

Abstract

Deputy Director Lindi Harvey
Remarks at Dolomiti Bellunesi National Park
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The U.S. National Park Service (USNPS) has learned much in the 92 years since Stephen Mather and Horace Albright worked with the U.S. Congress to create an agency to manage the jewels of America's natural, cultural and historic heritage. Among the many programs that the USNPS applied to its management of the U.S. National Park System in looking for a balance between conservation and recreation, there have been many that the world has looked to emulate, and still quite a few that were less than successful. With hindsight, we have been able to gain perspective on what works, what seemed to work - in its day - but needed revision, and what had to be discarded, as well as where much work remains to be done.

Catering to the comforts of the visitors led to Mission 66, the program undertaken to observe the USNPS's 50th Anniversary in 1966, where the USNPS emphasized building more and better Visitor Centers, which the visitors loved, but which claims an increasingly heavily share of the agency's annual budget, sometimes to the detriment of many other services. As visitation changed and the duration of individual visits diminished to where the average visitor stays only four hours inside the park, we realize that we overbuilt our infrastructure, and that there were environmental impacts from all this activity inside our park borders. We seek now to move more of these structures from within park boundaries to outside the park, into the local communities, where the economic benefits of operating hotels, restaurants, gift shops and other amenities that visitors enjoy and expect can redound to the benefit of those who live closest to our national parks.

Through public-private partnerships, we have been able to undertake social science surveys to learn more about visitation trends, which helps us better determine where to focus our resources. Despite the shorter visits that these surveys have uncovered, overall visitation to the national parks remains high and it becomes imperative for us to know what the carrying capacity of each of our 391 national park units is, to ensure visitor safety, provide for an experience that helps the visitor connect with the site, and also protects the resource so that future generations can enjoy it unimpaired.

As the demographics and lifestyles of our nation have changed, the USNPS has not always been proactive in adapting itself to marketing and drawing new communities and ethnicities into the parks, but there are programs that we have introduced, such as Junior Rangers and Web Rangers, Parks as Classrooms and Kids in Parks, that continue to evolve in order to serve the American and visiting public better. New technologies are being embraced, including multi-lingual audio tours and downloadable podcasts.

With the advent of the 100th anniversary of the birth of the USNPS, political leadership in the country has helped launched the Centennial Challenge, a program for reconnecting with the American public through a series of public-private partnerships. The USNPS has learned to work more closely with local communities and with the inspiring example of international parks colleagues have been able to expand how we engage, incorporate and even promote the products of the people living in our gateway communities.

Finally, the USNPS has forged ahead to monitor the impacts of climate change on all its national park units, whether natural, cultural or historic. Incorporating lessons learned from colleagues in Costa Rica, we have instituted a monitoring and inventory program, the All-Taxa Biological Inventory, as well as smaller one-day "Bio-Blitzes," to establish baseline data on what floral and faunal resources reside within our jurisdiction. Through our Climate Friendly Parks and Energy SmartPARKS! Programs, we are implementing methods and practices to reduce the carbon footprint of park operations, from energy efficient lighting to green cleaning, landscaping and heating-ventilation-air conditioning systems.

Sharing these lessons learned with colleagues from abroad will yield benefits to all of us engaged in the conservation of park and protected areas, making America's Best Idea an enduring legacy for all mankind.