

National Park Service Mission

The mission of the National Park Service is derived from Congress as expressed in the Organic Act in addition to several other acts, including the National Historic Preservation Act. Collectively, those Acts authorize and direct the National Park Service to lead America's conservation movement, including the conservation of natural, historical and recreational resources. Many of these objectives are expressed in the activities in the National Park Service commonly refers to as our partnership programs. They include the Recreation Trails and Conservation Assistance Programs, and the various historic preservation programs through which the National Park Service gives grants or other forms of aid or recognition of important resources in the culture of our Nation.

The mission of the National Park Service therefore has expanded from managing the places that are set aside as America's national parks to leading the conservation and preservation movement in the United States by not only managing those parks, but also managing other conservation programs so that other people may participate in the heritage and conservation programs of the United States.

The mission of the National Park Service is to "conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein, and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations..." These areas, though distinct in character are united through their interrelated purposes and resources into one national park system cumulative expressions of a single national heritage; that, individually and collectively, these areas derive increased national dignity and recognition of their superb environmental quality through their inclusion jointly with each other in one national park system preserved and managed for the benefit and inspiration of all the people... The authorization of activities shall be construed and the protection, management, and administration of these areas shall be conducted in light of the high public value and integrity of the national park system and shall not be exercised in derogation of the value and purposes for which these various areas have been established except as may have been or shall be directly and specifically provided by Congress." The historical and cultural foundations of the nation should be preserved as a living part of our community life and development in order to give a sense of orientation to the American people."

Director Roger Kennedy, September 11, 1994

The Interpretive (R)evolution and Organizational Change



In November, 1993 a group of forty interpreters met in Alexandria, Virginia to focus the work of interpretation in the National Park Service for the future by establishing the "Interpretive (R)evolution".

The goals of the Interpretive (R)evolution are: to elevate the stature and performance of interpretation and education in the NPS; to advocate leadership roles for interpretation; to develop subject matter expertise and encourage the use of the best research available in our programming; and to foster participation by all interpreters throughout the service.

Work proceeds on the interpretive training curriculum, the interpretive planning process and the development of the compelling stories concept. Each of us has a role to play in the Interpretive (R)evolution. We all are individually charged with the responsibility to deliver the finest visitor services we can muster. As individuals we must continue to build subject matter expertise and interpretive skills by learning everything we can about our park resources, their significance, the values associated with them and their place in a wider context. We must take responsibility to act personally and professionally in an environmentally accountable and sustainable manner. We must communicate the full range of park values including visitor enjoyment, resource preservation and protection, ecological significance, and historical context. We must pursue sensitive, controversial and challenging issues in a responsible manner. We must seek to facilitate a change in attitude or behavior through our educational programs that encourages visitors to minimize resource impacts in their parks and at home. We must link our programs to ongoing research both within and outside the Service.

The work of interpretation must orient, inform, instruct, and motivate. Our interpretive work must convey knowledge, stimulate discourse, and result in reform. This is not a passive profession. We have an opportunity to be provocateurs or instigators of thought and communication. The tools of our trade are the story line and the physical environment. We can involve the public with the resource.

Interpreters should play the part of the facilitator acting as experts in creating the exchange of information. The interpreter should be a catalyst. We can facilitate the use of parks as forums for action. We can play the role of host. Although we may many times be short of fiscal resources we should do what we can, with what we have, where we are. Interpretation is a process not a division. Nationally there are about nearly 1600 permanent interpreters performing the work of interpretation and education.

Not a huge group but more than enough to initiate change. As Margaret Mead wrote we should, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

In performing our roles as guides, teachers, and advocates to help people forge emotional, intellectual, and recreational ties with their natural and cultural heritage we must be eternally vigilant to the changes in the information used in our programs. There was a time when American History was synonymous with the story of national politics, war, and the philosophies of a small circle of noted thinkers. Less than two generations ago the American Epic centered around the exploits of great men like Jefferson, Emerson, Grant, Wilson, Ford and Roosevelt. America's history was written by, for and about men of property and standing and their story formed the framework for our national chronicle.

Times have changed and so has American history. Always dynamic, the history of our nation is written and re-written as new information is uncovered and as each generation brings its own new questions seeking historical context for its own time. History as practiced today has shown interest in not only the great men and women of the past but also great interest in the everyday lives of ordinary people. This study of history from the bottom up opens a very wide range of topics of interest to us. The lives that are represented by our best national historic sites and the things that these people owned all become subjects of interest for us. We have an enormous opportunity to tell a richer story based upon much wider research. We can more easily relate to the real life experiences of our visitors.

If we are to fulfill our roles as educators of the public we must keep abreast of the latest dynamics of historical research questions and interpretations. Most of what Americans know about history is not learned in the classroom. Most public knowledge is gathered through the mass media and the public presentation of history at museums, public forums, historic sites, and national parks. The burden to provide our visitors with the latest scholarly research and the most recent interpretations of our stories lies heavily upon us. This is not intended to have us following every contemporary fad but to keep our history education current.

We have an obligation to offer the most serious and varying scholarly points of view that are available. This may take us into controversial water but our object is not to seek controversy for its own sake but to create opportunities to address the tough issues through dialogue.

Education in the public forum does not occur in surroundings that are too comfortable, where the facts are carefully selected and always interpreted the same. We must guard against becoming so familiar with our programs that thought is not needed to wind our way through. Seeking new paths may be less comfortable for us but it forces us to think about our every step in a way that we seldom do on roads routinely traveled. For those of you who work everyday in the historic sites that represent the best of this country an opportunity exists to truly make a difference in the lives of our visitors. Seeking out and using the most current research in developing programs that address controversy and seek dialogue is a most high calling.

This attention paid to the changes in historical interpretation applies no less to the programs we offer in our natural areas. In this natural world new research is steadily made available that needs to be blended into the telling of the story. New science brings the opportunity for new programs. The resources protected by the National Park Service harbor lessons that the nation wishes and needs to teach itself and replenish itself. As we move to begin to understand the meaning and significance of ecosystem management we too should move our interpretive efforts in that direction. The controversies created in the natural world are of great interest to our visitors and should be a part of our everyday programming.

In creating new vigor for our interpretive programs we are advocating the use of the compelling story concept. The compelling story concept is something with which you are already familiar. It is a challenge to interpreters to revitalize Freeman Tilden's Principles of Interpretation and to apply them in new, innovative, thought provoking ways. It is a challenge to re-examine the themes, goals, and objectives of our programs in a modern context. The stories we tell and the resources we manage and protect must be placed in a context of broader significance. These are complicated but exciting times in which we find ourselves and each of us must decide for ourselves how we will participate. There is a Chinese proverb which seems to capture where interpretation currently resides, "A peasant must stand a long time on a hillside with his mouth open before a roast duck flies in." We have the opportunity to seek greater accuracy, dimension and zest in our interpretive programming. We should take all opportunities to create new enthusiasm and context for we cannot afford to wait for the duck.

A Personal Contract for Interpretation

The Interpretive (R)evolution is evolving and you are a part of the evolution. You can decide whether you want to be part of the great persons associated with the history of interpretation.

ASSIGNMENT

Each of you should begin to think about what you would include in your own personal contract for interpretation. You will be asked to write your own personal contract with interpretation in one page or less. The contracts should talk about commitment to subject matter, dedication to audience, perfection of skills and your personal desired outcomes of your interpretive work. An example follows.

My Personal Contract for Interpretation

"Knowledge is Power"..Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626)

As an interpreter I am in the information and knowledge business. I believe that people want and need good information about their National Parks. I believe as Stephen Mather did that one of the highest uses for the parks is the education of the public. Therefore, I have developed some parameters that guide my own personal contract for interpretation.

In providing interpretive services I will always:

Seek to use the best, most accurate, current to date information I can find.

Create in myself and others an inquisitive mind.

Maintain a high respect and value for the real things.

Try to create a socializing experience for myself and others.

Try to insure that the audience feels better about themselves and the park and park service for having participated in my programs.

"I confess that I never respond to places like the Colosseum or Pompeii, or the Roman Forum, or the ruins of Ostia or Arigento, unless my imagination, or some learned and sensitive friend, can first people them for me as they were when they were alive. Sean O'Faolain.