

Administrative Histories in the National Park Service's Alaska Region

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As some of you may know, much of my work revolves around administrative histories. I read them, write them, edit them, and care deeply about how well they work, and I think that a well-done administrative history can be highly effective as a planning and management tool.

Recognizing that a primary goal of all administrative histories is that they be used as a primary planning and management tool, I feel that the best way to ensure their effectiveness is for administrators or authors of these studies to employ a four-part strategy:

1. Convince park management sufficiently of their worth that they will want such histories to be written;
2. Incorporate the goals and concerns of park staff during the writing process;
3. Make the final product both worthwhile to look at and worthwhile to read; and
4. After its completion, work with existing and new staff to make information available that was discovered during the research process.

I'd like to spend the next few minutes elaborating on each of these four points.

First, it is recognized that an administrative history is just one of many products that cultural resource personnel can use—and fund—with a limited amount of funds. Therefore, it's important to convince both superintendents and resource management personnel of the value of a historical perspective in addressing management problems, especially when examining knotty or critical situations. In Alaska, a Cultural Resources Advisory Committee (CRAC) often votes on whether certain administrative histories will be funded, so it's important to persuade all of the region's CRAC members of the value of an administrative history. It's also important to recognize that, in specific situations, that the best solution to a management problem may be a special, thematic administrative study rather than a general park history. (*Alaska Subsistence: An NPS Management History* and

The Most Striking of Objects: The Totem Poles of Sitka National Historical Park are examples of special theme studies.)

Second, once the decision has been made to fund an administrative history, it's important to involve park staff in the research and writing as much as possible. For instance, it's important to choose an author who writes clearly and well—not elegantly, but directly and with a minimum of embroidery. In addition, whoever is chosen for the project should be able to visit the park in question with some regularity—enough to get to know a park's staff and its resources. Once the project has begun, it's important for the author to let the park staff know, in advance, when he or she will be visiting. After arriving at the park, it's important for the author to talk to both the superintendent and the various division chiefs about the project, either individually or at a staff meeting. He or she should ask them what specific problems they would like to have addressed in the study, and the author should also ask if there are any specific datasets that should be perused during the research phase. During the writing phase, the author should follow up with park staff from time to time, either in person or by telephone or e-mail. During these follow-up contacts, the author should let staff know what progress has been made, what answers have been found to particularly vexing questions, and if any particularly rewarding materials pertaining to their subject area have been unearthed. Finally, it's important to ask both the superintendent and the various division chiefs to read over the draft chapters; this will both ensure accuracy and increase the degree to which park staff will use the final document.

Third, it's also important to make the final

product look good and read well. First, make the length appropriate to the complexity of a park. A colleague of mine once said that an administrative history of Grand Canyon National Park could be written in 100 pages, and I have seen an administrative history of a small, uncomplicated park that was more than 700 pages long. Both lengths, in my opinion, are unacceptable; the history of a small, uncomplicated park should be no more than 150 pages long, while a history of many of the larger parks should be completed in no more than 350 or 400 pages. In the case of the largest and oldest “crown jewel” parks, park management should consider the production of a single-volume general history; once completed, additional histories on specific themes (interpretation, the road system, bear management, etc.) may be considered later.

Be sure to produce enough copies of the final product to allow availability well beyond the immediate distribution process. With staff turnover, there’s a constant need for new copies, and given the choice, no one wants to read—or have to produce—a photocopied report. (It’s important, by the way, to have a copy of the final report on the world wide web, but this is no substitute for a paper copy; besides, a report’s availability on the web is bound to create new demand for a paper copy, not a substitute for it.) If the park being written about has a high degree of public interest, it may be economically advantageous to work out distribution matters with a university press, commercial press, or cooperative association. Using an outside press, however, may delay the receipt of a final product for a year or more, and complicating the situation is that park managers (your primary audience) may demand a different product than representatives of outside presses. In Alaska, where visitation has traditionally been low and where there is little demand for these studies outside of NPS visitor centers, we have had little reliance on outside presses. In the “old” days, prior to the computerization of the printing process, there was a fairly close, mathematical relationship between the number of copies desired and the total printing cost. But since the mid-1990s, the cost of small print runs has

cost far more per copy than in the “old” days, while relatively large print runs result in less expensive per-copy print runs than in the “old” days. These changes in the economics of printing have encouraged us in Alaska to increase the number of copies in our typical print run; print runs in the early 1990s typically averaged between 150 and 300 copies, but recent print runs have often topped 1,000 copies.

Given the expense of producing the final document, it matters to all who will receive the document that it look good. Be sure to add an appropriate number of photographs, tables, maps, headers and footers, text boxes, and other elements to make the document appear attractive. Employ a graphics consultant if necessary. Superintendents often like to present these histories to park friends and neighbors, and the small time and expense of producing a visually attractive document is time well spent.

Make sure that the document works well and is accurate. To ensure accuracy, have the author ask several people to review the entire draft. If he or she is unsure about a chapter’s completeness, or if a chapter is particularly sensitive or controversial, have the author present the chapter to one or more experts in that field. Here in Alaska, there is a writer–editor employed on the regional staff.

Finally, it cannot be overemphasized that a study such as this demands a good index. Because virtually no one will ever read an administrative history from front to back, a good index is needed in order to ensure that resource managers can quickly look up a specific topic when needed. Adding an index is often the very last item an author wants to do when completing a project, but it is worth its weight in gold. If an author cannot or will not index a document, word-processing programs often have indexing features (which, in my opinion, do not work as well as hand indexing), and professional indexers can also be hired.

Fourth, when the administrative history has been completed, the author (if an National Park Service employee) or the administrator (if the author worked on contract) will need to

Administrative and Intellectual Tools for Park Management

keep “selling” the administrative history after copies have been distributed. For example, the author may wish to give a talk highlighting the park’s history to park staff (perhaps as part of seasonal training), or perhaps to a community gathering in a town neighboring a park. There will often be one or more park staff—perhaps the superintendent, perhaps a resource management specialist—who will show a special interest in the details of a park’s history, and it’s important to provide a perspective on what was written and to otherwise keep the com-

munication lines open. Depending on who is in charge of distribution, someone may need to accommodate future requests for copies. Finally, it’s important for the author to box up the research materials that were used in creating the document. Those materials should then be categorized, and finding aids should be prepared. Once this process has been completed, the materials should be available for future researchers, either at a park office, a regional office, or in the nearest National Archives repository.

