

## Civic Engagement: What Does that Mean Again?

**Molly Russell**, NPS Archeology Program, National Park Service, 1201 Eye Street, NW, Washington, DC 20005; molly\_russell@contractor.nps.gov

**Barbara Little**, NPS Archeology Program, National Park Service, Washington, DC; barbara\_little@nps.gov

**Dean Reeder**, National Tourism Chief, Office of Tourism, National Park Service, 1201 Eye Street, NW, Washington, DC 20005; dean\_reeder@nps.gov

**Nora Mitchell**, NPS Conservation Study Institute, Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller NHP, 54 Elm Street, Woodstock, VT 05091; norajmitchell@gmail.com

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IS INCREASINGLY BEING SEEN WITHIN THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE AS A means to achieve greater relevancy, as well as a mechanism to increase resource stewardship, provide meaningful educational experiences, and diversify the agency's workforce. However, it is not generally recognized that civic engagement is utilized by a number of different parks, programs, and offices in meaningful ways. Nor is it realized that employees representing different areas—both geographically and discipline-wise—can work together and learn from one another on how best to engage with the public.

Our session attempted to provide some insight into what civic engagement is, and some of the ways that it is utilized in varying programs and offices in the NPS. To help achieve this we had panelists Barbara Little (Archeology Program), Dean Reeder (Office of Tourism), and Nora Mitchell (Conservation Study Institute) serve as representatives for their respective programs/offices. Each panelist explained why civic engagement is an important aspect of their office/program's work, as well as how it can inform all undertaken projects. Interpretive training manager David Larsen, who passed away earlier this year, was also supposed to serve on the panel. We would like to acknowledge David's expertise on this subject, and his numerous contributions to both civic engagement and the NPS. The session was dedicated to his memory.

Following our panelists' presentations, we asked the audience to participate in a discussion about perceived impediments that are making civically engaged projects a challenge. The purpose of this was two-fold. Firstly, it would provide a forum in which people could participate and know they were being listened to. Secondly, it gave our panel insight into challenges that many face when trying to implement highly collaborative projects so that current initiatives that have been launched at the WASO level take into account the feelings of those undertaking such work. In other words, it was a means by which we could begin to engage with those working outside of WASO.

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**Citation:** Weber, Samantha, ed. 2012. *Rethinking Protected Areas in a Changing World: Proceedings of the 2011 George Wright Society Biennial Conference on Parks, Protected Areas, and Cultural Sites*. Hancock, Michigan: The George Wright Society.  
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The following proceedings contain a general overview of each panelist's presentation. Following these overviews is a summary of the dialogue that occurred after the presentations. These comments will be presented in a manner that produces the greatest level of coherency, with some accompanying commentary to provide context.

### **Civic engagement from a perspective of resource management and stewardship:**

#### **Barbara J. Little**

Resource managers, as well as other practitioners within NPS, work within a universe of standards, ethics, science and scholarship. Trends and influences in the professions in universities and in private practice impact our work. Archeology as a profession working with both local and descendant communities has increasingly found that civic engagement is a component of good practice.

Some changes in public archaeology came from within the field, but many of them came from external forces. We can trace the tearing open of archeology as a practice to the needs and desires of descendant communities, to decades of Native American activity resulting in the passage of NAGPRA 1990, and the discovery and none-too-elegant handling of the African Burial Ground discovery in 1991 in lower Manhattan.

It became clear to archeologists that stakeholder concerns could no longer be ignored. Stakeholders insisted on having some control. Professional sense of ethics changed in response. We have seen similar needs and similar trends across disciplines. There is a trend not only of public insistence on government accountability, but also an insistence on citizen involvement in government (widespread and involving not only land managing agencies but also, for example, public health).

Civic engagement and resource stewardship also intersect because people want to be part of research for many different reasons. Tribes, for example, may be very interested in being involved in designing the research that touches the remains of their ancestors; citizen scientists or students may want to learn and serve and even gain job skills.

In resource management, it seems as if civic engagement is less frequent than in some other NPS practices. Why should this be? Why does civic engagement happen less in resource management? Part of the reason may be that resource folks are trained as experts; sometimes that includes a sense of professional identity that instills in us the strange idea that we have all the answers—or the best answers—or the only answers that matter.

Kirsten M. Leong, John F. Forester, and Daniel J. Decker (2009) interviewed natural resource managers, planners, and practitioners with experience in public participation and identified roadblocks:

- Takes a lot of time
- Lack of support from management
- Fear of a lawsuit
- Fear of losing control of the outcome

One of their interviewees summarized it this way (2009, 27):

Information must be three things: credible and accurate, salient to the issue at hand, and legitimate in the eyes of the public. To accomplish that, you need relationships that are transparent, open and accessible to everyone. All forms of knowledge have to be respectfully questioned and examined, both traditional and expert. This builds the legitimacy of expert knowledge. Otherwise, people will take the attitude, 'If you dismiss my local knowledge, I will dismiss your expert knowledge.'

In light of the importance of credible, accurate, salient, and legitimate information, it is useful to reframe the importance of civic engagement to scholarship: to consider that getting more perspectives, getting more input, gathering more data is what leads to sufficient quality and quantity of knowledge to make good decisions. We want good decisions, good and thorough understandings, and to avoid as much as possible short-sightedness and blind spots, recognizing that science is an imperfect practice.

To trust the process is a big leap. One of the lessons from archeology as a discipline comes from the aftermath of NAGPRA and the African Burial Ground. These were terrifying events for many archeologists. However, the truth of the aftermath is that archeology done in collaboration is better archaeology. It's not just more ethical, it's also better science.

### **Recognizing the link between civic engagement and tourism: Dean Reeder**

Tourism is connected to civic engagement in many ways, but most directly through three authorities. The first—the NPS mission itself—promotes sustainable visitation. Secondly, Director's Order no. 17 outlines a policy to promote and support sustainable, responsible, informed, and managed visitor use through collaboration and coordination with tourism partners, thus acknowledging a joint socio-economic interest with gateway communities. This Director's Order fosters positive relationships with park neighbors by promoting an understating of, and sensitivity toward, local cultures, customs, and concerns. Finally, the NPS National Tourism Strategic Plan outlines coordinated actions with gateway community partners to increase the communications capacity of parks and the park service. Many of these partnerships take the form of a cooperative marketing project designed to reach targeted audiences who may not otherwise visit park units.

As Jon Jarvis says, "Gateway communities and parks have an important relationship that needs to be grown through mutual respect and cooperation, particularly when tourism is an essential part of the economy."

It is through the direction of these authorities that parks and programs are encouraged to take a proactive approach and engage with gateway community partners. A common assumption is that these partners operate in close proximity to the park—occupying land that is contiguous to park boundaries. In reality, however, the term gateway community extends far beyond this general assumption. Consider these two different concepts of community: communities of place, and communities of interest. While communities of place refer to those in close proximity to a park unit, communities of interest are self-declared and therefore, self-defined. For example, a few years ago, the Western States Tourism Policy Council (travel directors from the thirteen Western states) co-produced a gateway community conference with the Department of the Interior. Through conference registrations, we learned that San Francisco considers itself a gateway to Yosemite, and Las Vegas considers itself a gateway to Grand Canyon. These cities, while not communities of place, have defined themselves as communities of interest in that they connected themselves to their respective park.

In the sustainable tourism model, such partners—whether they are communities of place or communities of interest—deploy patient capital. This means that they invest themselves with the expectation that they will experience greater financial benefits over a longer term. The values inherent in sustainable tourism emphasize local products, based on the host community's unique character, culture, and heritage—which are gained through civic engagement. Such emphasis, in turn, results in a higher quality visitor experience.

The emphasis of local products can be described as brand positioning. In simple terms, brand positioning conveys a promise as to what their NPS unit experience will be like. When consumers agree to accept our offer to visit, they look for clues in and around the destination that their expectations surrounding the brand promise will be kept. This is why a sustainable desti-

nation pays close attention to communicating a “sense of arrival.” The park cannot create this sense alone. Together, we and the community partners are both being judged as providers of the destination experience. For example, the town of Springdale, Utah has worked in collaboration with Zion National Park on planning, underlying infrastructure, and a passenger transportation system. The level of collaboration is evident in architectural themes in Springdale, which preview and complement the historic architecture of facilities inside the park.

Civic engagement is also present in the “Crown of the Continent,” a geotourism region that has been coordinated by the National Geographic Society. This geotourism region, in part, provides a holistic destination experience for those traveling to the “International Peace Park,” which was created with the merger of Glacier NP and Waterton Lakes NP. As a cooperative marketing project, the parks, other federal and tribal land managers, and their gateway community partners formed a local stewardship council to sort and select the combination of natural and cultural experiences to be featured in the geotourism map guide. Conspicuously absent are park and political boundaries.

In closing, consider the following words from President Barack Obama: “Folks in communities around this park know they don’t have to choose between economic and environmental concerns; the tourism that drives their local economy depends on good stewardship of their local environment.”

#### **Civic engagement and social capital: Nora Mitchell**

Civic engagement supports all four of the NPS current national priorities—relevancy, education, stewardship, and workforce. By making a commitment to have a “continuous, dynamic conversation” with communities and key stakeholders in a meaningful way, civic engagement builds the relationships and provides the knowledge and insights that are necessary for the NPS and our partners to achieve our shared conservation goals over the long term. This panel illustrated how programs across many disciplines—and every project team—can practice civic engagement for a more successful effort. Considering the breadth of this practice, civic engagement—conducted in a thoughtful, deliberate, sustained and inclusive manner—can play a transformative role for the NPS, our partners and also, importantly, for American civil society.

Civic engagement is of tremendous importance, in particular, to maintaining the relevance of the national park system and conservation stewardship into the next century. Numerous challenges exist as a result of certain current societal trends, including declining historical and cultural literacy, “nature deficit disorder” (a term to describe disconnection of youth from nature), concerns over obesity, a population that is more urbanized, and increasingly sophisticated technology. These are all challenges—but also opportunities—for the NPS and our partners to engage new communities, diversify visitation, and introduce more of the American population to all that the national park system has to offer.

Even so, reaching a broader part of the American public requires new approaches. Fortunately, in recent years, many national parks, NPS programs, and partners across the country have initiated innovative efforts to engage communities and to enhance their service and relevancy to all Americans. The emergence of successful programs provides an incredible opportunity to learn from and share knowledge among parks, programs, and partners across the national park system. This meeting at the George Wright Society Conference—and others like it—offer an important venue for sharing what we’ve learned and help all of us continue to hone our practice of civic engagement.

A particularly promising development that demonstrates the role of civic engagement in relevancy is the many recent innovative programs that engage youth from surrounding, diverse communities, building their connections to parks, and developing their sense of stewardship. Some of these initiatives also provide an avenue for considering career opportunities with the NPS. In

order to learn from these programs, the NPS Conservation Study Institute initiated a research project with the University of Vermont to capture lessons learned and to better understand what constitutes good practice in engaging diverse communities and enhancing relevancy of national parks and programs. Working in cooperation with two national parks—Santa Monica Mountains and Boston Harbor Islands NRA—their partners, and the Northeast Regional Interpretation and Education Program, a team conducted research on the key ingredients for successfully engaging youth from diverse local communities.

This project coined a term “deep engagement” to describe the long-term, sustained engagement of community members that builds strong connections with NPS programs and parks so that the park becomes an integral and vital part of program participants’ communities and an asset to their quality of life. Deep engagement complements other, more short-term experiences usually offered by national parks. The report on this project, *Beyond Outreach: Sharing Innovative Approaches for Engaging Youth from Diverse Communities* (Stanfield McCown et al. 2011) includes a “toolkit” for practitioners that can be used to guide the development of new programs and improve existing efforts to engage diverse communities (see also Tuxill, Mitchell, and Clark 2009; Jewiss, Laven, and Mitchell 2010; Tuxill and Mitchell 2010; and Duffin et al. 2009). By sharing these experiences, other managers and practitioners both within and outside of the NPS can, through adaptation of these good practices to their situations, enhance the effectiveness of their civic engagement with diverse communities.

### **Audience comments**

Following these presentations the audience was asked both for their questions, as well as to comment on any presentation or audience-member question that had been posed. Through this portion of the session we gained insight into many challenges that are encountered as people undertake civically engaged work. For example, a recurring comment was the need for a sustainable support-network that people can field questions and help troubleshoot challenges that have been faced. Audience members also suggested that overall organizational culture may inhibit civic engagement practices. Other comments referred to power struggles that at times interfere with collaborative work.

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