

## Professionalism and Training

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Item: The Yellowstone park curator vacates her position in the summer of 2002 after a protracted illness and lengthy absence. The park archivist position is also vacated. The park collections are expanding, and will be moved into new storage in 2003. Park management combines the two positions and downgrades the composite from a GS-12 to GS-11. The position has been advertised, but currently remains vacant.

I can think of no other profession in a park where the lead position is combined and downgraded. It doesn't happen with the rangers, and it doesn't happen with maintenance.

Item: The National Park Service (NPS) Southeast Region's regional curator vacates the position in 1995. The region abolishes the position, and turns the duties over to a person whose previous job was secretarial. This leaves the 64 parks in the region without professional and technical guidance for five years. The position of regional curator is filled in 2000, but is paid with "soft" money at a reduced grade, a situation that is continuing.

I can think of no other profession in a region where the lead position is vacated and filled with a clerical-grade person, or filled with a position on soft money. It doesn't happen in contracting, and it doesn't happen in personnel.

Item: The servicewide Museum Management Program is given the task of policy and program development for NPS. The program was left without professional management for one year. The chief conservator position has been vacant for some 16 months, and the funds have been pulled for the remainder of fiscal year 2003. The chief archivist has now filled the management position, but it is uncertain whether the archivist position will be back-filled. This leaves two professional positions vacant at the national program level.

I can think of no other profession at the agency level where the lead position is vacated, and not filled for over a year. It doesn't happen in concessions management, it doesn't happen in wildlife management, it doesn't happen in ranger activities, and it doesn't happen in budget and finance. (By the way: the program funds for both the chief archivist and chief conservator positions come from the Museum Collections Protection and

Preservation Program [MCPPP]. Parks and regions are not allowed to re-direct these funds in this manner. How come they get do it at the national level?)

These three examples are not "exceptions to the rule." For the most part, they are more like the normal way the National Park Service does business when dealing with the Museum Management Program at the park, region, and national level. So we have to look at these three examples and figure out why it happens with museum management, and why it happens at all levels.

One reason is poor program definition. We obviously have not adequately defined what it is that a professional museum curator does that can't be done just as well by a secretary. Water treatment plant operators have done it. Personnel officers have done it. Archeologists have done it. When was the last time you saw an untrained person doing water treatment, or ranking job applications? You need at least a four-year degree plus specialized training and experience to manage an archeological investigation. Do professional-level collections documentation and preservation and management require any less education, knowledge, and skill than archeology? (By the way: In one park recently I saw an injured fire fighter assigned curatorial duties. He was cataloguing historic collections. I have never heard of a curator being pulled out of the collections to build a fire line; you need training to do that.)

The question of "professional training" and "continuing education" logically follows the above. Consider the following:

- In order to apply pesticides you are required to attend a basic course, and periodic training is required to maintain your certificate.
- In order to fight fire you are required to take a basic course, then additional training in various specialties (such as felling trees, operating a pumper truck, being a crew boss). Annual refresher training is required.
- In order to supervise contracts, you are required to take 40 hours of contract officer's technical representative training, followed by an eight-hour refresher course every two years.

The last regular servicewide curatorial methods training course was in 1995. Many of our "collateral-duty collection managers" have not had *any* curatorial training other than the Automated National Catalog System (ANCS+). Most of our professional-level GS-1015 curators have not had professional-level training since their basic-level curatorial methods course received upon their entry to NPS.

This is partly the result of poor identification with the larger profession. We have not made a collective effort to tie our Museum Management Program to the larger archival and museum professions. Consider the following:

- Most law enforcement rangers I know are members of at least one organization—the Association of National Park Rangers, if nothing else. How many curators belong to at least one professional museum organization?
- Most historic architects I know subscribe to at least one professional journal. How many curators regularly read at least one professional journal?
- Most historians I know read several books each year dealing with their specialty. How many curators regularly read new books dealing with our profession (other than *Museum Handbook* updates)?
- Most archeologists I know present at least one professional paper at a conference, or write at least one article for a journal, every year. Over the past year, how many cura-

tors have presented a paper or written an article for publication?

A third reason is program myopia. For the past twenty years museum management in the National Park Service has emphasized museum documentation and storage, mostly at the expense of other program missions. What should be a diversified program offering useable tools to park staff and the public has been reduced to a series of handbooks, numbering schemes, tables, checklists, and other accounting tools. Collectively we have promoted a pseudo-professional approach which presumes that basic documentation and safe, secure storage are results sufficient to justify the existence of archives and museum collections.

Example: When asked why the park was making and keeping collections, a park curator responded "Why, to preserve them, of course!" As well as that collection had been documented and cared for, it was obvious the curator was not looking at the bigger picture.

The *Museum Handbook* insists on artificially high security and preservation standards for all materials on exhibit. As a result, the exhibit design people are using fewer and fewer actual objects and specimens, or are going to ridiculous lengths to secure all exhibit cases.

Example: A very expensive environmentally controlled exhibit case, complete with tamper alarm, is used to "exhibit" trash picked up along a park trail as part of a permanent environmental exhibit. Park Service people are not dumb, and this sort of thing sends a message: "We curators don't really know what we are doing, and we are wasting money that could be better spent elsewhere."

When is the last time you saw a new exhibit in a visitor center that contained a lot of real things? Most park interpreters will tell you that NPS does not have "museums"—we run "visitor centers." This is partly an attempt to get around often needlessly restrictive standards suggested by the *Handbook* and applied by people who don't know better.

Also in the name of "preservation" we have locked collections up, and locked out the primary users. The plain fact of the matter is

that everything NPS owns is not a 16th-century panel painting, or a signed George Armstrong Custer letter, or a passenger pigeon specimen. We own a lot of fairly ordinary, run-of-the-mill stuff whose primary value lies in what it can tell us about the park and our management of the resources. For many of our frequently used collections, we can afford a much more liberal use policy than what is in the *Museum Handbook*.

Example: A collateral-duty collections manager reads the *Handbook*, and makes the case to the superintendent that the park herbarium needs to be taken away from resources management and locked in the collections room. The following week the resource management staff goes out and starts collecting specimens for a “comparative collection” that will not be “official” and thus not documented. As a result the “official” collection goes static, does not receive any new specimens, and is not used by the park staff.

This was the result of a non-professional having no understanding of how natural science collections are used, but aggressively applying poorly written “standards” from the *Handbook*. There has been a real curator at the park for three years now, but the resource management staff is still very leery about having “their” collections documented.

Since we have imposed draconian conditions on their access and use, park staff and the public have found other avenues to get their information. The in-house surveys we have been doing in the Pacific West Region show that about half the staff at any given park don’t know what is in the collections, where they are located, or who can get them in to use the material. If people don’t use the collections, who cares about their accessibility or condition?

Example: It is the close-out for a collections planning effort at San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park, and we have been talking with the superintendent and senior staff about the poor conditions in museum storage. The former superintendent turned in his chair, pointed to the ships outside and said: “If one of those ships sinks I get fired. If the collections fall apart, I still have a

job.”

It is apparent from this remark that there is currently there is no downside to poor or mediocre management of archives and collections. We have not provided management with the necessary indicators needed to distinguish between a job well done, a job partly done, and a job not done.

So, what do we need to do to fix the situation? Unfortunately there is no single answer, no “silver bullet” to make the problem go away. But there are some things that we can start doing, at the park, at the central office, and at the national program levels.

We need to develop a message that answers the question: “Why should management care?” We need to begin developing our own support groups in each park, each region, and on the national level. If we do so, there is someone who will complain, long and loudly, when the collections deteriorate, are not available for easy access, are poorly documented, or when the curator’s position is not filled quickly and with a qualified applicant.

We need to stop hiring the untrained, the half-trained, the poorly trained, to do professional-level work. Even though the qualification standards for the positions of museum technician, museum specialist, and museum curator were written in 1956, they are still considered the *standards* and we need to insist that they be followed when filling professional jobs in these series.

Park managers need to start insisting that professional positions currently in their parks be filled by professionals when they become vacant, and at professional-level grades (GS-11 and above).

Regional and central office curators need to start insisting that park-level positions be filled with qualified professionals, and curatorial work be supervised by qualified professionals. This year in the Pacific West Region we have started insisting that the expenditure of BAC-CAT (backlog cataloguing) and MCPPP funds be supervised by at least a GS-11 curator. We are tired of untrained seasonal employees being supervised by untrained collateral-duty employees. We are not ending up with professional products, and the money is

too hard to come by to waste in this manner. From now on in the Pacific West Region, you will need an approved work plan, or an approved scope of work statement, or an approved treatment plan in order to get your money. You can use seasonal employees to catalogue and do basic-level collections management, but they need to be supervised by a GS-11 curator. If you don't have a curator on the staff, you need to employ one, rent, or borrow one from a neighboring park. This requirement was instituted by the Pacific West Cultural Resources Advisory Committee, and approved by the regional director.

The national Museum Management Program needs to insist that regional and central office positions be filled by qualified professionals on base (ONPS) funding, and vacancies need to be filled in a timely manner. If regions are reluctant to do so, try withholding BAC-CAT and MCPPP funding. This is done for inadequate documentation, so why not for inadequate professional supervision?

The national Museum Management Program also needs to take ownership and give direction to the need for both basic-level curatorial training and continuing education for practicing professionals. The Museum Management Program council needs to develop a "certification program" based on profes-

sional standards and regular refresher training, and pass it along to the NPS director for implementation. Remember, similar programs are required by our counterparts in maintenance, law enforcement, fire control, personnel, and contracting, to name a few.

Finally, at the national level we need to break out of the narrow mind-set about curatorial work that has dominated the last two decades. We have done a fairly good job of reducing the catalogue backlog, and addressing the deficiencies in the storage and protection of collections. We now have to look for ways to make the collections we manage more available for many kinds of use. If we don't, park management will start looking at the meager resources they are currently spending, and wondering whether this might be a good place to implement out-sourcing.

And if we have not done everything in our power to make the collections available and useful to the staff and public, they will be right. For without using these things to help us manage the park resources, and tell the story of the parks and our stewardship to the public, we really don't have collections in the large sense. We have pathetic assemblages of fur and feathers, meaningless symbols of past culture, wood pulp with printers ink, and fading images that no one looks at.

