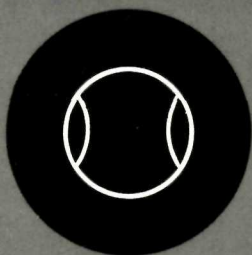
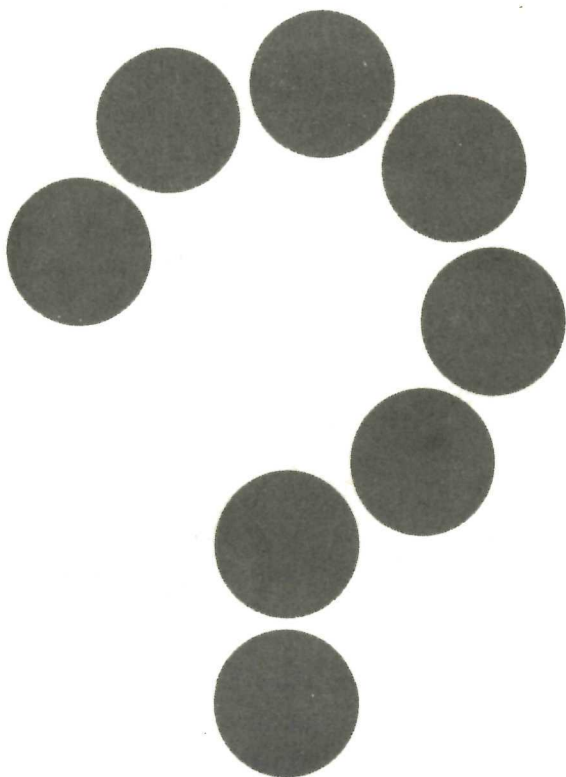


say, ranger...

Or, How to Perform in the Information Center



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Or, How to Perform in the Information Center

by
Albert Manucy

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Visitor Services Training Series

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KEYNOTE

Each year we people of the National Park Service welcome millions of other people into the greatest park system in the world. Our job is to help them find what they came for—information, relaxation, recreation, and, perhaps, some inspiration, too.

Many of these people are national park fans. Others are first-timers. To all, an unfamiliar park can be frustrating. Hence the clamor of questions.

Your job is to answer the questions. Correctly. Also skillfully, courteously—and even soothingly, upon occasion.

As a help, we have devised this booklet. Read it. Perhaps you too can win the ultimate accolade:

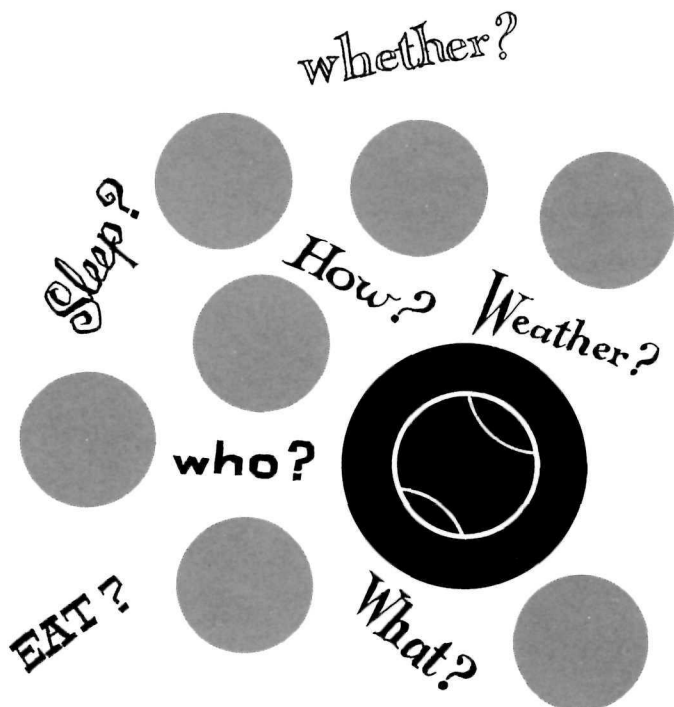
"Nice guy, wasn't he?"

"Yeah. He really had the answers."

Or, if you're of the feminine gender, strive for:

"Wasn't she nice?"

"M-m-m-m."



YOUR ATTITUDE

Think:

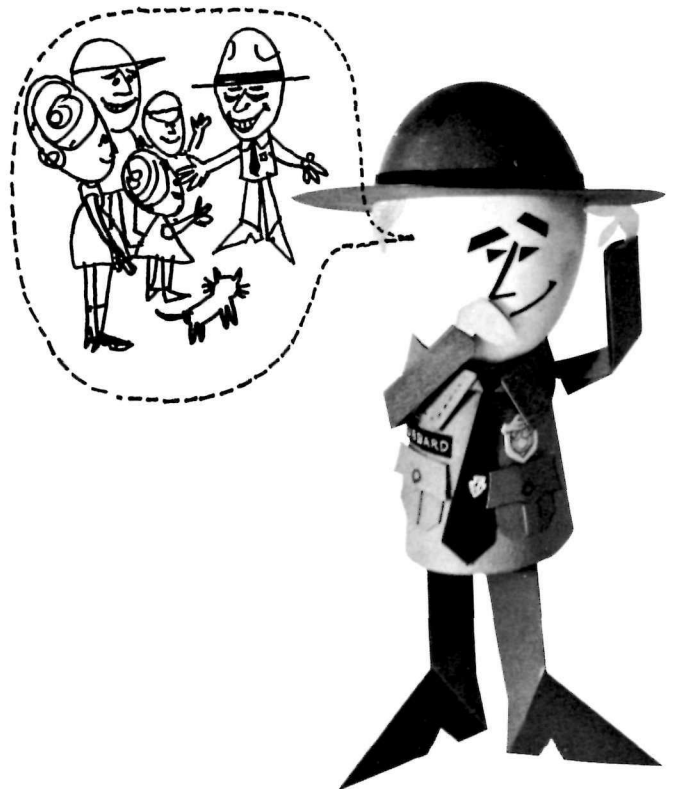
My service to the visitor can increase his pleasure in my park.

Truth is, helping people also helps me. Personally. Sort of points me in the right direction through this old vale of tears.

Besides, I'm paid to do this. Come to think of it, people are *entitled* to my help, so get on the ball, boy (or girl). No discrimination, either: let 'em be humble or famous, young or old, pretty or not so pretty, courteous or rude—I *will* be polite and patient. And I'll try, really try, to be cheerful. Even at the end of a long day.

But being a magnetic personality isn't enough. These people will ask questions which I am expected to answer. Well, here and now I promise to get the right answers and learn how to express them so visitors will understand me. Clearly. The first time, if possible.

This job, when you *do* think about it, gets bigger and bigger: *To a heck of a lot of people, I guess I am the Park Service. Hmm. So I'll have to act like it.* But be modest, boy (or girl), be modest . . .



YOU MAKE AN IMPRESSION

Yes, to the man in the street (or more precisely, in the park), you *are* the National Park Service. You at the entrance station, or behind the information counter, or wherever, may be the only one of us with whom the visitor will have a chance to talk. *You* are The Service. Its reputation is in your hands.

You have a lot going for you, so there's no need to cringe.

First, you're in uniform. Be proud of that uniform. Several generations of outstanding public service have established public respect for this outfit, and to the ones who wear it, the visitor naturally turns for aid and comfort.

Second, these people are looking for you. You're not a house-to-house salesman. What you're selling, our visitors have already bought: namely, the park.

Third, the visitor, determined to enjoy his vacation, is receptive to anyone who can help.

So take advantage of these points in your favor. Don't cancel them with carelessness. First impressions are lasting, and a bad impression can never really be corrected. So it behooves you to think of these factors:

Friend or foe? One thing you have no control over is the way the visitor feels before he gets to you.

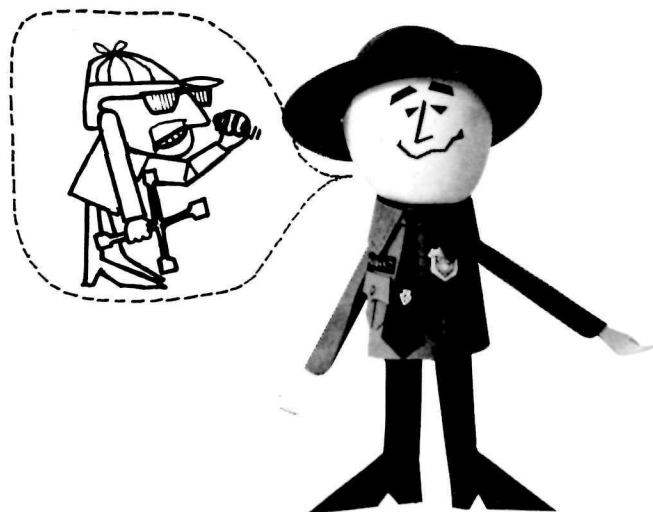
Be prepared for anything.

Maybe he's just recovering from a flat tire, a spat with his wife, the menu at the Greasy Spoon, or a bout with the gout. Even the weather can turn a nice, friendly visitor into a snarling foe on a moment's notice.

Of course, some people are born belligerent. In these cases, for everybody's good, turn the other cheek. In our book, belligerence is countered successfully only by courtesy. So you bite another notch in your tongue. Let the bellicose one talk. When he runs down, he may be more receptive to you. Certainly you will be better informed about *him*!

For your own protection, keep alert to smoke signals in voice and visage and make it plain, before the fire gets out of control, that you want to be helpful. If you understand his problem (try walking in his moccasins, as they say), the chances are you *can* help. At least you can show concern. A search for non-existent accommodations as the sun is setting over the mountain and the kids are yowling in the back seat is traumatic for even the calmest of *Homo sapiens*. At this stage, an encounter with somebody in uniform who shows no interest in the crisis will not exactly start a new friendship. On the other side, consider the reward if you *can* solve the problem. A warm glow suffuses everybody. Even the kids. A real, live RANGER spoke to them.

The shop. Your station needs that "cared for" look. After all, it's *your* workshop. Besides, the bosses (Mr. and Mrs. J. Q. Public) are positively coming to see you. Keep the shop clean



and orderly, and they can't miss the full impact of your personality, shining out from attractive surroundings. But who can scintillate in a rat's nest? Sweep that floor! Shine that glass!

Even more to the point, compose the bulletin board so people can see the vital message first, not last. Throw away the outdated stuff and straighten out the clutter. Keep your tools (maps, literature, and such) up to date. Bring order to those slovenly stacks of folders. Have your "show them" equipment within easy reach.

If you need light, adjust it so the illumination falls where it should, and not into the eyes of the customer. Or yours.

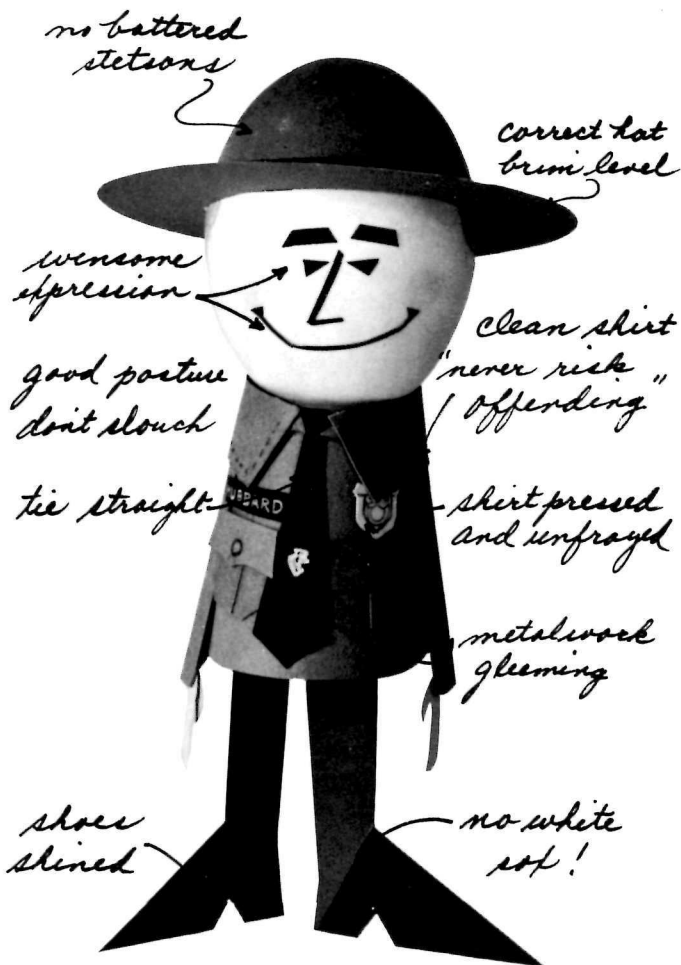
The real you. Your uniform tells people you are a member of the National Park Service. It gives you a sort of "foundation personality" to build upon.

One can't slouch attractively in a uniform. So don't try. Somehow, uniforms seem cut for individuals who hold heads up and shoulders back. Strangely enough, humans look better that way. Especially you. Poised. Vital. Ready for come-what-may.

Uniforms do save a lot of decisions about what to wear. But they do not save on

- (a) cleaning and laundry bills;
- (b) personal grooming.

To speak more pointedly: while with his ears the visitor hangs on your every word, he's also zeroing in with eyes and nose. Under certain circumstances, honest sweat is encouraged. It's the aftermath that causes people to sidle away from you. As the TV commercials say, "Never risk offending." Keep a clean shirt on hand at the shop for emergencies.



Nothing fits with a uniform except the articles listed in the *National Park Service Uniforms Handbook*. No feathers, no white socks, please. Conversely, what's worn must be worn right: hat brim level, fabric pressed and unfrayed, tie straight, leather gear and metalwork gleaming.

Obviously, since uniform allowances are provided, they are to be spent, but spent only on uniforms. You may love that battered old Stetson, but the public will never understand what you two mean to each other. Get a new one.

Try to see yourself through the visitor's eyes, and be sure that self regard doesn't dull the critique.

Beware of imitations. Be yourself. But make it your *best* self. "Winsome" and "gracious" may be "out" words, but what they describe is forever "in." This quality doesn't come with the uniform, either. You have to supply it. The best way is simply to be pleasant and helpful all the time.

It's the way to project your own special shining spirit beyond the good green uniform.

It's also the way to win friends and influence people.

CONTACT!

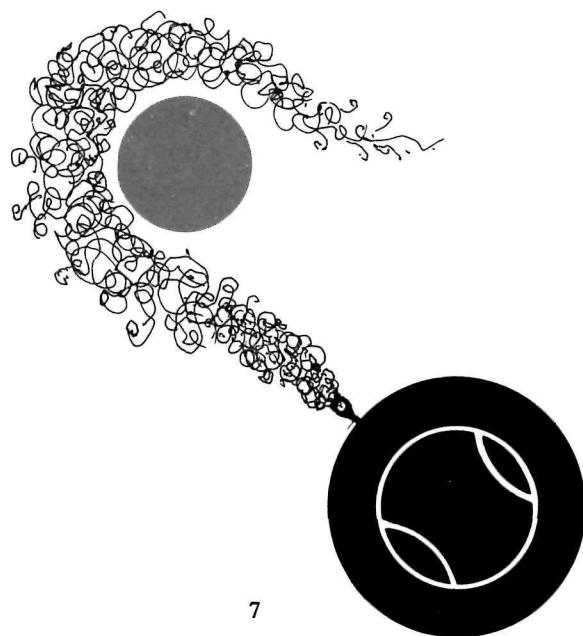
The greatest opportunity of each workday is yours when you are the first one of us to greet the visitor. Yours is a rare privilege, because you can shape the enjoyment of what may be his trip of a lifetime. That trip, for him, is a momentous occasion. For you, too, it is of moment. If you are approachable and offer valuable service, the visitor becomes conditioned to expect the same from the rest of us.

Before you say a word, your appearance and surroundings have spoken to your guest. What you say and how you say it come next.

Howdy, Stranger! Greet people. Greet them as they come in, as they approach you or as you approach them. Greet them to establish contact and show you are human. In uniform, you can talk to strangers without being suspected of ulterior motives. Use (but don't abuse) this advantage. Break the ice.

Many visitors, perhaps recalling their experiences, are reluctant to talk to "busy officials." Genuine friendliness in your greeting can bridge the gap on first contact. Smile at them. Important: let your cordiality be the same for all. All are entitled to it.

Personal mannerisms can make or break that first contact. It's only common courtesy, if you're seated, to stand when a visitor comes up to you. Don't smoke when you're on contact duty. (Smoke is offensive to many people.) Even in unguarded moments, don't talk to visitors with a smoke in your face; despite what the ads say, smokes and sunglasses do not improve your personality.



Smile a while. “A smile begets a smile.” You already knew that, didn’t you? But did you also realize that your pleasant word of interest in the visitor often brightens *your* own day? Yes, it works both ways.

Not many of us are born with the tendency to like strangers. This ability has to be cultivated, and under cultivation it becomes a rich pleasure.

The best way to make a friend is to be friendly; but as any politician can testify, keeping a smile in place over the long haul takes much more than muscle control. If lips droop, the eyes and the voice must keep on smiling, or you’re lost. People are quick to reject the insincere grimace, just as they respond magically to *genuine* expressions of interest.

Speak up! Do people fail to laugh at your jokes?

Most of us are busy thinking *what* to say, and forget to check on *how* it comes out. When one cocks the ear for a titillating tale, only to have the tale teller swallow the punch line, how great the frustration! Heaven forbid that you will ever commit the crime of failing to communicate.

Just to be on the safe side, better put your voice on tape and listen to it. Beautiful, isn’t it?

But watch the people you talk to. There’s where you’ll read your *real* test grade.

When it comes to reaching the visitor, a good clear voice is an asset second to nothing. Even the cheeriest “Good morning!” falls flat if it goes unheard. The use of your larynx can always be improved; and since the voice speaks a thousand times a day, wafting your personality to others—well, don’t just *sit* there.

Countless books and teachers discourse on how to improve the voice, so here we shall do no more than suggest the three A’s:

- Articulate (move lips);
- adjust volume to situation;
- achieve tone quality.

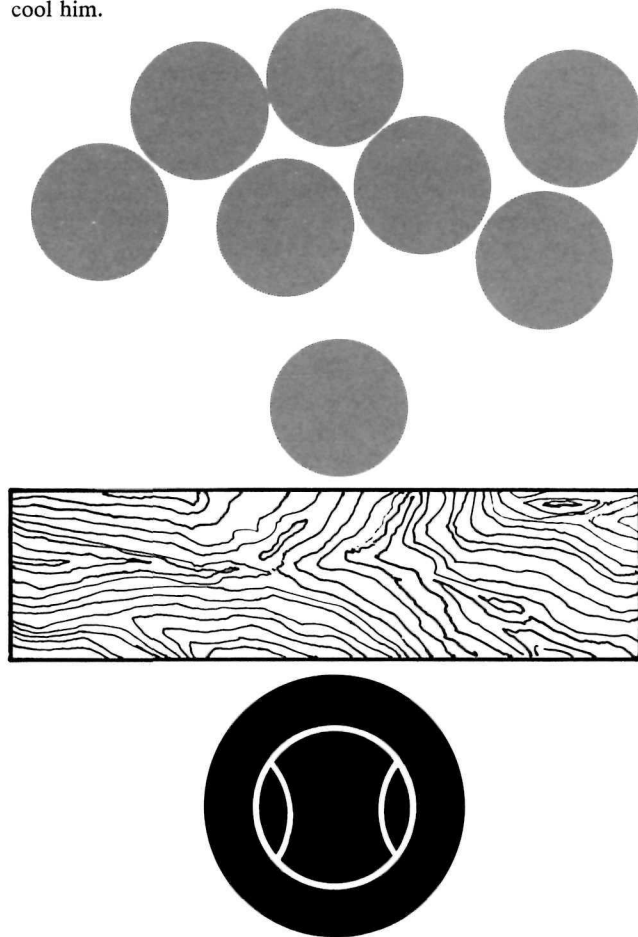
These mean simply (1) speak distinctly enough to be heard and slowly enough to be comprehended; (2) speak softly enough in the quiet, and loudly enough in the not-so-quiet, so that you are heard clearly; and (3) let the sound flow forth at a pleasant pitch, without nasal impediment nor grunts nor squeaks nor rattles. Be not remembered for the rasp in your vocal chords. Nor for your soft southern drawl or any other dialect, unless you articulate clearly enough for all to understand.

Try listening, too. “Good morning,” you carol, ever alert and cheerful. The visitor says, “Hello there.” Keenly aware of your environment, you observe, “Nice day” (or something). “Mmpf,” he replies. Despite this encouragement, don’t launch into a timely exposition of the park resources. When he really wants answers, he’ll ask questions. In that case, respond in the same way you like to have your own questions answered: Talk directly to him and speak clearly.

Should you be stacking folders or doing other odd jobs when visitors come in, stop and tend to them. After all, they are the *only* reason you’re here. Of course, if they catch you stemming a flood in a comfort station or coping with some other minor catastrophe, it’s best merely to force a smile and tell the newcomers you’ll be with them as soon as you can.

Fair to all. There comes a time when people surround you three deep, hoarding their questions impatiently while some insistent taxpayer monopolizes your time and talent. You finger the motto which says, “Manage your service so as to give a fair share of attention to all.” Perhaps you can give the monopolist something to read—like the motto, maybe—while you turn away to take care of the others. If he still doesn’t let go of your lapels, try telling him (pleasantly and without offense) that others must also be served and suggest that he wait until you can spend more time with him.

Or, suppose the boss suddenly shows up. Do you drop everything and snap to attention? Never. He’ll tell you if the barn’s burning. Meanwhile, to ignore your counter customers is to be unforgivably rude. So deal with the supervisor when his turn comes. If his temperature goes up, use this reference to cool him.



Speak no evil. Information counters are breeding places for foolish questions. The best thing to do is let them expire quietly. Beware of repeating them humourously to other visitors. This kind of ha-ha bites back. The same is true of wisecracks, especially when directed against a visitor. Yours is the hide you may be saving as you leave the tempting remark unspoken. Never—repeat *never*—put the visitor in an embarrassing situation.

“I’m going to write my Congressman.” These are chilling words, true. Nevertheless, when you hear them, maintain your customary calm. Complaints are high priority items, and a little time devoted to them at once may save many sweat-stained hours later on.

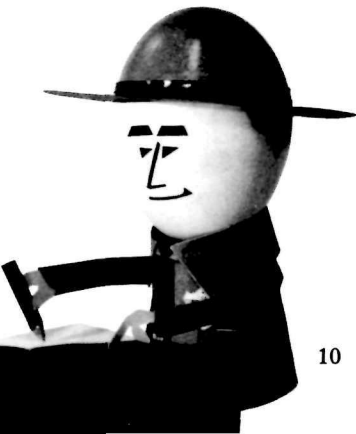
A complaint implies dissatisfaction. Since we are not in the business of dissatisfying people, we take great pains to avoid or correct unhappy situations. As one of the frontline troops, you are required to do three things:

1. Get the facts. Listen to the whole story. The chance to unburden himself may be all the complainant needs, particularly if he gets honest assurance that the matter will be investigated and if you sincerely thank him for taking the trouble to tell you about it. (After all, he’s doing us a favor.) Complaints which cannot be remedied on the spot should be obtained in writing, if possible. Strangely enough, the mere act of writing out a complaint will often take the fire out of it.

2. Satisfy the complainant. That is, try to modify the visitor’s dissatisfaction. No one ever won an argument with a customer, as the saying goes, so avoid contradictions or statements that would aggravate the situation. It is not necessary to defend the National Park Service or yourself from a visitor’s complaint. Still, if you know what caused the foul-up, don’t hesitate to explain. But not argumentatively.

Each area has its own standard procedure for referring certain types of complaints or detailed questions on National Park Service policy to permanent staffers. Often another staff member can do more for the complainant than you. Know your own park’s rules-of-thumb for these situations. Just be sure the visitor doesn’t think you’re giving him the runaround.

3. Remedy the complaint. The sooner the better. Do it yourself, if you can. Report all complaints *in writing*, including the ones you’ve fixed, to your supervisor.



ONWARD AND UPWARD

Ready to serve. Be at your station early and have the flag raised before opening time. Let it never be said that a visitor had to wait because *you* were late.

Ready to serve means being equipped with all the answers visitors need for their sojourn in the park. The first three queries are usually directional: (a) Where is the restroom? (b) Where can I buy gas? and (c) Where can we eat? Then come questions as to directions to reach other destinations, shelter for the night, places open at this season, weather, roads, and so on. You’ll want to memorize the location and time of interpretive programs, and such urgent items as closing hours of dining rooms or other concession facilities. If matters get too complicated, make a card file.

Things to check:

- Supplies of National Park Service publications
concession leaflets, naturalist programs, maps;
- Latest reports on road conditions
rock slides, the high roads; and
- Weather conditions and forecasts.

You need to know these things because the visitor is depending on you for reliable advice. Because *you* know where it’s snowing you can tell him which roads are safe and which aren’t; because *you* know the clouds are low, you can save that family a long and useless trip to the Mount Baldy overlook.

In fact, with knowledge of the park and awareness of visitor needs, you may volunteer some hints that will lead that lively family to see the best of the park and to do the things they enjoy most, instead of just muddling about. Your voluntary interest can transform routine into a pleasant sequence of stimulating relationships with people. Just be sure that the prescription fits the patient: one seldom suggests a horseback ride for the mature couple who can spend only 3 hours in the park. Watch the time of day, know the day’s program, and visitors you counsel will cherish your name.

Place both feet on ground. Rate your own effectiveness in giving information, and try to improve. Don't peek now, but there's a personal checklist at the back of this booklet. We suggest that you also ask for ratings from your supervisor and colleagues. Observe others who do a good job.

Make clarity a virtue. Of the several fundamental points in giving directions to park visitors, the first one is *orientation*. "Drive north one-half mile, then west on 30" sounds wonderfully precise until the unhappy visitor realizes he hasn't the faintest idea which way is north. So tell the guy where he *is*. Better yet, show him on a map. Put a circle around the "you are here" point. Be sure the map is right side up to him, and point out north.

Second, keep directions clear and simple. Move the visitor one destination at a time. You can lose almost anybody after that third turn, especially if you can't see it from here. Don't be tempted to add gratuitous tidbits such as: "Too bad you weren't here last week. The azaleas on the southeast slope of Whatzis Mountain were marvelous. That's just after you hit the fifth tunnel." Instead, just line the route on a map he can take with him. A light-color felt pen makes a mark easily perceived by a busy driver. (Stay away from dark pens; they blot out the whole landscape.) It's not a bad idea to mention a few place names the visitor will see on road signs, but don't load him with too many. Avoid alternate routes, unless they insist.

Keep them out of trouble. The third precept is to anticipate difficulties the visitor may encounter. "How far to Johnsons Corners?" he asks. "Fifty miles," you say, and he mentally checks off 1 hour for driving to Johnsons Corners. But 5 of those 50 miles are straight up. It will be dark before he's half-way there, and a cold front is blowing in. This man is going to be mighty tired and irritable by the time he gets to Johnsons Corners—if he ever gets there. Better counsel with him a little.

Or these kids ask about the summit trail. "Ten miles," you say, and as they dash for the trail you realize not one of them is equipped for those rugged grades. So call them back and acquaint them with the facts of life.

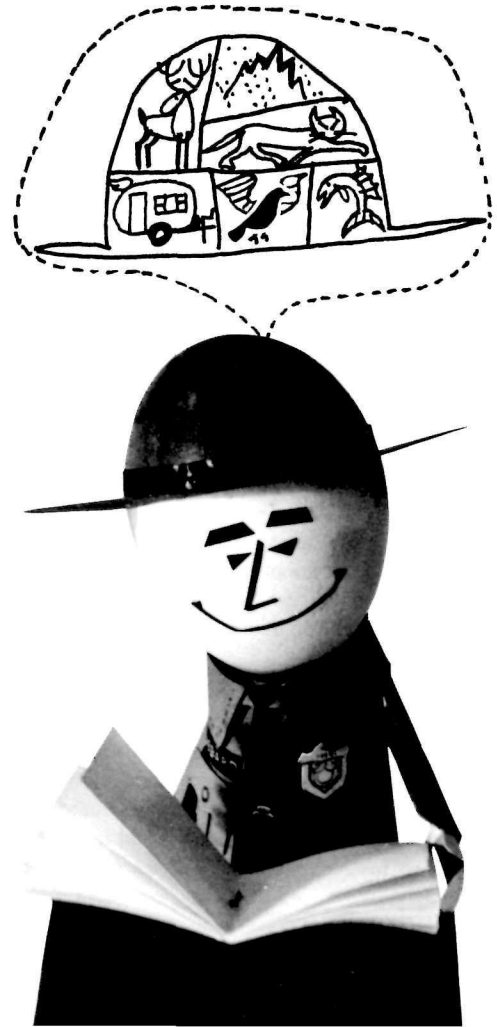
Newcomers are apt to run aground on park regulations. Often you can recognize trouble signs during a conversation. Don't preach, but maybe this is the place for tactful suggestions about joint use of the park by wildlife and humans. When you inspire the visitor to drive safely, use the garbage can, and put out campfires, you are making our job easier and the visitor's stay happier.

Uniformed and informed. Putting on the Park Service hat doesn't automatically put a stock of answers into your head. Nor does anybody expect you to keep all the answers at the tip of your tongue. But you should know where to find them when you need them.

When you're stumped, admit it. Get the answer if you can, or send your visitor to another source. Then try to have the answer ready for the next time.

One of the best sources for information on your park is the master plan. Study it, and ask questions on your own. Many parks have handbooks for new employees. Ask your supervisor for what's available.

Now that you are wearing the Service uniform, you should know what it stands for. The National Park Service training booklets were written especially for you. And in the park library you'll find worthwhile books on the great system of national parks and the Service that was founded to keep them for the people. One of the best of these books is Freeman Tilden's *The National Parks: What They Mean to You and Me*.



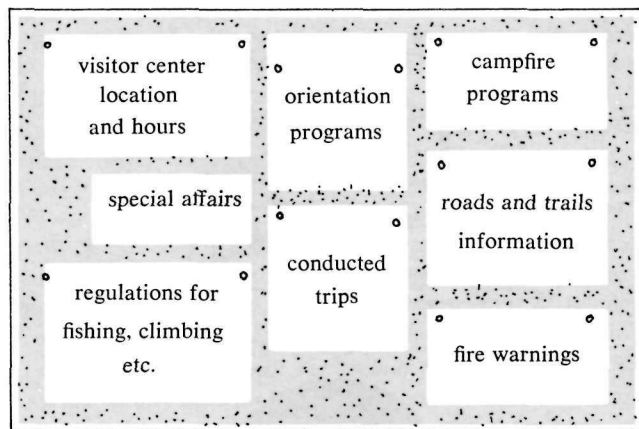
BULLETINS

The ***** place is closed!** The big beautiful sign says INFORMATION, but the door's locked and nobody's around. With night coming on, what can be more disheartening to a visitor?

We can't man this post around the clock, but why not a device to function while we're gone? The simplest is a card on the door to tell the traveler when you'll be back, or to send him on to the next open station. Leave a supply of park folders in the rack, and post information on food and lodging. If there's an audio tape for after-hour use, before you leave be sure it will sound off when somebody punches the button. And have a bulletin board.

Bulletin board or rat's nest? A bulletin board is a sort of a newspaper, telling the visitor what's going on, and when and where he can join in. At a busy information center, it works for you 24 hours a day and saves both the visitor's time and yours.

On the board go announcements of interpretive activities, such as



and so on.

A bulletin board is not a catch-all. But far too often it deteriorates into an ugly, cluttered "rat's nest." To keep it from becoming so, you may wish to borrow the newspaper technique and headline announcements and information categories with bold letters. Anyway, oversize letters make for easier reading in a crowd. Remember that when you have an important notice to post.

Every day or two the display should be combed out. Throw the out-of-date items away and restore neatness. This is not always easy to do. Park visitors enthusiastically scan the boards for messages from friends, transportation notices, and lost and found articles. In such cases, a second board (perhaps at the concession) may be reserved for personal items, thus freeing your own board for National Park Service information.

ADMONITIONS

Our public image. We've said it before; now we say it again: the uniform you wear sets you apart as a representative of the National Park Service. You are somebody special. People respect the uniform and they expect dignity, sincerity, dedication, and friendliness from the person who wears it.

In the taxpayer's view, whenever you're in uniform you're on duty. It follows that, while you're in uniform, your conduct should be exemplary.

And especially when you're in uniform, the taxpayer and your supervisors, who in this case may be one and the same, expect you to earn your pay. Avoid the situation where you and Ranger Joe appear to be shooting the breeze with nothing to do, perhaps even ignoring the visitors present. This can easily occur when the shift changes and the man going off duty has to brief the new man. Arrange such conferences (or coffee breaks or whatever) out of sight of the visitor, so there are no seeming discourtesies to him. *Never* allow the information desk area to become the "take-five" gathering place for employees. For nothing gives the visitor a quicker impression of unearned salaries than the sight of several uniformed men clustered together in comradely badinage. Surely there must be bears to chase . . . somewhere.

For the future. Perhaps you don't expect to make a career out of information service. But as of now, that's your job. You are expected not only to do it well but to find ways of doing it better.

Coming into the park as a new staffer, you are somewhat of a visitor yourself. Your viewpoint is fresh, and we value it highly. Talk to the supervisor and pass your ideas along. This is part of your job, but it also tells the boss (and your associates) that you're a person with perception and imagination.

Still, the most important return from this job will be experience in dealing with people. A workshop in human relations is operating here, and if you don't gain stature from it, you're not the person we thought you were. Friends out of this travail will last a lifetime, and contacts made will shape your career.

Information duty is giving you opportunity for public service of high order. As one of us, you can share the pride of the National Park Service in custodianship of the greatest system of national parks in the world.

THE COUNT-DOWN SHEET

(All items must be checked before beginning operation.)

I. Attitude

- I am ☐ convinced of the importance of the job.
- ☐ aware of the importance of first impressions.
- ☐ aware of the appearance of my surroundings.
- ☐ looking for ways to keep my job interesting to both visitor and me.

II. Personality

(Reminder: I may be the only National Park Service representative the visitor will see during his stay in the park.)

I will be

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> available. | <input type="checkbox"/> MYSELF. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> courteous. | <input type="checkbox"/> neat. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> enthusiastic. | <input type="checkbox"/> patient. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> helpful. | <input type="checkbox"/> uniformed sharply. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> informed. | <input type="checkbox"/> well groomed. |

III. Operations

A. Greeting visitors

- I am ready to ☐ smile and speak.
- ☐ be gracious and friendly—
AND MEAN IT!
- ☐ stand when visitor enters and while he is at my station.

B. Answering questions

- I am prepared to ☐ speak plainly.
- ☐ use a pleasant but forceful voice.
- ☐ use "show them" folders, maps and books.
- ☐ and turn them so visitors can read.
- ☐ add useful information—when it is useful.

C. Ammunition

- I will ☐ obtain road and weather information early in the day and keep it current.
- ☐ have informational literature at hand and keep it neat.
- ☐ keep sales publications available, neatly displayed, and priced.
- ☐ know sales techniques and policies.
- ☐ see to it that information room and its furnishings are clean and in their places.

