

Remarks of the Director, U.S. National Park Service, at the Plenary Session on North American Park Directors and Global Change

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Thank you, Ernie [Ortega] for your kind introduction. I am honored to be here this evening and to share the microphone with my colleagues, Ernesto Enkerlin and Alan Latourelle.

Global change is expansive, inescapable, and all encompassing—and central to the challenges and opportunities the three of us share with everyone in this room.

It is our shared privilege to have this chance to address the George Wright Society, which collectively represents the thoughtful analysis of what we manage and where we are headed.

Management of protected areas is impossible unless we recognize the need for anticipation of and reaction to the inevitability of change.

I view global change in three broad classes—natural, cultural, and technological. I'm not sure those categories matter except as a way to discuss what we face.

The technological changes of recent times have occurred at a breath-taking pace. Many here today began our careers with no notion we would use computers professionally. Now we cannot imagine working without them!

The exponential growth in communication speed and access to information has been a joy—even if that joy is sometimes overwhelming. But it comes with a price—or many prices. Even the brightest among us cannot begin to assimilate all that our computers can access. Add in cell phone and Blackberries and we are losing much of what is personal in our lives—the personal connection with colleagues and the personal distinction between work and home life.

To me, the most insidious effect, however, is on our youth. In his book, *Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv, a San Diego newspaper columnist, warns that the video-game generation is losing its connection with the natural world. I fear that he is right—and we may be to blame!

Where do we draw on the electronic mastery of the young by providing useful versions of familiar electronic tools—iPod-based interpretive tours, for example? When do we insist that our central asset—reality—should be undiluted, requiring the laptops, cell phones, gameboys, and iPods all be put aside so that eyes can focus, hands can touch, and ears can listen?

Can we bridge the gap between seamless virtual experiences and uneven truths of nature and history where—and as—they occur? How do we encourage the kids of “Geeks in the Woods” (www.geeksinthewoods.org)? Our own Junior Ranger and Web Ranger programs (www.nps.gov/webrangers/) are good. Can we make them better?

It is our job as educators—and all of us who gather and share information are educators—to compete effectively for the minds and hearts of the next generation. We proudly and

rightly claim to be the keepers of a heritage—responsible for places and things that our society values. If that is so, we must teach the next generation how to share those values and to appreciate their symbols.

That leads us to the cultural challenges we face. Another aspect of global change is global migration. Every nation is witnessing shifting demographics. There is an accelerating worldwide population growth—by itself assuring urbanization even without migration. And there is the relentless movement that drives people to seek economic, political, or social opportunities unavailable where their lives began.

Accompanying all of this movement of peoples is the cultural baggage that travels with them. Languages, eating habits, clothing styles, religious persuasions, and more intersect along with the people who carry them.

Years ago, we recognized that the influx of German and Japanese visitors to Grand Canyon National Park made it imperative we provide visitor information in their languages. How can we do less for the Laotian-speaking neighbors and visitors of Lowell National Historical Park in Massachusetts or the Somali communities now found in the Upper Midwest?

All the things we do to feed, clothe, house, protect, and employ people have their own impacts. Power from coal-fired plants affects air quality, from dam impoundments impacts water and all that depends on those waters, nuclear has notable risks, even wind and solar affect landscapes, wildlife, even soundscapes. Each choice requires incisive decision-making about which costs are acceptable and which unmanageable.

Our farms, roads, and buildings not only consume space, they disrupt or displace resources of all kinds—anthropological, geological, historical, and biological.

Climate change is very real and directly impacts many of the other changes we have identified. Our responsibility for landscapes, built and natural, requires that we understand how climate change affects the resources entrusted to us.

Air pollutants are eroding buildings and monuments as surely as they are killing trees in the forests.

Recurrent storms force us to re-examine the propriety of rebuilding roads we once built in good faith in vulnerable places, like the barrier-island formations of Gulf Islands National Seashore.

Everywhere, historic structures fight self-concealing damage to bricks, mortar, window frames, and more caused by that wall-crawling interloper, English ivy, or kudzu, or honeysuckle, or Formosan termites, or . . . the list is unending.

The presence of non-native plants, animals, and other organisms poses a major and nearly universal threat. Global change in nature rides on melaleucas in the swamps and mollusks in the lakes. Misplaced species drive out those that were not only native, but essential parts of dynamic, interactive systems. Displaced species cost predators their prey—and foster the spread of prey that no longer have predators!

And through it all we have the measures of what is. Another of our global changes is the rapidly growing global record. Last week [April 9] the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History announced that the worldwide scientific effort to catalogue every living species has surpassed one million. I should note, too, that the U.S. Geological Survey's

National Biological Information Infrastructure program has provided essential support for access to this burgeoning body of knowledge.

In the U.S. National Park System, of course, we've had a decade of experience with the All-Taxa Inventory at Great Smoky Mountains National Park and its spawn—from serious, traditional scientific study to the “BioBlitz” programs that engage our young in the hands-on discovery and identification of the biological diversity of a given park. Part fun and games, part serious science; part learning, part teaching—and all valuable.

Seeing change is not enough. At the beginning, I noted that management of protected areas imposes on us a need to anticipate and react to the inevitability of change.

Our three agencies have to look at what North Americans can do to help protected areas withstand or adapt to global change. We already know some of the answers. We can continue to develop non-consumptive uses of protected areas and reduce consumptive conduct, too. We can guide management and visitor behavior in ways that provide for use without degrading the features of the protected areas. We can actively resist change where possible by removing exotic species, restoring natural systems, and creating corridors to facilitate the natural dynamics of plant and animal communities.

Ultimately, the greatest challenge and the greatest obligation of our response to global change is cooperative action.

We have long known that individual parks cannot function as nature's islands in a sea of human endeavor. Drawing a line on a map will not make nature whole within those boundaries. The winds will carry seeds far from the wilderness; the animals will wander in and out and the people, in ever-growing numbers, will come to share the shrinking space of protected lands.

Just as surely, we cannot halt global change at our national boundaries. The great North American continent needs a great North American partnership. This forum is a reflection of our shared commitment to working together. And, as we work together, we must also work with the global community to address the meaning and response to global change.

Thank you.