



United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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IN REPLY REFER TO:

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Memorandum

To: Regional Directors
Attention: Regional Chiefs of Interpretation

From: Assistant Director, Interpretation

Subject: Urban Parks and Interpretation

After attending the Urban Parks Superintendents' Conference in New York, I began thinking about my past experiences in urban parks. Being from a Midwestern farm equipment manufacturing community, most of my childhood experiences in urban parks were limited to a number of city blocks that were tree-filled and had grassy play fields. I spent every day of the summer months participating in organized and spontaneous activities with other children who lived nearby. On occasion, our organized play would send us across town to another neighborhood park to compete with children of that neighborhood. Sometimes we would go to parks "on the hill" where the rich kids lived, and sometimes we would go to parks near the great Mississippi River where we believed the poorer kids lived. These were forays into mini-cultures of our town.

During those early years, I learned which activities suited my individual talents and which activities required teamwork. I learned who would be friendly to me and who was likely to punch me in the nose, occasionally without provocation. Sometimes I would simply hang around the older kids, observing their less social behavior. For sure, I began to realize the differences in we children and the differences in our town. I do not ever remember wondering what life would be like for children if they did not have a park or the chance to choose which activity would be satisfying, or the chance to make a new friend. I guess I assumed parks were everywhere, for always, and available to everyone.

Now when I return to those places of summer fun, I discover a changed park with very few children and an absence of facilities. The parks seem to have become simply open space. The fish pond, once serving as an ice skating rink in the winter, now has been drained. The ball fields have no back stops. The merry-go-round must have been unsafe; it has been removed. The corner grocery store does not sell popsicles anymore, it went out of business.

During the visits I have wondered, "Where do the children go to play and learn together?" When I am more alert and less nostalgic, I notice the park is being used by a new group of people, the elderly. Although the children of that neighborhood may have gone, the park still remains a vital part of the community.

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OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT
DIRECTOR FOR INTERPRETATION
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Later in my life, I visited many grand city parks in places like San Francisco and Seattle. I did not go there to play. I went for such "significant" events as hydroplane races, art exhibits, and demonstrations. In reality, I went there out of boredom for the sake of curiosity. These parks were mostly places of beauty and intense activity.

More recently, during the 1970s, the National Park Service sent me to the South Bronx. President Carter thought something should be done by the government and he wanted ideas from the National Park Service. I remember the stark empty buildings and the frightening absence of humanity. At first, I was unsettled; after being there awhile, I was sad. It seemed the place was more than an exhibit of despair, it was the final moment in the life of a community. I thought to myself, "What value might a park bring to this place?" The ideas I submitted called for activities that would renew a sense of pride in the neighboring communities. The place needed the spirit and involvement of the local people. This seemed more important than a gift by the government; a gift of beauty and development. I thought of my home town neighborhood park rather than the beautiful park in Seattle.

All of these memories remind me of the changing character of our lives and the changing character of those places where life experiences have shaped our values. City spaces change and evolve just like the more natural spaces in our great Natural Parks. Economic, political, and technological changes all affect the choices we make about how we spend our time and what we feel is important to a personally satisfying life.

What does not change is our need to have pride and some self-guiding principles to live by; principles that ensure our personal growth and development will not occur at the expense of other people and the environment in which we live. Remarkably, the search for this high quality life experience somehow often transcends our consumptive and combative tendencies. The need for places to enlighten the spirit, extend goodwill to our neighbors, and discover the untold secrets of nature, commit us to hanging on to the principles of human dignity and environmental distinction. Our system of national parks can provide places for these principles to be practiced. The principles remain the same whether a visitor is in Yellowstone National Park or Gateway National Recreation Area.

The articulate Yale professor, Robin Winks has said, "Parks are great natural laboratories; they are universities in a sense." I agree and believe parks are also the greatest social arenas within our society. We can study and learn from the natural processes in parks, and we can study and learn from the social processes in parks.

In parks, the basic principles of life can be viewed, studied, and practiced. Interpreters and superintendents of parks have an opportunity to orchestrate spiritual and intellectual experiences that will perpetuate our most cherished values and principles.

Noted physicist and Pulitzer Prize winner, Rene' Dubois has written, "In the absence of central guiding principles, activities tend to become ends unto themselves; they proceed on their own course and become increasingly unrelated to general human concerns."

In urban parks, we have an opportunity to address issues of general human concern. In all of our interpretive endeavors, we can inform and educate, as well as entertain.

Our forefathers came to this land and fought for what they believed to be basic principles, including the freedom of choice. This freedom to choose resulted in the framing of our constitution. This year we celebrate that event and we celebrate it knowing it has given us the right of dignity, distinction and the right to choose what our future will be. When we help visitors understand this, we are shaping the future.

Interpretive programs in national parks can be related to the general concerns of our visitors. What they learn may strengthen their will to make decisions that will ultimately preserve the dignity and distinction of their environment and themselves.

The Urban Park Conference in New York was a wonderful experience; it provoked me to think about the meaning of open space, parks and national recreation areas. It encouraged me to once again, take a few moments and explore the roots of my own values; something we all should do on a regular basis.

bcc:

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