



“Who is Gen-Y and Why Should I Care?”

Findings from the “Generation Y” Workshop
Held at Saratoga National Historical Park, March 2007

Rising to the occasion is what we do in the National Park Service. As we face reports about decreasing park visitation resulting from loss of interest among younger people and lack of relevancy among culturally diverse audiences, we have exceptional opportunities to discover new ways to make our sites meaningful in the 21st century. Between new technology and fascinating scholarship, NPS professionals have literally thousands of new horizons to express our creativity in meeting this challenge. We hope this initial “Gen Y” workshop generates further dialogue, and that by 2016 we celebrate the Centennial with a widely diverse public who come to understand and care about our national parks as “theirs.”

Frank Dean,
Superintendent, Saratoga National Historical Park

Who is “Generation Y” and Why Should I Care?

Support for the National Park Service among Generation Y (those born between 1980 and 2000) is essential to the future survival of national parks. As we approach the NPS Centennial we have an exceptional platform to reach out to Gen Y and other audiences, much as Stephen Mather reached out to ‘new’ audiences almost 100 years ago.

According to media accounts the shrinking number of national park visits may be caused by increasing gasoline prices, the rising popularity of electronic media and the greatly evolving diversity of the U.S. population. Gasoline prices aside, there is much the NPS can do to make our parks meaningful to audiences who seek experiences that reach beyond traditional uses.

Spurred by a compelling presentation at the November 2006 National Association of Interpretation Workshop about “Who is Generation Y and Why Should I Care,” staff at Fort Stanwix NM and Saratoga NHP decided that the topic warranted a meaningful dialogue that extended beyond our two parks. As a result, a “Generation Y” workshop was organized for NPS sites in upstate New York, supported by the Northeast Region Division of Interpretation and Education Training, NPS National Capital Regional Office and in partnership with Siena and Skidmore colleges.

The one-day session spurred more interest than time

allowed. Plans are in place to present similar workshops in the region, and this newsletter provides findings from the initial workshop as well as suggested ideas and actions to make our sites relevant to this particular audience.

The Focus Group

Siena College, a partner of Saratoga NHP houses the Siena Research Institute (SRI) which conducts nationally recognized surveys on various issues and is regularly cited in national media such as The Wall Street Journal and The New York Times. Joe Caruso of SRI and Dr. Karen Mahar offered to conduct a focus group of Gen Y’ers between 18 and 27 years old. Here are the results.

Of 12 participants (6 men/6 women between 18 and 27) the following was reported:

- ◆ Ten had visited one or more national parks (regional or destination parks) with family or friends and seven through a school group. Eight had learned about parks on TV and five via the Web.
- ◆ On a scale of 1 – 5 (five representing highest value), students ranked as follows: two ranked visiting parks as a “2”; four ranked it as a “3”; four ranked it as a “4” and two ranked it as a “5.”
- ◆ Their reasons to visit were as follows: 6 for history; 11 for recreation; 6 for connecting to nature; 0 for stewardship; 3 for health; 1 for camping.

Activities They Found of Interest:

Hiking - 6
Camping - 5
Birding - 0
Touring historic sites - 5
Fishing - 4
Reading historic accounts - 6
Photography - 3
Enjoying nature - 4

Comments About the NPS Reaching Out to Their Generation

1. Create age-limited tours (Gen Y members do not want to be “stuck” with elementary students); offer college weekends, like travel agencies; make tours for similarly aged persons.
2. Promote compelling reasons to visit - knowing that glaciers are threatened, would interest Gen Y travelers in seeing the Glacier sites before the glaciers disappear

- (bragging rights).
- Rally others of their age group by providing testimonials on websites about the park - similar to what filmgoers say after seeing a new film.
 - Exposure on TV such as MTV's "Real World" program in which a character is pursuing a career in the NPS (product placement on TV/web).
 - NPS set up tables at certain campus-wide activity days, provide literature and talk to students about what they can do at the park.
 - Others included: Earth Day activities, promote parks alongside sports events, organized bus-trips; student rates, advertise on FaceBook or MySpace.com

The Academic Overview

Dr. Mary C. Lynn, Professor of American Studies at Skidmore College facilitated the workshop. Her meticulously crafted lecture was a thought provoking foundation that set an inspiring challenge for the conversation...yet filtered with a healthy skepticism about classifying 'generations' and pointing out that "correlation is not necessarily causation."

Looking at Generations

Generations have been defined by their place on a family tree. Although there is no official, agreed upon rule concerning generational length, nor consensus regarding generational divisions, they have often been separated by 20-year increments:

Generally born

Generation Y:	1980-2000
Generation X:	1961-1980
Boomers:	1946-1960
Silent:	1927-1946
Greatest:	1906-1927

These 'classifications' raised questions. Do people born in similar time frames share the same values or interests? Why the cut off dates and who determines? Do we run the risk of stereotyping generations? Similarities that were noted include the following:

- Generations are defined by shared experiences such as WWII.
- Boomers are defined by a birth rate, generally identified as 1942-1964 or 1946-1961.

Qualities of Generation Y

- Generation Y: Also called "whatever generation, millennials, I-generation (Internet), Nintendo generation, why generation, echoboomers; they constitute people age 7 to 27.
- Generation Y influences: 9-11, Challenger explosion of 1986, 1st Gulf War, fall of the Soviet Union, increase in personal technology.

- "Naturephilia" is being replaced by "videophilia."
- Is increasingly separated from nature, yet this generation has an increased environmental awareness and interest.
- Increased time spent indoors - past generations played outside.
- Had "organized" activities and camps.
- Both parents have full time jobs or from single parent home.
- Noticeable increase in protectiveness and safety made by parents, perhaps due to media over exposure of tragic events (kidnapping, etc).
- 1/5 of Generation Y children are born of an immigrant parent.
- They are adept at multitasking (possibly leading to decrease ability to remember/learn) and some reared by "helicopter" parents (constant watching/connection).
- Generation Y wants interactivity, quick feedback, choices, flexibility, and its members are generally good at teamwork.
- They feel special, vital, technologically advanced, sheltered, confident, team oriented, appreciate peer



Two Gen Y students at the Saratoga meeting, plus Kathy Tevyaw (far left), Bill Duffy (back turned), and Mary C. Lynn (second from right).

bonds, group learning and increased school standards, and avoid risks.

- There is pressure to excel, they support convention, and believe social rules can help.
- They are more confident of the future than previous generations.
- However, there are gender/class differences, racial/ethnic differences and not everyone is "wired."
- Likewise, while Gen Y members seem to prefer use of technologies like iPod or cell

phone tours, many are mindful that certain visitors may not be able to use them.

- Each rising generation rejects the identity of its immediate predecessor. They want to define themselves.

Qualities of the "New Silent Generation" or "Generation Z"

- Some sedentary, overweight, indoor kids unfamiliar with nature/the outdoors.
- Very "wired" and connected.
- The generation most detached from our nation's past - partly due to an increase in social cause instruction/legislative mandates (proper diet, pet care, fire, drugs, no child left behind) leaving less time for study, interest and knowledge of arts or history.
- As a result, families will not come to national parks if they don't know or aren't interested about the past and history.

Theories About the Gap Between Generation Y and NPS

- ◆ High cost of gasoline (park attendance also dropped during the 1970s oil crisis).
- ◆ Less exposure to parks as a result of busy family life where people work longer hours and take shorter vacations, leaving little time to explore national parks.
- ◆ Snowmobile and all-terrain vehicle advocates say potential visitors are discouraged because these forms of recreation are extremely limited by park rules.
- ◆ Although “correlation is not necessarily causality,” a study about decreased visitation at NPS sites (1988-2003) noted that during this time there was a significant increase in all forms of electronic entertainment.
- ◆ With more to do at home and indoors, Gen Y and the next generation (the “New Silent Generation” or “Generation Z”) are indoor generations.

The Technology

Skidmore College Director of Information Technology Bill Duffy provided insight about his experiences with the tech-savvy Gen Y and an overview of technological devices.

According to Bill, Gen Y is tech savvy, but only as familiar with the technology as their own personal use is involved - they're not necessarily the tech geniuses that older generations think them to be. They know what they use, but often can't do basic functions outside that regular familiarity, such as troubleshooting or uploads, updating, maintenance. This generation does not consider computers to be technology per se; they grew up *always* having one, much like having a toaster.

Gen Y is also more tolerant of computer malfunctions, often with an attitude of moving onto something else and being flexible with a “work-around” idea so they would come back to it later with a fresh thought process.

Gadgets

Laptops: Portable personal computing device for e-mail, word processing, design, networking, database, etc.

Video Game Consoles: 7th generation technology, incredibly high resolution and accurate, very interactive, very powerful gaming systems (Microsoft Xbox 360, Nintendo's Wii).

Cell phones: Revolutionized communication. Gen Y students on college campus are on their phones

frequently, many calling mothers/friends about day-to-day and minute-to-minute activities.

iPhone: Apple product is a multimedia/internet-enabled phone available in June 2007 with camera, e-mail, messaging, Web browsing via touch screen with virtual keyboard.

BlackBerry: Wireless hand held for e-mail, text messaging, internet faxing, Web browsing (jokingly referred to as ‘crackberry’ by addicted users).

GPS (Global Positioning System): A GPS receiver calculates position via satellites.

iPods: Utilize MP3 file formats to fit massive amounts of music and video files onto ipods/MP3 players. Macintosh “iPods” were the first and remain dominant in the market, but PC systems available.

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A recurring theme throughout
the focus group was that
Generation Y has a strong
interest in seeing people of
their age enjoying parks – so
programs and promotions
should emphasize people in
this age group.
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Technologies

• *Wiki:* Interactive websites where people can add, subtract, edit information listed on any subject, essentially a virtual workspace effective for mass collaborative writing.

• *WikiPedia:* Multilingual Web-based free content encyclopedia, collaboratively written by volunteers (Professors at the conference expressed concern over such sites as

presented info is sometimes inaccurate).

Blogs: Online journals, abbreviated from “Web logs” and essentially like journals or diaries of the past. Extremely popular, giving Gen Y folks an opportunity to express who they are, what they're experiencing/thinking/feeling (over 60 million in cyberspace).

Podcasts: Like broadcasts over radio or TV, only they're on the Internet and are downloadable. Some are free, others by subscription and are often targeted for a specific age range (Club Penguin, Nicktropolis and Colonial Williamsburg's site: www.history.org for elementary school age kids).

Instant Messaging (IM'ing): Real-time conversations over the Internet. Can include digital pictures along with text, or even video IM'ing over live video link. IM'ing has dramatically changed communication, resulting in language getting “dumbed down” with a lack of rules of grammar or spelling. It's speedy, and even be done as a “blind IM” where they're typing coherent messages by pressing phone keypads while still in their pockets.

RSS: Distilled headlines on news websites, allowing brief view of what's in the news – they're located at right hand side of newspapers Web-line.

Social networking: Very broad category, not permitted by present DOI National Park Service rules on Web access. Sites like MySpace, FaceBook or Flickr, YouTube.

Geocaching: Actual (real cache) and virtual (answers) scavenger hunts using GPS are increasingly popular. Actual geocaching not permitted on NPS lands, though virtual acceptable at some sites.

Reviews of Glacier NP and Saratoga NHP Websites by Focus Group and Gen Y Workshop Participants

- ◆ Glacier NP E-Tour: At the workshop there were problems getting into the site, but when an NPS staff person helped navigate and provided an overview, the audience enjoyed the site. The Focus Group was critical of the banjo music.
- ◆ Glacier NP E-Hike: The Focus Group gave good reviews for use of sound buttons, although it did not generate interest to go there if one were not already interested in such a hike. The 'people' sound button was silent –several individuals wanted to see other people their own age enjoying the park.
- ◆ Saratoga NHP: Workshop participants were frustrated that links were not available from the "Did You Know" section to respective parks. DYK info about other parks created confusion – the group thought they should relate to the park's theme.

Current NPS Tools for Gen Y and Younger Audiences:

- ◆ WebRanger: Internet site for young people to learn about natural and cultural aspects.
- ◆ Podcasts: Yellowstone clips (www.nps.gov/archive/yell/insideyellowstone/index.htm).
- ◆ E-Hikes: Glacier NP designed Web feature for 'virtual' hikes.
- ◆ Webcams: remote cameras featuring real-time images of parks.
- ◆ Climate Change Toolkit: educational curriculum in a box.
- ◆ Sustainability News: biannual newsletter by Environmental Leadership program.

Strategies to Reach Generation Y

- ◆ They want interactivity (touchables, smells, sounds, etc.)
- ◆ They want to see people their age in parks
- ◆ They want technology (liked the Saratoga light map)
- ◆ Websites:
 - Clean graphics, easy to navigate, not obnoxious looking.
 - "Did You Know" at the bottom of the page should be thematically related and have a link to the park addressed.

- Video gets stale quickly, but photos do not. Keep video fresh.
- Due to desire for instant access and communication, Web video load times may impact their interest.
- Literature is not a tool to ignore: not everything should be in pictures and video.

Actions Parks Can Take Now

1. Seek partnerships with local colleges to discuss the issue and create opportunities for them to help with developing programs and products.
2. Learn from innovative organizations that have created podcasts, cell-phone tours, computer generated interactive learning programs (Websites of interest: Valley of the Shadow, Ball State University).
3. Consider employing Student Conservation Association students to aid with relevancy, assist with research and prove programs to younger audiences.
4. Try low-tech interactive activities such as Lincoln Logs and a 'sand box' for visitors to 'construct' a fortification.

Thoughts to Guide the NPS

This 'trend' focused on Generation Y is an opportunity for the NPS to create innovative learning experiences for all visitors, not to stereotype any generation or provide solely for the tech savvy. The heart of this initiative is to find relevant methods to reach changing audiences and heighten our awareness of differences among gender, generation, class, socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity.

In Closing

For those of us who love parks or who work in the NPS, it is unimaginable that we are at risk of losing the people for whom these parks were created. Yet recent studies and numbers are telling us that we may well be on the cusp of such a trend.

It is timely that this news comes to us as we prepare for the NPS Centennial in 2016. It is exciting and important that although its origins relate to Gen Y, the fresh ideas and outcomes from this initiative have the potential to positively affect visitors representing multi-generations, cultures and ethnicities.

We look forward to next steps in continuing this dialogue and implementing programs that have the capacity to inspire current and future generations. 🍌

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