

The National Park Service, Education, and Civic Reflection

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Good morning. It's awfully nice to be with you and to have the opportunity to talk about such important subjects. I don't plan to talk long but to offer some observations that I hope will invite your thought and response. I hope that you will not only just ask questions but make contributions to our common understanding and purpose. I would like to talk this morning about two recent, unprecedented opportunities where the U.S. National Park Service engaged some of the best minds in the country in perhaps its most critical enterprise—education.

The National Park System Advisory Board accomplishes its work by providing diverse outside input and by advocating for the NPS within a broader community. In doing this, over the years the Advisory Board has contributed in significant ways to shaping the national park system and the policies and programs of the Park Service. A key function of the Board is to assemble expertise for developing ideas and policy recommendations.

A year ago in January, the Advisory Board's Education Committee convened a forum of distinguished historians and sociologists to talk with National Park Service leaders about civic engagement and the place of national parks in our nation's educational system. The Board was anxious to know how an NPS commitment to young people and education could strengthen civic awareness and stewardship in America. Present at the forum were members of the Advisory Board, National Leadership Council, representatives of the Education Council, and other NPS leaders.

The Advisory Board feels strongly that we as a people are not as well informed as we should be about our history as a nation, nor are we as involved individually or collectively in community life as we once were and some believe we ought to be. If you don't think we have a problem, let me give you a few facts. In a recent, large survey of our citizens 18–24 years of age, 29% couldn't find the Pacific Ocean on a world map. One-third thinks that the population of the U.S. is between one and two billion. Of schoolchildren, fewer than 15% are proficient at grade level in history. Only 54% know why the Bill of Rights is in the Constitution. There's more, but you get the idea. You can see why the Advisory Board has concentrated on education for the past several years, beginning with the release of its 2001 report, *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century*. We have come to believe strongly that the NPS should—and must—play a larger role in the education of all Americans.

Following the model established by the Scholars' Forum, the Advisory Board last October convened an Evaluation Summit at the University of Denver. The summit's goal was to create a culture of evaluative thinking throughout the interpretation and education staff of the NPS, characterized by continuous inquiry and learning, and to plan for and practice decision-making based on outcome data. Similarly to the Scholars' Forum, we reached outside the agency to bring respected experts, in this case in the field of evaluation, together with NPS leaders at all levels of the organization, and with many of the Park Service's key education partners.

So first, I would like to briefly report on the Scholars' Forum. A summary report on the forum is available at this conference as well as the current copy of *Common Ground: Preserving Our Nation's Heritage* that includes a special feature on the Forum.

Placing their discussion in the context of our nation's educational needs, our invited scholars cited disturbing evidence of eroding participation in civic and community organizations and declining knowledge of history and current events that have potentially serious consequences for the nation. As greater numbers of Americans appear to be, in the words of author Robert Putnam, "bowling alone," our experts argued that the national park system is uniquely positioned to contribute to the public life of the nation, helping to rebuild the social capital of citizenship and community.

The panelists praised national parks as ideal places to train teachers and to advance place-based learning, where natural and cultural history can be encountered firsthand, in fresh, sometimes quite unexpected, ways. Young people can have transformative experiences in national parks through various service learning and stewardship opportunities—gaining confidence, knowledge, and citizenship skills that they can apply in their schools and in their communities.

In addressing contemporary challenges facing the national park system, the scholars declared that parks and park programs are vital components of a diverse and democratic society, contributing to what Frederick Law Olmsted once described as "a refinement of the republic." Furthermore, they emphasized, this high purpose can only be secured into the future by finding new and meaningful ways to engage historically underserved communities and especially youth. For example, Professor Charlene Mires described the experience of an inner-city teacher reacting to an interpretive presentation on the controversy surrounding the slave quarters at the President's House at Independence National Historical Park: "So here's someone responding as a citizen, as a teacher, as a parent to an experience that was made more powerful because it acknowledged the controversy, because it engaged with issues that had been subordinated for a long time and have only recently come very powerfully back to life."

The panelists talked about the role of civic engagement and the importance of building bridges to local communities and stakeholders. They also discussed, using the example of Gettysburg, how civic engagement can open the door to more contemporary scholarship and provide a broader context for park interpretation.

In the view of University of Wisconsin environmental historian William Cronon, civic engagement in national parks provides multiple opportunities to "re-enact" experiences and stories uniquely associated with places that can reconnect people to their most deeply held values and aspirations: "... if we act as if this nation had full liberty, had full freedom, had full justice, we kill those things; they die because they in fact have to be re-enacted, re-embraced, re-empowered and struggled over yet again in each new generation that encounters the burdens of taking on those values. And that's why civic engagement is the core of the project."

For everyone in our audience it was both humbling and energizing to hear the panelists speak of their deep affection for the national park system and their high expectations for its future.

Turning to the Evaluation Summit, I would like to take a moment to talk about the role of evaluation in educational programs. What you would call evaluation, I would call continual assessment. All the great organizations do it rigorously. It is not just a fad. Every great organization has a culture of continual assessment. It's how we get better. Above all it is not a compliance tool. It is a learning tool and a self-improvement tool. An organization collectively needs to decide what is really important to measure and to understand. It is satisfying and necessary to be able to track progress, to constantly get feedback and to respond to it.

To be effective, assessment must be widely embraced as a way to measure success so that it is owned by everyone, and people who succeed are rewarded. Assessment is even more important when budgets are tight. It encourages transparency and accountability and is essential to program efficiency and effectiveness. Essentially it's a form of adaptive management. It also helps to see our work in a larger context, so we can better understand and respond to changes in the world around us.

It is critical that the NPS Interpretation and Education Program be strong, vital, flexible, effective, and fun. To that end, it is exciting that the NPS is in the midst of an "Interpretation and Education Renaissance" championed by NPS Director Mary Bomar and Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne and supported through the president's National Park Centennial Initiative. The National Park Service must continue to marshal the resources and intellectual discipline needed to create this culture of inquiry and ongoing learning and improvement.

The National Interpretation and Education Evaluation Summit was a historic step forward. It was clear to me that Summit participants found the experience to be fulfilling and quite thought provoking. The contributions of our panelists and 14 outside experts provided fresh and useful insights, and the responsive discussion from NPS staff and partners demonstrated the depth, creativity, and commitment that can be brought to this challenge.

All this, however, is not something that can be accomplished overnight. It will be a long journey, but ultimately the effort will be fulfilling, worthwhile, and should be enjoyable. Creating a culture of evaluation will be a key piece of taking the NPS from "good" to "great."

In summary, I believe that education is not something that is tangential or supplemental to the mission of the NPS. Since the National Park Service was established almost a century ago, education has been at the core of its mission. It is through education that we pass on our civilization, the knowledge and understanding that we have gained over hundreds and thousands of years. If we don't do it well, in the long run, our prospects as a people, a nation, and a species will be diminished. Abraham Lincoln said it about as well as anybody ever did and I'd like to quote him: "A child is a person who is going to carry on what you have started. He is going to sit where you are sitting, and when you are gone attend to those things which you think are important. You may adopt all the policies you please, but how they are carried out depends on him. He will assume control of your cities, states and nation. He is going to move in and take over your churches, schools, universities and corporations. All your books will be judged, praised or condemned by him. The fate of humanity is in his hands."

In its 2001 report, the Advisory Board recommended that the NPS "develop and expand" its educational capacity. The Board believed that there is a distinct and critical national purpose embedded in this mission: "to build a citizenry that is committed to con-

serving its heritage and its home on earth.” As never before, young people—and people of all ages—need to embrace and participate in the public life of the nation. The fundamental well-being of our society and the strength of our democratic system of government depend on the stewardship and citizenship of the next generation. As we look to our future I would suggest four positive outcomes:

- That people have a powerful understanding and connection to the American land, its history, its biodiversity, and its stories.
- That people broadly share an ethic of stewardship for the earth’s natural and cultural heritage and are willing to work collaboratively and respectfully for conservation.
- That they are empowered to deal with the tremendous environment challenges we face, particularly global climate change, with a sense of optimism, resourcefulness and a commitment to one another, inspired by all we have accomplished throughout our history, often in the face of adversity and conflict.
- That people practice civic engagement in many different aspects of their lives with a commitment to responsible citizenship empowered and encouraged by their educational experiences in parks.

National parks are places where people experience and learn about their country firsthand—its history, cultures, geography and ecology—and what it means to be a responsible steward and citizen of this republic. When parks conduct their business in ways that value transparency and public discourse, they can become places where people can engage in learning, dialogue, and problem-solving—sharpening essential civic skills of a democracy.

National parks are places where all citizens can come together to rediscover the common purposes and values that have shaped the American experience; places which animate a shared sense of national optimism, places where we can get it right. As Wallace Stegner wrote, national parks can “reflect us at our best. . . .”

In looking to its centennial in 2016, the National Park Service should take immense pride in reflecting on its accomplishments, on the profound good it has brought to the nation and indeed to the entire world. By developing and expanding your capacity and reach as an educational institution, you will dramatically grow the parks’ influence in your second century and play yet a more vital and meaningful role in our society.