

An Interactive Workshop: Identifying Ways to Improve Park Break

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Introduction

An interactive workshop, intended to identify ways to improve Park Break, was conducted during the week of March 14–18, 2011, during *Rethinking Protected Areas in a Changing World*, the biennial George Wright Society Conference on Parks, Protected Areas, and Cultural Sites, held in New Orleans, Louisiana. The goals of the workshop were to examine recent Park Break evaluation results, review past Park Break participants' suggestions for improvement, engage workshop attendees in a discussion of these suggestions, and create a list of recommended actions to present to Park Break organizers.

Background

Park Break is a national park-based, weeklong field seminar for graduate students interested in a career involving park-related research, education, or management. The Park Break concept was developed in 2007 as a collaborative program by members of the George Wright Society (GWS), National Park Service (NPS), U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), Texas A&M University, Colorado State University, Geological Society of America, and the Student Conservation Association. Park Break offers graduate students in academic fields related to parks, i.e., natural resource management, ecotourism, civic engagement, conservation, social science, and cultural heritage, an opportunity to spend a week in a national park. Students attend both field and classroom activities led by park scientists, managers, administrators, members of partner organizations, researchers, and scholars. An additional goal of the Park Break program is to provide increased opportunities for minority students to facilitating their careers in the field of park and protected area research and management.

Graduate students have primarily been recruited for Park Break through the GWS web site, with participants selected, and fellowships awarded, through a competitive application process. Sponsored by the USGS, NPS, and USFS, and with support from the other founding organiza-

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tions, four Park Break sessions were held in 2008, three in 2009, and one in 2010. There is currently an additional session scheduled in the fall of 2011 at Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area, the only NPS unit to have hosted a Park Break Session every year since the program's inception.

Parks and themes in 2008 included the following:

- Acadia National Park/Civic Engagement
- Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area/Conservation Policy
- Gateway National Recreation Area/Global Climate Change
- Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore/Wildland Urban Interface

In 2009 the parks and themes were these:

- Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area/Conservation Policy
- Great Sand Dunes National Park/Climate Change & Sustainability
- Mt. Rainier National Park/Natural Hazards

In 2010 the park site utilized, and its consistent theme, was Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area/Conservation Policy.

Workshop results

During the Park Break workshop, attendees reviewed the preliminary results of a 2010 evaluation of Park Break (Susan L. Vezeau, Carla Mora-Trejos, Robert B. Powell, and John Donahue, in preparation), which included participants' suggestions for improving the program. These suggestions were the foundation for further discussion, resulting in a list of proposed action items for future Park Break organizers. Workshop attendees believed the program to be a worthwhile endeavor, and suggest that in order for Park Break to grow and prosper, the following items need to be addressed:

- A sound structure of support needs to be established, including the identification of sustainable funding sources
- The creation of standards of learning, goals, or expected outcomes
- The selection of an individual to undertake the primary leadership of Park Break
- The development of a skeletal structure around which all future Park Break sessions could be organized
- Standardization of Park Break forms, general information, expectations, rules of conduct, etc. (i.e., a Park Break Handbook, or a welcome pack of information), to be made readily available for host parks, with only minimal modification needed
- The organization of a volunteer database containing information on interested individuals willing and able to support Park Break (i.e., Park Break alumni, speakers, sponsors, hosts, etc.)
- Marketing through a variety of venues, using an array of modalities, with the intent of recruiting a diverse group of applicants (i.e., through minority universities, indigenous communities, or national historic places that signify important events to specific segments of the population)
- Create and maintain a Park Break web site where future applicants, past participants, potential hosts, or instructors can go for information and inspiration
- Promote and encourage the inclusion of Park Break alumni for future Park Break sessions

- Simplify travel arrangements and minimize costs by utilizing a reimbursement method of payment
- Emphasize the importance of parks and the benefits of play, by bringing participants in a day early, and having them stay a day late, in order to explore the park for recreational as well as educational purposes.
- Continue to strive for excellence in all aspects of Park Break, but especially substantive areas such as speakers, experiential activities, and providing opportunities for engagement

Suggestions for improvement from Park Break participants

Preliminary results the 2010 Park Break evaluation were discussed with workshop attendees. For the evaluation, researchers utilized a survey instrument to acquire both qualitative and quantitative data from Park Break participants on several topics of interest. Qualitative answers, grouped by topic, included numerous comments and suggestions for improvement.

Relevancy. “It is incredibly relevant, some of the things I learned there I am still trying to understand and incorporate in my own research. There were great examples of things that happen there, that are happening in so many other places.”

- Care should be made in the selection of Park Break themes (they should not be too overarching).
- Once a theme has been announced it should not be changed.
- Topics of discussion, itineraries, and speakers should be relevant to the Park Break theme.

Speaker selection.

- Speakers should be knowledgeable, professional, enthusiastic, and inspiring.
- Try to provide input from local stakeholders.
- International speakers would be beneficial if possible and appropriate.
- Provide a balance between natural and cultural resource experts.
- Allow adequate time for discussion after a speaker’s presentation.
- Provide opportunities for speakers to spend casual time with participants.
- Maintain a strict presentation schedule; allow a reasonable length of time for presentations, and include time for discussion.
- Schedule frequent breaks between speakers.
- Schedule field trips to pertinent locations (speakers during travel time).

Implementation of a speaker evaluation form.

- Evaluations would be helpful. They would provide organizers guidance regarding which speakers to invite to future sessions, and would allow presenters to get feedback as well.
- Make sure that the evaluation forms are anonymous.
- Provide enough time at the end of the for evaluation forms to be completed.
- Include questions on relevancy.
- Encourage consistent use of the same form for all Park Break sessions.
- Develop and implement an overall Park Break session evaluation (perhaps a version of the survey under discussion) for in-depth and long-term monitoring of Park Break to track performance, allowing for current standards to be maintained or improved.

Provide opportunities for student presentations.

- Presentations should be requested, and content should be research-related.
- If participants elect to present, presentations should be short (i.e., 15 minutes), and should be scheduled on the first day (afternoon session) of Park Break.

- This would help to connect participants with speakers and mentors who have similar interests.
- Require each participant to provide a short autobiography with personal and research interests (can be distributed prior to, or immediately upon arrival), to facilitate social interaction, networking and future research.

Communication.

- Need for a central communication contact both before and after the Park Break session.
- Develop a welcome packet or website with information on logistics, schedule, packing lists, flights, as well as assigned pre-trip readings that could complement the discussions during Park Break.
- Facebook should be clearly defined as an unofficial communication medium run by participants for social networking only (not everyone has, or wants, a Facebook account).
- Communicate clear expectations for student assignments, projects, papers, or other deliverables, and follow through with necessary support.

Preparatory materials and assignments. “It was great reading professional scientific research papers about a park... and then actually meeting and learning from the authors of the papers. It made science ‘come alive’ this way—‘Hey, these are real people doing this research!’”

- Have a few, very relevant readings assigned for each Park Break session.
- Preparatory materials should also include a detailed itinerary.
- Communicate clear expectations for student assignments, give examples if possible.

Travel arrangements.

- Have a dedicated contact for logistics.
- Ask participants about transportation preferences and cost saving suggestions.
- Provide a timeline for the reimbursement process.
- Have an emergency contact number to carry during travel.

Accommodations. “Accommodations were incredible, it really felt like we were appreciated and taken good care of.” “Accommodations were above and beyond what I expected.”

- Maintain high standards in accommodations.
- If shared rooms are a necessity, make sure the room size is appropriate.
- Limit travel time to meeting facilities.
- If possible, provide transportation in the park to allow greater access.

Meal arrangements.

- Maintain current high standards, including the availability of snacks, and vegetarian options.
- If possible, alcohol should be allowed with dinner and during evening social time.
- Try to schedule some free time before dinner or other evening activities.

Meeting facilities. “I think having the meeting at Grey Towers was an amazing opportunity—really once in a lifetime.” “Grey Towers is incredibly beautiful and comfortable. This historic icon in conservation history was the cherry on top.”

- Meeting facilities should be sized appropriately and have the necessary equipment for presentations.
- Room temperatures need to be maintained at comfortable levels.
- Limit drive times to meeting facilities.
- Try to schedule some outdoor meeting time within the park if weather permits.

Extracurricular activities. “Students had a chance to shadow park staff doing night-time owl surveys—excellent! Maybe one or two nights of activities would be good, but not every night.”

- Provide unstructured, free time within the schedule.
- Introduce participants to appropriate park staff (i.e. entry level, scientists, HR, etc.).
- Arrange venues for casual social interactions between participants, organizers, park staff and speakers.
- Allow time, or schedule time, for participants to explore the park.
- Coordinate one or two night time activities (maybe make participation optional).

Other issues: GWS presentations or papers

“The task at the end of the Park Break program, to write a publishable journal article, was in my opinion, not really feasible given the context of the experience. Given that the paper topics were so variable and disconnected from our own areas of expertise and academic study, the low success rate of the manuscripts was not surprising. In spite of all of the comments listed above, I had a fantastic experience and met some very kind and knowledgeable individuals associated with the NPS and USGS. I have recommended Park Break to others and will continue to do so as long as the program exists.”

- Communicate clear expectations for student assignments, projects, papers or other deliverables.
- Follow through with necessary support (i.e., co-authorship or guidance on or review of a GWS poster, paper, or panel discussion proposal).
- Provide examples of what past participants have produced for deliverables.

Overall satisfaction

“Great experience, invaluable at combining ‘textbook’/school with real world problems and those trying to manage our public natural resources!” “So satisfied that I came back the following year as a mentor!” “I think park break is a great program and hope it continues.” “I found it very useful to get a perspective on the American conservation paradigms. I would even want to go to another Park Break session, if it is organized in a different area, just so that I can familiarize with other Parks in the USA.”

Conclusion

“Park Break is not just about a week in a park—it’s intended to create an ongoing community of motivated young professionals” (discussion participant, George Wright Society Biennial Conference, March 2011). Park Break alumni have proven to be passionate about this program. Several past participants have been hired by the NPS, USFS, and USGS as of the time of this report and others have clearly stated the role this program played in solidifying their goals to pursue a career related to park and protected area research, education, or management. The program also seems to be successful in attracting a diverse range of applicants; survey respondents reported the following demographics for race or ethnic group: 62.6% white (not

of Hispanic descent), 14.3% Hispanic, 9.9% Asian, 4.4% African American, 4.4% Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander; and 4.4% other.

The Park Break workshop was organized and run by previous Park Break participants in the spirit of reciprocity, a desire to give back to something they felt had benefited them profoundly. It was also done with the intent of helping to make the same experience, or an even better one, available to future graduate students for the benefit of the individuals, and also the parks and protected areas that they may someday become the stewards of. It is our hope that the results of this workshop, along with the suggestions from past participants will be applied to the betterment of Park Break. In lieu of a closing statement, the following are additional quotes that Park Break alumni wanted to share with the program organizers.

- “Really enjoyed it and wish I could do it again!”
- “Park break was a great opportunity to see how things were done, and how development affects protected areas that are so close to such a big city like NY.”
- “Keep it going, but have clear expectations for participants!”
- “I truly enjoyed the entire experience, the relationships created because of Park Break. I hope that more students are able to take advantage of such an enlightening experience. I also hope the organizers of Park Break take steps to create a more diverse cadre of participants. MANRRS (Minorities in Ag, Natural Resources, and Related Sciences) is a organization comprised of undergraduate and grad students, many of which with interests which fall into the goals of Park Break.”
- “I really hope that Park Break continues so that other graduate students can experience what I have.”
- “Great program! I was thrilled to have the experience, and connect with some very accomplished people. Great way to spend spring break!”
- “Got me to where I am now ... would love to help it succeed into the future.”
- “Appreciate all the work done by the staff of Park Break.”
- “Thanks so much for the Park Break program!”