The Cultural Challenge

Making the parks relevant and welcoming to a broader constituency is a matter of survival and equity for the National Park System in the new millennium.

BY TODD WILKINSON
If the U.S. National Park System were an artist's palette, its rich, raw tableau of color and engaging textures would reflect every hue under the sun.

Chartreuse could be found in the rhyolite cliffs of Yellowstone; soothing shades of red in the mesas of Grand Canyon, Bryce, and Zion; blue and gray in the battle uniforms preserved at Gettysburg; jet black in the recesses of Carlsbad and Mammoth Cave; aquamarine in the waves rolling in at Isle Royale and Padre Island; soothing pastels in the riots of wildflowers in Yosemite and the Great Smokies. Enough different pigments could be found in the forests, mountains, plants, animals, brick, and mortar in more than 350 other preserves to fill a super box of Crayolas.

But among the millions of people who visit national parks, including the thousands of dedicated civil servants who work in them, one color still dominates the face of the system after 84 years: lily white.

While the National Park Service (NPS) is considered one of the proudest, most progressive, and well-liked agencies in the federal government, it has lagged behind when it comes to mirroring America.

"Every day you pick up a newspaper and read about the latest threats to national parks, whether it is the crumbling highway system, commercial air tours buzzing over the Grand Canyon, the killing of Yellowstone bison, or the complexity of water issues at Everglades," says Iantha Gantt-Wright, NPCA's cultural diversity manager.

"While responding to these concerns is important," Gantt-Wright says, "the absence of cultural and racial diversity in national parks looms as one of the greatest threats of all because it means parks can lose the very constituents who will be in a position to save them in 50 or 100 years."

Demographers say that, within three decades, white Americans raised on the tradition of spending summer vacations in national parks will no longer represent the dominant voting block. Emerging in its place will be a new plurality composed of Asian, Hispanic, and African Americans. Nine of every ten people added to the population by 2050 will be nonwhite.

"It's already difficult to convince Congress to adequately fund the parks we have, but what will the tenor of the debate be, say, half a century, if parks are fighting for scarce dollars?" Gantt-Wright asks. "If parks are not relevant to people, then how relevant will they be to the lawmakers those people elect?"

Experts say that, unless people from different cultures become enthusiastic, the future of national parks in this country could be in trouble. Consider Yellowstone, where the make-up of its 3 million tourists is indicative of many large national parks.

A survey in 1997 revealed that 90 percent of Yellowstone's visitors were white; 4.1 percent were of Asian descent; 1.5 percent were African American; 1 percent Hispanic, and .5 percent American Indian or Eskimo. During the 1990s, more visitors at Yellowstone were from Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan than the number of African, Hispanic, and American Indians combined. Further, the employee roles in Yellowstone are even whiter.

"The welcome mat has not been out [for Americans of color]," says Roger Rivera, founder of the National Hispanic Environmental Council, which is based in Alexandria, Virginia.

Rivera says that national parks have an elitist reputation in many nonwhite communities, where people have neither visited local units of the park system nor come in contact with park rangers.

"There's an interesting notion out there that public lands and protected areas have been the domain of middle-class whites," Rivera says. "But I think it has more to do with culture than economics. There are many middle-class Hispanics, Blacks, and Asians who have the money to travel to parks, but they don't do it." At the same time, even white Americans who hail from poorer income levels, he argues, know that national parks are part of their birthright.

No one is better acquainted with the challenge than Robert Stanton, the agency's first African-American director and a man who began his Park Service career several decades ago as a seasonal ranger in Grand Teton National Park. "The fact is, the National Park Service has not done a very good job of welcoming people of color into parks or encouraging nonwhite Americans to work in them," Stanton says. "It is my chief goal as head of this agency to make sure we start looking like the rest of America."

It was this recognition that led NPS and NPCA to sponsor an unprecedented conference on diversity in parks last year in San Francisco titled, "America's Parks—America's People. A Mosaic in Motion: Breaking Barriers of Race and Diversity in Our National Parks."

"I think the conference proved to be eye-opening for the Park Service," says NPCA's Gantt-Wright, a key conference organizer. "Here you had 650 people, many of them from communities not usually associated with the conservation movement. For the first time ever, they had a stage to express their anger at literally being ignored. I think the Park Service itself felt feeling humbled but empowered.

"These people weren't there because they wanted to bash the Park Service," she says. "They were there because they care about the future of parks and the role they play in the lives of their kids and grandchildren."

Professor Myron Floyd of Texas A&M
DIVERSITY Continued

Although the Park Service is adding more diverse sites, such as Kaloko-Honokohau, only a small number of visitors are people of color.

University noted in a scientific paper, "Race, Ethnicity and Use of the National Park System," that the Park Service suffers from an inability to connect with people beyond its traditional constituents and has no effective way of establishing a dialogue.

The fundamental struggle is reaching out to populations with the message that adopting an awareness of parks is akin to learning a new language. Using the conference as a springboard, Stanton unveiled three priorities:

- **Expand diversity within the NPS workforce by hiring more minorities.**

  The Park Service has been accused of being among the slowest federal agencies to break out of its white male image. Stanton notes that because the Park Service moves career employees slowly up the ranks, advancing minorities into management positions will take time.

  Already, however, Stanton has ordered a heavy emphasis on increasing hiring at the seasonal ranger level, which is where most agency employees begin. During the summer of 1999, "minority" hiring increased 40 percent over the previous year alone.

  To ensure the momentum carries on after he leaves the service, Stanton ordered that a Diversity Action Plan be distributed, which allows senior managers to hold individual park superintendents accountable for their record of hiring minorities.

- **Increase diversity by reaching out to urban communities, especially grade schools, and inviting kids to think about how they might shape the park system when they become adults.**

  Gantt-Wright, a national park late bloomer but, she maintains, that it is never too late to tap into the latent love that all people feel for wild places and history. As an African American growing up in Baltimore, Maryland, Gantt-Wright never visited a national park when she was a child because it wasn’t something people from her neighborhood did.

  "We had a little hill down the street, and this was our idea of wilderness," she says. "I didn’t come to work at NPS until I was 40 years old. Although I had heard about Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon, I didn’t think they were real or open to me. Now I try to tell everyone I know that national parks are available for them as they are for anyone else."

  She says a keen sense of parks begins with personal contact. "If people aren’t able to see others like themselves in parks, it is more challenging to see parks as friendly places that give them either solace or an opportunity to find meaningful employment."

- **Add more parks and cultural sites that reflect a wider range of ethnic interests. In addition, sensitize white visitors to important cultural touchstones and achievements of others in their community.**

  Gantt-Wright says strides have been made. Brochures and web sites for several parks are now bi-, tri-, or quadrilingual. Recent legislation designed to celebrate the Underground Railroad established a network of sites scattered across the country that played a role in the effort to aid enslaved Africans to freedom. The Park Service has also established cooperative arrangements, such as recruiting American Indian guides and managers to help oversee parks that he inside the boundaries of Indian reservations.

  Working with Congress to build a true multicultural system, the Park Service has added such sites as Chamizal National Memorial, which marks the peaceful settlement of a 99-year boundary dispute with Mexico; the Kaloko-Honokohau National Historical Park, which preserves Hawaiian settlements that existed before the arrival of Europeans; Chaco Culture National Historical Park, which highlights pre-Columbian Pueblo culture; Manzanar National Historic Site, one of ten relocation camps used to hold Japanese-Americans during World War II; Cape Krusenstern National Monument, which features archaeological sites of Eskimo communities dating back 4,000 years; Golden Spike National Historic Site, which marks the role of Chinese immigrants in completing the transcontinental railroad; and the Mary McLeod Bethune Council House National Historic Site, which honors Bethune’s leadership in the black women’s rights movement.

  Critics have accused the Park Service of engaging in token rhetoric and commemorating sites only set against a backdrop of white culture. The symbolism of places like Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty, they say, rings hollow. The park system must instead transcend its traditional role as museum curator protecting pieces of antiquity, history, and ecological processes deemed important to white people and take on a more organic function.

  Indeed, it’s not enough merely to set aside parks for the sake of political correctness. Gantt-Wright notes that even after the addition of the Rev. Martin Lu-
ther King, Jr's birthplace and gravesite to the system, the majority of current visitors are not African American, but white. The same holds true for the people who pass through the entrance gate at Mesa Verde National Park, Canyon de Chelly National Monument, and Coronado National Memorial. Still, she believes it is important to be patient. Building diversity from one generation to the next is a process through which investments today will produce dividends tomorrow.

Trying to convince different cultures to adopt the 20th-century attitude toward parks is wrong and doomed to fail, says Jack Shu, a cultural diversity expert with the California state parks department. Quotas are not the answer if the goal is engendering support for national parks among the largest possible population.

"There are some people who believe the answer to promoting diversity is to bring more, quote, 'minorities' into parks like Yellowstone," Shu says. "To the extent that local communities find their own way to enjoy Yellowstone, that's good. But instead of expecting people from far away to travel to northwest Wyoming, which isn't likely, I believe it is better to bring Yellowstone to them."

What Shu has in mind isn't radical. It involves small steps. For example, in the past the Park Service has prepared "discovery chests" filled with objects from various parks that are sent on loan to classrooms around the country Shu says that kids and others in the community would develop a more personal connection with a given park—and thus become stronger advocates for its protection—if the discovery chest were accompanied by a park ranger.

Shu isn't naive about the monetary costs of such a program, but he says the alternative of doing nothing means that future generations will suffer a disconnection. The ideology driving the National Park Service needs to shift from being "park-centric," in which surrounding communities respond to a rigid definition of what a park is, to "community-centric," in which the park remains committed to its purpose but allows itself to be flexible in meeting community needs.

What if certain parks located near Indian reservations were made available more often for Indian youth embarking upon vision quests? What if weekend excursions to parks were promoted as ways to enhance family values? What if the leaders of teen centers in the inner cities, confronting problems such as drug use and teen pregnancy, had access to parks for teaching young people self-reliance and building their self-esteem? What if local Park Service cultural sites became fulcrums for neighborhood empowerment?

Based on personal experience, Shu says the investments can be minimal but long lasting. A few years ago in southern California he helped organize an annual pilgrimage of Japanese-American senior citizens into the desert to witness the blooming of natural poppies. A similar event had been a cultural tradition in their homeland, but by giving the experience an American context, the event gave the pilgrims a reason to care about parks.

"Frederick Law Olmsted pioneered the idea of parks being antidotes for the social ills of society," Shu says. "Broading the way that society thinks about parks and making them more accessible to a wider range of people doesn't mean you retreat from the principles upon which the parks were created. If anything, making parks more relevant only makes them more sacred."

Celebrating diversity means more than promoting racial diversity, says Laura Loomis, an NPCA policy specialist based in Washington, D.C. It also means broadening the ideas of what a park is. Remembering the 20th century, future Congresses may want to honor a sports stadium like Chicago's Wrigley Field, the skyscraper architects who designed modern cities, the origins of the Internet, the studio of a poet, or maybe even a back lot set in Hollywood.

Rivera says there is no prerequisite for falling in love with the idea of the park system, which is as relevant today as it was in 1872, when Yellowstone was placed on the map. "We need to inculcate everyone with a sense of the grandeur and splendor that is America," he said.

"When you talk about the crown jewels and cultural landmarks, there isn't any American, regardless of his or her background, who upon seeing them for the first time, isn't overwhelmed. Our job is to ensure that when they look at the system, they see a part of themselves reflected back."

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