitan areas. Its practices as well as its uniform are largely unknown. Yet, the agency has the potential to be well received. It can become an integral part of community life. Allegations have been made that the agency spends too much of its time, money and personnel in the large western parks far from the majority of potential visitors. It behooves the Service, especially in these times of severe economic crunch, to do more to increase public awareness of its role and its benefits to the urban dweller.

Interpreters who had attended training sessions conducted at the start of the season tended to identify the agency. But, in general, they were in the minority. It was a rare occurrence to hear the Service identified at any time during talks, walks, tours or other activities. Asked why, many interpreters indicated that there had been no emphasis on this by their supervisors and/or that they felt "awkward" doing it. It struck this investigator that it would be much more awkward if the Park Service ceased to exist because people supported the state or municipal park and recreation agencies they so often thought were in charge of the NPS sites.

The huge populations represented by the New York and Boston metroplexes represent largely untapped sources of support for the Park Service. But, there must be a renewed emphasis on public education. Interpreters

Regional Considerations

Site Involvement. A major concern is the fact that Regional input is reduced by virtue of limited authority. When input from the Regional level must be limited to suggestions which the areas are free to ignore, there is little chance than a common thread will ever exist.

Budget restrictions make travel to sites possible only on a limited basis. Yet on-site visits need to be made to enable accurate assessments and input.

There is a real need for increased communication between the Regional Office and the sites. It is also important that a constructive rapport be developed and maintained. Repeatedly, people at the field sites indicated concern with the distance both in terms of miles and philosophy between Region and their location.

It would be advantageous for all concerned if goal setting meetings could be held on an increased frequency to enable Regional and local administrators to discuss concerns.

A clear understanding of both long and short range goals and objectives appears to be lacking. These goal setting meetings could be opportunities to develop such approaches. Repeatedly comments indicated that not enough was known about where the entire Region was going in terms of programming, operation or possible future expansion.

It may be heresy to suggest. But, there needs to be more direct involvement in a positive manner from the Regional level.

A major deterrent to that is the amount of paper work expected of those functioning in the Regional Office. When this is tied to severe manpower shortage, the result is a logjam which almost brings progress to a halt.

Urban Areas

There is a definite correlation between the quality of interpretation and proximity or involvement with the larger urban areas. Generally, interpretation and overall facility quality and maintenance was far lower in the urban sites. It was also noted that morale was at its lowest in these areas. Interpreters as well as their supervisors seem at a loss to comprehend what they are there for. Somewhat awed by the rush and dazzle, they appear to be carried along merely by the moving mass unable to exercise any control over it.

Communication Training

Probably one of the causes most clearly related to lowered quality of interpretation was the inability of individual interpreters to communicate well. Basic communication skills were glaringly lacking, especially in the urban sites. Mere recitations of facts never have and never will do the job in interpretation. There is a need for those often touted qualities of provocation, enthusiasm, motivation and sparkle. If there is any single thing which needs attention, it is this. Training in communication is not adequate.

Administration

Many of the problems come directly back to the fact that site supervisors are either unaware of the place interpretation should have or in some cases are unwilling to support it. Interpretation is too often the stepchild--unloved and unnourished.

But, even more serious is the fact that administrators often did not have a clear understanding of where either their site or the region was headed.

PHYSICAL FACILITIES

Maintenance

Maintenance region-wide can only be described as marginal to gravely inferior. In one site it appeared that flower beds were never tended. Sidewalks were tilted and cracked posing severe safety problems. Facilities were often in dire need of paint. What there was was cracked and peeling. Initials dated several years back were carved in wooden trim. Wayside exhibits and trail signs often contained bleached, water-stained and curled flatwork. Light leaks occurred in projection areas where orientation programs were shown distracting from the needed atmosphere. And in many areas, dirt was everywhere.

While there was a correlation between proximity to intensely visited urban areas and poor maintenance, this was not always the case. Some areas in more remote settings also suffered.

In general, the projected image was of an agency either too poor or uncaring to maintain what they had. In any case, the often rundown appearance of the sites is doing nothing to bolster Park Service credibility. While it is realized that over the past ten years the Service's budget has not grown enough to keep pace with expansion, it must be noted that the deterioration is so spectacular that the question must be asked if the Service will ever be able to catch up. With each passing year in which nothing is done, the costs escalate. Will the time come when the facilities are simply not worth fixing? Will the costs to repair become costs of replacement? This has happened with metropolitan areas. But, they have apparently had the Park Service waiting in the wings to take their wornout or unmanageable areas. Who will take them off the Service's hands?

PERSONAL INTERPRETATION

Selection and Rehire

Over the past years as the investigator has conducted quality evaluations for other regions of the National Park Service as well as other recreational agencies, it has become apparent that a higher quality interpreter is being employed. This may be due to better academic preparation or improved employment practices or both. Whatever the reasons, observations in the North Atlantic Region demonstrated that interpreters were generally improvements over their counterparts of five or more years ago. However, this should only be understood to mean their preparation was better. Training, which is addressed below, is still an area of great concern.

Rehire criteria have been stiffened. This is good and bad. Some years ago this investigator made the statement in another region that there was a correlation between number of years a seasonal had returned to the park and lowered quality of interpretation. Certainly, the new approach to rehire makes it easier to rid the agency of inferior employees. But, there is evidence to support the concept that the baby may have been thrown out with the bath water. Too often it is almost impossible for even very good interpreters to receive a "highly recommended for rehire" status. The result is the loss of good people.

In the urban areas there needs to be a strong effort to employ those who really want to be there. Especially in the permanent ranks there seem to be a significant number who feel trapped. Perhaps incentives ought to be offered, shortened stays guaranteed and increased effort made to select urban-oriented people.

Training

Too frequently, seasonals were thrust into their job responsibilities with little or no training. The result was poor quality presentations and morale problems. It was the exception to find trained people. Even

Films and Slides

Some attention ought to be given to films and slides in orientation programs. There were a few areas in which films were difficult to follow and/or of poor quality. Quality difficulties were generally bleaching of color and deterioration in the soundtrack.

Also, interpreters assigned the task of tending and operating programs need to be constantly aware of their responsibility to check focus and sound levels.

In one area, films were apparently being used only as a means of occupying attention while other members of the group toured the facility or waited in line. The films had nothing to do with the interpretive theme, and at the time of the investigator's visit a Charlie Chaplin film was being shown.

Video Tapes

When video tapes were used, they were generally of good quality. But, one site is using tape in which the video is electronically distorted.

Signing

The single most important problem in this category is the fact that many of the sites are almost impossible to find. Road signs and other directional signs were, in some areas, almost nonexistent and create serious difficulties for anyone trying to get to the site. This concern was emphasized by overhearing visitor comments recounting the task it had been for them to get to the site.

In urban areas, where traffic lights and other signs compete for attention, it is very important to have Park Service signs which are distinctive and repeated often enough to assure the ability of following them. Often they were neither distinctive nor present.

Interpretive Philosophy, Traditions, Goals, and Objectives

What has been said regarding understanding of Service philosophies and traditions is doubly true as it relates to the field of interpretation.

Seasonal interpreters still are selected from a wide variety of academic fields. Some have passed through curricula in the broad area of parks and recreation while others arrive after an immersion in the life sciences. Whatever the case, there is no guarantee that either really understands what interpretation is about. It has been shocking over the past several years to realize that many schools offer courses in interpretation. But, few of them seem to provide the philosophical base necessary to understand and really catch the vision of Freeman Tilden's almost transcendental ideas of interpretation's opportunities.

Interpretation has the potential to change people's lives. Yet far too many of the interpreters observed were merely parroting raw information. They were all too often warm-blooded tape recorders utilizing only that portion of the brain which deals with cold facts. They were not involving the area of the cerebral computer capable of delving into the abstract and intangible. It is this which approaches the idea that interpretation is an art which is to some degree teachable. But, if it is teachable to any degree, it is important that some attempt be made to present it to those whose jobs require public contact. Otherwise the flavor, the essence, the magic, the life changing opportunities will be entirely missed and interpreters will find themselves marching monotonously through an utterly boring act which neither stimulates the visitor nor maintains their own personal vitality and enjoyment.

Communication Skills

Over the many years which have elapsed since the first nature guides trod the meadows of Yosemite and other western parks, a significant transition has occurred. Originating with scientists and specialists in

Although this section deals largely with interpretative personnel, it must be related that some of the worst examples of grooming involved maintenance people. While we may know the difference between divisions, the visiting public does not. As long as we wear basically the same uniform, it is essential that some kind of uniformity be in effect. Uniform shirts which were torn, open to the belt, missing sleeves, etc., were common.

Law enforcement people sometimes played their role to maximize the "Dodge Cop" image. Mirror finished sunglasses with hat cocked down over their brow coupled with an officious, macho strut and an equally condescending or militaristic style of communication did little to relax the visitor or promote agency image. Their demeanor left no doubt in at least one area that the visitor was only an interfering distraction to be tolerated as an undesirable part of the job.

Morale

As mentioned previously, morale was lowest in the urban sites. It followed closely the attitude of the permanents. If the supervisors transmitted a positive, constructive demeanor, it carried over to the seasonal interpreters.

Probably the most important contributors to low morale were failure to share information (no staff meetings), caste discrimination (seasonals vs. permanents) and supervisors who demonstrated their low esteem for the entire idea of interpretive services.

As mentioned earlier, some site supervisors permitted very little opportunity for innovation. Also, they were not open to suggestions or questions from the seasonal employees. Often they were isolated in their offices, having essentially no contact with their people. They were virtually unapproachable.

merely gave information often using terms and descriptions which were beyond the experience of the visitors. The easily observable result (had the interpreters also known how to read an audience) was boredom and reduced acquisition of both appreciation of the site's significance and enjoyment of the experience.

Innovation was also limited. Where it occurred it was well done. But, some interpreters evidenced that supervisors would not permit deviation from the way things had always been done.

Many of the sites had deep historical significance. Yet, the interpretation seldom reached out to touch the imagination, to foster introspection or self-examination of what the interpreted events might mean in the life of the visitor. This appeared to have two causes. First, the interpreter had never been stimulated to think about the inclusion of such material as "think pieces." Second, many had not developed within themselves an appreciation of the site's significance. Their own perspectives were too narrow. They were merely reciting, not inspiring. But, without inspiration how can one be expected to inspire?

Lastly, grooming standards sometimes detracted and adversely affected the interpreter's credibility. But, this is discussed in detail two sections later.

Specific Job Responsibilities

While limited, it was determined that there were some sites in which supervisors had inadequately prepared the interpreters for what was expected of them. In one area, interpreters were only told to be in uniform and stand at a particular location and that they would learn as they performed. Granted, this was only informal information duty. But, they were not paired with experienced people and did not know anything about the site. In effect, they were not only unprepared to assist visitors in anything beyond finding the restrooms. They were a liability to the Service. Unprepared, uninformed people can do nothing but convince the visitor that the Service is a patchwork operation unworthy of respect or support.

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If the National Park Service in the North Atlantic Region were a corporation dependent solely upon public knowledge of their existence, they would likely be on the verge of bankruptcy. It is very possible to enter the majority of sites, participate in activities and leave having gained no knowledge of what agency is responsible. From circuses where only a very weak and marginal identification with the NPS occurred through guided walks to nonpersonal devices such as signs and exhibits, the National Park Service is almost invisible.

The National Park Service has only in relatively recent years made its appearance in the eastern metropolitan areas. Its practices as well as its uniform are largely unknown. Yet, the agency has the potential to be well received. It can become an integral part of community life. Allegations have been made that the agency spends too much of its time, money and personnel in the large western parks far from the majority of potential visitors. It behooves the Service, especially in these times of severe economic crunch, to do more to increase public awareness of its role and its benefits to the urban dweller.

Interpreters who had attended training sessions conducted at the start of the season tended to identify the agency. But, in general, they were in the minority. It was a rare occurrence to hear the Service identified at any time during talks, walks, tours or other activities. Asked why, many interpreters indicated that there had been no emphasis on this by their supervisors and/or that they felt "awkward" doing it. It struck this investigator that it would be much more awkward if the Park Service ceased to exist because people supported the state or municipal park and recreation agencies they so often thought were in charge of the NPS sites.

The huge populations represented by the New York and Boston metroplexes represent largely untapped sources of support for the Park Service. But, there must be a renewed emphasis on public education. Interpreters

supervisors looking at a program which lives and breathes for only a short time and which deals with a severely limited clientele group must have some difficulty taking it seriously.

In many of the sites literally masses of the visiting public are being ignored in order to cater entirely to schools. Is it necessary to become so single-minded? Surely, many of the families and others visiting the areas would find it rewarding to engage in some of what interpretation could offer.

Cooperation Between Divisions. Although there was no indication of active undermining of each other's roles, it was apparent that communication and cooperation among Interpretive, Protective and Maintenance divisions is less than would be ideal. Efforts should be made to assure that any and all uninformed people are fully aware of the interpretive program. The visitor should not be faced with personnel who are ignorant of this facet of the operation.

As in many NPS sites throughout the United States, there is an undesirable feeling of superiority/inferiority existing in many areas. Too often the interpreters are looked down upon. The problem is a complex one with interpreters feeling rangers are animals and rangers regarding interpreters as slightly or extremely strange.

This kind of atmosphere tends to reflect unfavorably upon anyone who promotes or sustains it. The cost is applied to all involved in that it lowers the effectiveness of the entire operation.

However, if interpretation is to assume its rightful role, it is imperative that the problem be faced, brought into the open and discussed so that remedies might be developed. Representatives of each of the three divisions must be involved in the deliberations and the meetings called in a climate of mutual desire for improvement.

Purpose and Scope of Study

Interpretation and allied services form one of the most significant public contact arms of National Park Service operations. The purpose of the study was to determine the quality of personal and nonpersonal interpretation in the Region.

Procedures

Under the original agreement, personal forms of interpretation were to be examined. However, as time permitted, nonpersonal forms were also to be evaluated and observations made relative to general site operations. Originally, no attempt was made to provide sites with detailed information as to the dates of proposed visits. In any research, the more those being studied know about the purposes and procedures of the study, the more likely they are to behave in artificial ways. In order to minimize conscious or unconscious attempts to "put the best foot forward" during evaluation, only general information was provided. For example, supervisors were initially told only that visits would occur sometime during June and July. However, such nonspecific information would have made it difficult, if not impossible, to assure close-out discussions with supervisors. So, most were advised within a day or two of the actual dates.

In most areas it was possible for the investigator to spend a significant time (as long as a full day and in some cases two) before those conducting programs became aware of his identity. This relative anonymity was important to minimize nervous tension and thus aberrant responses in those being observed.

Except in the rare case where the supervisor was absent during a visit, the investigator discussed observations with them prior to leaving the site.

Urban Areas. Especially in the permanent ranks there were a significant number who felt trapped by duty in the urban areas. Evidencing that initial information had led them to believe urban assignments were steppingstones and of short duration, they now found themselves essentially locked in. However, it was interesting that there were both permanents and seasonals who expressed a preference for urban work assignments. Every effort ought to be expended to use these people. A good percentage of the quality problem is tied to basic dissatisfaction with duty locations. Care should be exercised to prevent spreading information which leads employees to wrong assumptions regarding urban assignments.

Supervisory Cooperation. The difficulty created by supervisors unwilling to consider seasonal ideas has already been mentioned. It is very serious in some areas. There were a few sites in the New York metroplex which were deeply distressed and apparently rightfully so. When supervisors isolate themselves in their offices, seldom are seen on site, and never wear the uniform, it gives rise to deep resentment.

It is not essential for supervisors to become difficult and lose interpersonal skills but too often it seems to go with the job. Open communication is imperative in any organization. But, it is especially necessary when working conditions are less than adequate. It was the investigator's feeling that a number of the concerns expressed by seasonals could be dealt with quickly by the simple expedient of open dialogue.

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said the audits were once during the season and others said during previous summers they were never audited. One audit during a season provides no means for observing improvements, and zero audits casts serious doubts upon the validity of rehire decisions.

2. Coaching. Coaching is far different from supervisory critique. Critiques imply dangerous decisions revolving around rehire. Coaching is cooperative and basically nonthreatening. But, it means repeated work with interpreters to assist in their personal growth and development. It is time-consuming. However, the rewards are great. Not only can presentations be technically improved, but rapport can be built which will go a long way toward overcoming morale problems.
3. Training. Training opportunities should be conducted not only at the start of the season but at least twice as the summer progresses. Principles of communication, interpretive philosophy and Park Service goals should be intermixed with discussions of agency and site planning.
4. Pre-Season Materials. Packets of information sent to new and returning seasonals ought to contain not only information on the site but also details concerning those items mentioned above. Tape recordings of talks, tours, etc., might also be included. Many sites do send out information but it is of limited scope. Inclusion of communication and other information would enable seasonals to come to the job better prepared and more nearly ready to begin.

FINAL NARRATIVE REPORT

Evaluation of Interpretive Services in Thirty Selected
Sites in the North Atlantic Region

Prepared by:

Dr. Paul H. Risk
Principal Investigator and
Interpretive Consultant

Under-reaction may result in discounting of observed shortcomings. After all, what can anybody from outside the sanctum of the agency know? They obviously suffer from lack of touch with the problems we face. The result of this line of reasoning is to do little or nothing. Therefore, this approach is likewise not recommended.

Whatever is done, this investigator is struck by one fact. Over the past 15 years of involvement in several regions of the National Park Service as well as other park and recreation and law enforcement agencies, great similarities have existed.

Problems were not that different. And by their very nature, the solutions proposed have been almost mirror images. The main variations have been in their application to specific areas and minor differences in cause.

In other words, region by region, area by area, we continue to reinvent the wheel!

And perhaps even more discouraging is to know that initial surges of zeal toward changes and improvement have all too often been short lived. Once the first spurt of energy has been expended, programs and approaches seem always to drift back toward a middle ground--that grade C category--rather than continue toward excellence.

So, the challenge is to enter this phase of improvement steadfastly determined to make significant and lasting alterations.

Lastly, it is important, after changes have been implemented, to re-examine the entire situation from a similar vantage point. If this last step is omitted, there is no way to accurately assess any improvement which may be forthcoming.

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IN THE NORTH ATLANTIC REGION
OF THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Conducted June/July 1980

Prepared By:

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