

Preparing the Next Generation of Protected Area Employees: Opportunities for Students, Agencies and Universities

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Why students are becoming more valuable to protected area managers

RESOURCEFULNESS WILL BE A KEY CONCEPT IN THE NEXT SEVERAL YEARS for the National Park Service (NPS). Managers across the NPS will have to find ways to keep “the gate open” and the “lights on.” Park managers will need to find a way to engage the youth of America, as well as embrace a population that has a changing demographic structure. Park managers will also need to decide how to incorporate new technology to meet the needs of the visiting public while still being stewards of the natural environment. Students are the answer for all of these challenges.

Students have flexible schedules that allow them to work intermittently and in times of need (e.g., weekends, special programs). Students represent a mosaic of our society, and can help protected area managers better understand how youth engage with the natural world, and how to accommodate different cultural preferences. Today’s students have been brought up interacting with technology and understand how it impacts not only their own lives, but also the lives of others. As noted by Prensky (2001), today’s students are “digital natives” since they have never known a world where technology isn’t inherently involved in everything, even natural experiences. Technology, and how it is applied, will best be incorporated into park management by students (and the generation they represent) who engage with it everyday. Actively pursuing students to work for protected areas will provide the energy, insight, and relevance to ensure the importance and even existence of parks in the future. These students will also be the future employees and stewards of our protected areas in America.

Students are a cost effective way to complete projects

Park managers will always find it necessary to find creative ways to ensure projects are completed on budget and on time. Permanent staff is often pulled in many different directions as part of their

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everyday workload, which can lead to projects being delayed or not completed. Students can help by providing dedicated employees that can focus on one project until completion. Students will often be engaged in park projects that cannot be completed in a short period of time; however, their dedicated involvement in that project can move it closer to completion. Students can also bring a fresh perspective, to a project or issue, that may help facilitate completion.

Through programs such as Pathways, high-functioning and high-achieving students can be identified for part-time or seasonal employment. These exceptional students will have a high intrinsic motivation for success and thoroughness, and will also have the extrinsic motivation of completing a project for academic credit. The potential for students to obtain a term (temporary) or permanent position with the NPS may also serve as a strong motivator for exemplary work.

Student research

Of the many ways that students can help NPS managers, conducting research may be the most mutually beneficial. Students, especially graduate students, are often required to complete a thesis or dissertation as part of their course of study, and many want to work with the NPS. The NPS often needs assistance with ongoing projects, some of which a student could easily develop research questions around. Student research can answer questions that managers may have, but do not have the funding or staff to pursue (many students will have funding through their university). Students can incorporate up-to-date scientific methods and analyses (with the assistance of their thesis or dissertation committee) that can inform park planning efforts. Conducting research in a park setting can provide students with an understanding of how research is conducted within a federal agency, which can benefit the student, should they pursue a job with the NPS or other federal entity. Overall, the student gets the opportunity to conduct personally meaningful research for a federal agency, and the federal agency gets the benefit of the student's research outcomes.

Benefits to students

There are several less obvious benefits students gain from working for an agency like the NPS. First, a research study will complete a requirement for their university. This will likely be through the completion of a senior thesis, a master's thesis, or a PhD dissertation. It may also help to satisfy certain course project requirements, or act as an independent study for a student. Second, the experience of working for a park can bridge the gap between the classroom and the "real world." Too often students do not get the field experience they need to be successful upon graduation. Employing students will provide students with a balance between what is discussed in a textbook and how that applies to a tangible situation in the field. This practical knowledge will be a "foot in the door" for students to be hired for term or permanent employment. Lastly, students will have the unique opportunity to "be in the room" or "at the table" when park managers are making decisions. Many times the student will not be a part of the decision-making team, but understanding how decisions are made will provide tremendous insight to the student.

Case studies

The following case studies are from students who have worked for, or are currently working for, the NPS in a student role, as well as from an NPS park manager and a university professor.

Student's perspective, number one

Working for the National Park Service while completing my master's degree served as a mutually beneficial relationship for both the NPS and myself. The ultimate topic of my thesis came from discussions I listened to, and participated in, while working at the NPS. From subsequent conversations, I was able to identify a topic of study that I was passionate about and that filled a need for the

NPS. Many times, park units have research questions that they would like to investigate, but funding, busy schedules, and the formal approval processes often make such research endeavors out of reach for park managers. As a student, I was able to conduct my research outside of the official NPS Office of Management and Budget (OMB) approval process. While my research was required to pass through my official university review process (Colorado Multiple Institutional Review Board), this process was timelier than the research approval needed when federal dollars are involved.

The information from the research I conducted will be given to the NPS in two ways. First, I have presented my findings at formal federal conferences, as well as more informal presentations to NPS personnel. Second, an executive summary that gives a digestible overview of my findings will be sent to the specific parks where I conducted research, along with a full copy of my finalized thesis. This summary will also be provided to interested subject experts within the NPS as a whole.

Working for the NPS while attending graduate school allowed me to conduct research that is at the forefront of its topic in a way that best serves the needs of the NPS. This work environment also provided me access to subject matter experts who were able to review and inform my research, both during its developmental phase, and the analysis phase.

Student's perspective, number two

I feel like a late bloomer in life. I didn't attend a university until my early twenties and later I enrolled in graduate school in hopes more education could help me start a career in some type of environmental work. It took me four years to finish a master's degree and certificate while working full-time. During this time I also started volunteering for my county's sustainability task force, which helped me earn two part-time positions at small nonprofits (a conservation center and a land trust). These positions helped me gain my next job as the events and marketing coordinator at a community foundation. I was still working on graduate school and could not figure out how all my random jobs would ever help me get my foot in the door with some type of environmental policy work. I didn't even know what type of job would fit me, given all my random skills.

While in graduate school I took a class that helped me get my foot in the door for my job with the NPS. I started asking my professor how he made his way into the NPS. He told me about the student program. I submitted my resume to one of my professor's contacts at the NPS and once I had an interview things moved very fast while we all raced to meet the deadline for the end of the student hiring process.

I couldn't be more grateful to have this job, it's a better fit for me than I ever could have imagined. I didn't even know what "planners" really did before this. Thankfully, my boss saw my skills of marketing, communication, education, outreach, sales, event planning, environmental policy, and GIS as a perfect match for the program.

It's been really wonderful to finally use the knowledge I gained in graduate school. I think I would have been more engaged in my classes and my final project if I had been working at the NPS or another public land management agency earlier in my education, but it's great that now I use on a daily basis class work that once seemed irrelevant to me. I am no longer a student with the NPS, I have been converted to a "term" employee. The best and most unexpected benefit of working for the NPS has been my fellow employees. I have never worked with such a large group of wonderful, hardworking, skilled, and fun folks.

Manager's perspective

[We have utilized several] government programs which allowed for the competitive recruitment of students, targeting skill sets needed by an organization, searching for diversity in candidates, and

hiring current students to recent graduates. These programs for hiring students allowed our division to go from zero diversity in our staff, to 50% in some branches, 30% in others, and 10% overall. Recently we had 25 students working within a division of 65 professional employees. These were career positions traditionally held by permanent career employees. We needed talent, a lot of it, and our vision was to be cutting edge, diverse, and reflective of the nation. Our revenue was double what it had been two years previous and our project workload was triple. We were also experiencing the anticipated retirements from an aging workforce. Our permanent staff dropped 30% in this two-year time period. The numbers tell the story....

Of our 25 students, seven were diverse racially, but equally as important, we recruited, competed, and selected our students from 16 different universities around the country. Nearly all of those students had their undergraduate degrees from different universities, representing even greater experiences around the country. Most students were seeking their master's degrees or PhDs.

Our success was due to a number of factors:

1. We had a vision. We fully knew what our organization needed in terms of skills: technical, leadership, interpersonal. We are a national service center, expected to be the best of the best, and we needed diverse technical skills to conduct the environmental analysis needed for good government decision-making.
2. We utilized some national recruiting forums for African-American and Hispanic students, and to some extent Native American students.
3. We used our network of students to find more students.
4. We created an intense, comprehensive interview and selection process.
5. We were creative, nimble, flexible, and tenacious.

The result is that we have an excellent, vibrant workforce capable of taking our organization into the future with energy and expertise. We were able to convert several students last year to term employees and we intend to convert several more this year. Our students are our long-term workforce, leading the NPS planning and decision-making into the future.

University perspective

As a professor I always look for opportunities to get my students in touch with what drives them professionally. In many cases this is working for or conducting research for a federal land agency, and specifically the NPS. Through a student position with the NPS, students can have the opportunity to contribute to the mission of preservation and recreation while giving the NPS much needed help in a cost effective manner. If a student asks me about how to get a job with the NPS, I almost always tell them to either volunteer as much as possible, or find a student position that could lead to permanent employment. Often times the students can be hired non-competitively if they work over 640 hours for the agency as a student. This situation allows the student to work towards future employment after graduation and also serves the park by bringing on the next generation of park stewards.

Importance of continued support for student involvement

Federal land management agencies, and especially the NPS, have been facing budget shortfalls for many years now, and the future does not look any more promising. Managers struggle to find ways to complete projects and conduct research necessary to meet the mission of the NPS, and with declining budgets and less staff, this is a daunting task; however, it is not an insurmountable one, students can be the answer. By having students involved, managers can recruit the best and brightest to be the future employees at our parks. Managers can continue to recruit diverse stu-

dents that help the NPS with one of its major hurdles in the years to come, maintaining relevancy in a changing society. A large portion (40%) of the Department of the Interior (which the NPS is a part of) is eligible for retirement in the next few years (Dodaro 2012).

Taking all this into consideration, hiring students does not come without challenges. According to a report by the Partnership for Public Service (2009), relatively few students report that they are considering the government (e.g., the NPS) as a potential employer. Also, it is difficult for many recent graduates or matriculated students to compete for government jobs through the competitive hiring system because they do not have much experience. With a temporary reduction in the student workforce via the recent sequester, and the challenges with interpreting the Pathways program (a new student employment program for the federal government), we are at a crossroads. It is imperative that we hold students' interest in a career with protected land management agencies, such as the NPS, and that we weather the storm of current budget cuts. Students are the future of protected area management, and there are still many avenues to bringing on young professionals with the drive, passion, and education to propel protected area management through the twenty-first century.

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