



United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

P.O. BOX 37127

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20013-7127

IN REPLY REFER TO:

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Memorandum

To: Regional Directors
Attention: Park Superintendents

From: *W. Penn Mott, Jr.* William Penn Mott, Jr.
Director

Subject: Interpretation

As you know, we are facing a period of belt tightening. Some difficult decisions will have to be made on priorities to maximize the use of the resources we have to work with. You have all heard my thoughts about the importance of interpretation and my belief that it should not be an automatic place to look for cuts in your budget. The attached position paper on the Role and Responsibility of Interpretation should serve as a guide for analyzing your interpretive programs before you decide on making any funding or staffing cuts in this program. The public support generated by a sound, effective interpretive program is the only long term protection we can count on to guarantee the preservation of both the National Park System and the National Park Service.

Attachment

THE ROLE
AND
RESPONSIBILITY
OF
INTERPRETATION
IN THE
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF INTERPRETATION

The role of interpretation in parks varies with the areas resources, the needs of its visitors and the needs of the service managing the area. This interactive threesome, park resources, park visitors and park management form the milieu in which park interpretation functions. They also comprise the broad categories that define the three basic areas of responsibility that can and should be accomplished by the interpretive program in all national park areas.

Park Resources:

Our national parks are repositories of resources that contain this nation's most valued treasures. The richness and diversity of these natural, cultural and recreational resources are the tangible evidence of our national heritage. They represent the physical, the human, the intellectual and in the broad sense of the word, the spiritual basis from which this nation's strength, pride and continuity of purpose have been fashioned.

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Instilling and understanding and appreciation of the value of our parks and their resources and through this process developing public support for preserving them is the critical responsibility of interpretation and should be the primary objective of a park interpretive program.

We should tackle this effort on two levels; (1) on a park-by-park basis, each park telling the story of their resources, that portion of our heritage for which the area was designated as a unit of the National Park System; (2) on a system-wide basis telling the story of the National Park System its value and the role it can play in enriching the lives of all Americans.

Park Visitors:

Our national parks were created to preserve their resources and to provide for the enjoyment of those resources "by such manner and such means as to leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations." Parks are special places, different from the everyday environments most of our visitors are used to. They are dynamic, often fragile and in many cases, potentially dangerous due to their unknown or unfamiliar physical, biologic or climatic conditions. The interrelationships of diverse visitor groups and such complex settings as national parks require substantial adaptation and behavioral change if both the park's resources and the visitors are to be protected from damage. An interpretive program that provides information on the park's resources, informs visitors as to recreational and sight-seeing opportunities, helps them understand their relationships to and responsibility towards the parks environment, and explains park regulations and safety concerns is part of this process.

The exchange of information necessary to insure the successful adaptation of visitors to park environments and to encourage and facilitate appropriate, safe, minimum impact use of the parks resources is another responsibility of park interpretation.

Park Management:

Our national parks are managed to provide recreational experiences and the continuity of their resources rather than to produce products or profits. This is accomplished by a cadre of diverse specialist responsible for the planning,

protection and operation of the national parks. The Service has invited the public to participate in this management process. To do so, however, without providing them with easy access to the basic information needed to make sound, informed decisions would be doing only half the job. People are more likely to accept and support a sound even though controversial decision or policy, when they understand it's rational, the research on which it was based and the possible consequences of not adopting it.

Providing our publics with the reasons behind our management decisions and policies, especially when those policies or decisions result in restricting some forms of use or implementing controversial actions, is another responsibility of park interpretation.

These three major responsibilities of a park interpretive program are not a luxury to be worked on when our other concerns have been satisfied. They are an essential part of any park management program. They can be accomplished simultaneously in a carefully planned and managed program without any loss of the traditional enjoyment or educational aspects of National Park Service interpretation. We must always remember that our visitors are on vacation, they did not come to the park to hear about our problems or to go to "school". They came to have an enjoyable, rewarding experience and possibly to learn something about the park and their nation, preferably with minimal effort.

PARK INTERPRETERS - COMMUNICATORS

Interpretation has grown and evolved in response to our nation's ever changing social conditions, educational level, environmental problems and political concerns since its inception in the early 1900's. Despite the changes in emphasis, philosophy, techniques, and media, our basic mission has not changed. Interpretation is a park management activity, one of many used to accomplish the basic mandate of the National Park Service.

"... to conserve the scenery and the natural and the 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 the unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."

As valuable as interpretation is, it is not an activity that can be justified as an end, in and of itself. It must be an integrated part of the overall park management program.

The most difficult facet of any management scheme is the "management" of human beings, the regulations of human use. For this reason, one of the most demanding and indispensable management task is that of communicating with the public. Ultimately, the success of any park management program depends on informed public support. Such support is developed through interpretive and educational programs, courteous helpful visitor services, and by providing immediate tangible benefits to the public.

Interpretive programs by providing information to and affecting the attitudes and behavior of visitors before, during and after their visits to parks are a significant means by which management communicates with the public.

Interpretation operates at the interface of the public and the National Park Service. In most instances, it provides the primary in-depth contact the visitors have with park management. By informing visitors about the national park's significance and values, resources preservation concerns, recreational opportunities and regulations as well as their personal relationships with and effect on the resources, interpretation influences their enjoyment and behavior. Properly utilized interpretation can be our most cost-effective way to minimize visitor related protection, maintenance, and resource management problems as we educate the public in the principles of National Park Stewardship and appropriate use.

PARK INTERPRETERS - EDUCATORS

There is a great deal of interpretive activity in our parks. Many millions of citizens and international visitors are enjoying the parks and their interpretive programs. In general, we can be proud of our efforts in this field. Still, there are some areas of endeavor in which we can improve our efforts and effectiveness.

Marketing the National Park System - For too long, we have expected the public to automatically support national parks. Never suspecting that the day would come when we would need to market our park system, to develop support for our product. Without the public's aggressive and enthusiastic support, park systems at all levels of government may find it difficult to maintain and

develop parks and provide the services requested by the public. Marketing a park system should not be confused with the mass selling of products as the term is usually misunderstood to mean. Selling is product oriented, marketing is user oriented. Marketing a park system should relate to the community or the users and their aspirations for a higher quality of life and a better environment rather than relating to the internal needs of the system such as more equipment, new facilities, more personnel and so forth. The successful approach is one that springs from the needs, desires and aspirations of the people themselves, rather than from the needs and desires of the organization.

Interpreters must be skilled in motivating the public not only to appreciate and understand their natural heritage and the roots of their culture, but in actively supporting the system that preserves that heritage. Our visitors should be made aware of how much it cost to operate the parks that they are enjoying, this should not be a hard discussion of the budget but a general informative report to our "stockholders" built into our interpretive programs as appropriate. It's their tax money we are spending, they deserve to know how much of it goes to supporting their national parks and just what we are doing with it.

Interpretation must be taken out of the realm of entertainment - It must be the serious business of educating visitors and developing public support for the values within the parks and the system itself. This is not to suggest that we eliminate entertainment, but all too often, interpretive programs have had as their primary objective entertaining people. Entertainment and enjoyment are

and should remain the hallmark of our programs. If we loose this aspect, we can loose our audiences as well as our effectiveness. Entertainment, however, should be a means toward an end, not the end product. The end product should be education and public support. Education that will acquaint the visitor to the park with its resources and the conservation issues facing those resources. Support, in both time and money, for the park system and the park services policies and programs.

We must interpret our resources in relation to their entire ecosystem or historic context. Modern conservation recognizes the limitations of resources and the carrying capacity of both natural ecosystems and cultural resource areas. As such, conservation is basic to human welfare and indeed to human survival. Interpreters need to understand the national and the global problems that effect mankind and to be able to interpret those problems in terms of the resources of their parks, where such a connection is relevant, to the public using and enjoying those resources. Interpreters need to understand the interrelationships of their parks resources and the relationships of their parks story to the larger story of our nation and to be able to interpret those resources in terms of this larger ecosystem or historic context.

Conservation has many different meanings, but it generally refers to the non-renewable resources. Yet most non-renewable resources such as chemicals and minerals can be synthesize in the laboratory if they are lost in their natural state. If, however, our park's renewable resources - species of living things are exterminated, they can never be recreated. Thus, living renewable resources are in the absolute sense, non-renewable and this fact needs to be recognized.

A basic objective of conservation is to preserve genetic diversity by insuring that living renewable resources and the ecosystems in which they are found are saved and protected. A park system can and should defend its "unused acreage" on the need to preserve wild natural lands as genetic pools.

The conservation of cultural resources has an apparently different but in reality an essentially similar basis. They serve a research function not unlike wilderness areas in the study of ecosystems. They comprise the base line against which we can measure changes. Our cultural "gene pool". They tell us something about who and what we are as a people, where we have been, and lot about the kinds of people, places, and events that we consider important or of value. We are nearing a crossroads in our development. Our technology has been developed to the extent that not only have we produced great wealth and great technical achievements, the greatest the world has ever known, but we have generated forces and conditions that threaten to alter the very environment in which we live. Much of the knowledge and understanding necessary to predict the consequences of our activities can be learned by the careful study of our past. The preservation of the tangible evidence of this past insures the preservation of the knowledge base. A base that can help us understand the fundamental relationships of men to each other and of men living in communities to their environment as a whole.

INTERPRETIVE PROGRAM - OBJECTIVES

The actual objectives for a park interpretive program should be tailored to the specific "needs" of the areas resources, visitors and management. The following general objectives are the basic types of achievements that management should expect to accomplish through interpretive programs. They are:

1. Information and Orientation Objective:

Provide all park visitors with easy access to the information and the need to have a safe and enjoyable park experience.

This involves making our visitors aware before at the onset of and during their visit of: (1) the use opportunities, facilities, services and resources available in the park and (2) the equipment, skills, physical capabilities, hazards and safety precautions, regulations and considerations of resource protection necessary to knowledgeably and safely enjoy their park visit.

2. Understanding and Appreciation Objective:

Provide visitors with a variety of services, activities, and information to aid them in gaining a deeper appreciation and understanding of the park's resources, their values of the National Park System in general.

Interpretation can significantly enhance the visitors understanding and appreciation of the parks resources and values. Good interpretation also motivates our visitors to become actively involved in the preservation and operation of the park and of the entire park system.

We must recognize the need to provide different levels and kinds of experiences and services that will enable all our visitors to participate at their level of ability and interest. We must be

careful to provide them with these opportunities without imposing undesirable "interpretive messages" or unnecessary restrictions on them; at the same time, we must be sure that our efforts are relevant to the mission of the agency and the management objectives of the area.

3. Protection Objective:

Provide visitors with a variety of opportunities to safely interact with and enjoy the potentially dangerous, the fragile, and the irreplaceable resources of the area, while protecting those resources from overuse, unintentional damage, vandalism and theft.

Interpretive services can significantly aid in the protection of the park's resources and visitors by increasing the visitor's awareness of the resource values, of the internal and external actions and activities endangering those resources, and of the damage they can cause through careless acts or inappropriate use. This objective can be further enhanced by insuring that our visitors are aware of the rules, regulations and hazards of the area, by directly controlling the interaction between the visitors and the resources through guided tours and conducted activities and by scheduling programs, activities and roving interpreters specifically to manage the use of heavily impacted, fragile or potentially dangerous resources. Interpretation can also provide visitors with the information they need to protect themselves from the occasional illegal actions of other people in the Park.

4. Participation and Skill Development Objective:

Aid and motivate visitors to develop the skills necessary to fully enjoy the parks. Certain basic skills are required to use park resources fully and compatibly. Many citizens do not visit their national parks except for the few Urban Recreation Areas close to their homes due, in many cases, to a lack of familiarity with park environments and how to enjoy them comfortably. Many thousands who do visit, spend their entire time in the park's developed areas because they lack the skills to venture comfortably outside these man built environments. Others through lack of knowledge and/or skills become search and rescue cases or cause unintentional resource damage.

Interpretive activities that involve visitors in learning-by-doing provide increased opportunities for primary resource experiences. Workshops and skills demonstrations involving visitors in direct participation in outdoor recreational and traditional cultural activities expand their knowledge and/or kills and, thus, can increase their understanding, appreciation and enjoyment. Urban Recreation Areas can and should utilize this type of programming to help urban residents develop the skills and comfort levels necessary to feel comfortable visiting the more outlying and "wild" national park areas.

5. Dialogue Objective:

Provide a means for the public and park management to communicate their thoughts and desires to each other. This communication channel helps insure that park management is kept aware of and appropriately responsive to the needs of all the publics we serve. Conversely, it

can improve the public's understanding and support for plans and policies that the preservation of the parks resources imposes on their use and management.

By providing the public with accurate information on the reasons behind our policies and programs and by providing a communication channel for the public to reach park management with their concerns, interpretation can assist in developing the public understanding and support critical to the successful management of our parks.

6. Educational Objective:

Provide interested users and education groups with the information necessary to develop a thorough understanding of the park and of the entire park systems significance and values. While developing this appreciation of the park's resources, we should also educate the public on the current condition of those resources and make them aware of the global conservation concerns that our parks share with the rest of the world.

Interpretation by providing general information in their regular programs, special programs, seminars and other in-depth educational opportunities based on the park's themes and resources can help people understand and appreciate their dependence on and interrelationship with their environment and history. At the same time, helping them understand the global conservation concerns that our resources and the forces on them are a part of.

INTERPRETATION - A NEW LOOK AT AN OLD GAME

The changes facing the National Park Service are many -- some serious, some frivolous, few clearly understood -- and all the data indicates even more changes ahead. The most important of these, in terms of their impact on interpretation are:

1. The economic constraints facing the National Park Service and the resulting demand for increased fiscal responsibility, efficiency, and accountability in everything we do.
2. The "new federalism" movement with its decentralization of governmental authority, reduced expectation that the federal government will provide for all the needs and wants of the nation, and the requirement that government agencies develop a serious dialogue with their publics and respond to their needs and desires.
3. Changes in the composition, attitudes, and expectations of our visitors. More international visitors are using our parks. Our nation's average age is increasing steadily. The post World War II "Baby Boom" has matured. Our user population is not only older and larger, but it is also coming from a wider spectrum of our nation's population. It is healthier, better educated, more interested in leisure time recreational activities and intellectual growth, has more leisure time to utilize and more available income than its predecessors. Coupled with these demographic changes, a revolution in recreational technology is changing the nature of their leisure time activities and desires.

Our world is getting increasingly complicated, our jobs as interpreters equally so. With public involvement in management decisions increasing, and with changes in visitor use desires and patterns, interpretation has a vital role in managing parks. A knowledgeable public makes more informed and ecologically sound decisions; they respect their cultural and natural heritage more.

By creating an identification with our park's resources, an emotional involvement with and commitment to actively supporting and helping preserve them as well as an understanding of the "why" of resource related policies and regulations interpretation can be the most cost-effective management activity we have in the service.

Clearly defined and measurable objectives relevant to the park's management and visitor needs must be developed. Interpreters and the rest of the park staff working together must initiate the necessary critical self-examination of their existing programs. We can no longer afford to continue "business as usual". New methods, new approaches, and new technology must be tried and fine tuned to meet the changing conditions we face.

Yesterday's approach was not "wrong" for yesterday and today's may not be "right" for the longer range future. The programs for each period must be keyed to the needs and realities of that particular time. Creativity and Quality must become more than just nice sounding slogans, they can and must become the normal modus operandi of the National Park Service.

One last admonition, we must kept in mind that we are not the only source capable of providing interpretive services to our visitors. We can and must better utilize the potential assistance available through our Park Cooperating Associations, Park Concessionaires, Conservation and Historic Organizations, the Travel and Tourism Industry, Educational Institutions and other interested private sector organizations and individuals. Planning a park interpretive program they only deals with the services available through National Park Service employees and/or facilities is only completing part of the job. We no longer have the luxury of the "I would rather do it myself" approach to our responsibilities.

