

A NEW EDUCATION MISSION FOR THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

by Sarah G. Bishop and Robert Huggins

In response to both President Bush and Secretary of the Interior Lujan's expressed interests in promoting educational programs, Park Service Director Ridenour convened a task force in January to review the Service's educational programs. The charge to the task force was to look at what the NPS is doing in education, where it should be going, and how it can integrate both cultural and environmental education into a Servicewide program.

The Director's interest in the Service's education programs is also supported by The Interpretive Challenge, a plan developed by the Division of Interpretation, and National Parks: From Vignettes to a Global View, the report of the Commission on Research and Resource Management Policy in the National Park System.

The "Challenge," an internal NPS planning document, gives major emphasis to the renewal and enhancement of National Park Service education activities.

"Global View" was co-sponsored by the National Parks and Conservation Association and the NPS. One of the four major areas of recommendations in the report concerns a much expanded educational role for the Park Service as well.

Other recommendations made by the Commission Report call for ecosystem management that extends beyond the boundaries of parks as well as encompasses human activities, past, present and future, within natural systems; stress the urgent need for a vastly expanded research program to provide the information base for effective ecosystem management; and describe the need for a fully professionalized Park Service to conduct the research and manage the parks. (Copies of the report, National Parks: From Vignettes to a Global View, are available from the National Parks and Conservation Association, 1015 31st Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20007).

When the Global View report was released last year, a day long seminar allowed both the authors and recipients of the report to discuss its contents and implications. A discussion group led by Sarah Bishop, Commission member; Robert Stanton, National Capital Region Director; Edward McCrea, former President, North American Association for Environmental Education; and Robert Huggins, Natural, Recreational, and Urban Park Specialist, WASO, exchanged ideas on the role of education in the Park Service. These ideas, which are summarized in this article, helped form the foundation for the task force's work.

Education, a Regional/National/Global View

The Park Service's educational role must extend far beyond the parks for two reasons: to build an understanding among all of us of the value of our natural and cultural heritage that parks preserve; and to give us the tools to make informed decisions about living in harmony with our natural environment as well as with each other. The special features must be

understood and protected, and we must learn this lesson for our parks' survival as well as our own.

If national parks are to survive or better thrive, they must have a knowledgeable, committed constituency. Knowledge and commitment come through education and involvement. In order to learn everything we can and must form them, park must become centers of education staffed with great teachers and a comprehensive curriculum. Some will say that this is too grandiose, that we are asking the parks to be all things to all people. Just let the Park Service manage its lands and special features. That is enough.

That is not enough. The natural constituency for the national parks is growing older. The torch must be passed to a younger, more urban, less park-oriented generation. Parks must reach out further and more extensively than ever before to bring understanding of our natural and cultural heritage to the entire American public. To reach only the park visitor, no matter how well the presentation is made, will not be sufficient to build the support community that parks need and deserve.

Within the parks themselves all employees should understand why the park is there so they can effectively support resource management and interpretation programs. As for outreach, parks already have some natural partners to help them take their stories beyond their boundaries. They include volunteers, concessioners, cooperating associations, and others who work in or with parks.

The educational role of parks must be integrated into overall management efforts. Granted there need to be education specialists with a good support network, but their work can be effective only if they are part of the management mainstream. Many organizations stand ready to help parks, both formally and informally, to develop and expand their educational outreach.

Interpretation programs should capitalize on the relationship between park resources and the public enjoyment of them. Cooperating Associations in growing numbers are developing seminars and other programs just for that purpose. Interpreting management policies should also be a major focus.

Parks have been in the educational outreach mode since the 1960's. However, many programs have suffered for lack of cooperation with local institutions. A systematic coordination with educational institutions is needed to teach a conservation ethic focusing on cultural and ecological change. Parks and the Park Service as a whole, need to learn how to use mass communication to their greater benefit. Finally, the NPS must take a leadership role in promoting international education on global, cultural and ecological changes.

Parks need not work in isolation from the multi-faceted educational system already in place in our country. There is much information that can be made accessible to parks and integrated into their education programs. Park managers must start by bringing their own staff together as an educational team and then reaching out in cooperative efforts with others for teaching values and developing the conservation ethic among the next generation of park enthusiasts. Outreach of the National Park System has the ultimate

goal of increasing national unity through a common understanding of our environment and the role it plays in all our lives.

The Education Task Force has considered these recommendations as well as those found in the Interpretive Challenge in the development of a report which will be presented to the Director in March 1990.

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