

Communities of Practice Beyond Our Borders: Building an International Program at Yosemite National Park

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Introduction

AT NEARLY 100 YEARS OLD, the National Park Service (NPS) is a mature organization with tremendous expertise and experience protecting and managing natural and cultural resources. In the first 100 years, our efforts focused on building a park system and honing management skills. As we look toward our second century, we recognize that not only do we have much to share, we have much to learn about the protection of natural and cultural landscapes around the world. Participating in the global conservation community through an international program is Yosemite's attempt to do just that.

The [Call to Action](#), a nationwide initiative outlining the future of the NPS, identified themes important to maintaining the agency's relevancy and continued adaptation to contemporary challenges. A Call to Action identified adopting a landscape-scale approach to planning and partnerships, because many of the emerging challenges we face involve processes that originate outside the boundaries of our parks. Climate change is the paramount example and clearly calls for large-scale planning and coordination with parks and other protected areas in order to maintain biodiversity and healthy ecosystems. Working with the international conservation community through sister park relationships and technical exchanges builds a foundation for these larger levels of collaboration and problem solving.

At Yosemite National Park, we recognize our responsibility as one of the oldest and most complex parks in the United States. Yosemite's status and capacity provide both an opportunity and an obligation to share the park's extensive experience. The idea of national parks—federally owned land set aside to protect natural and cultural resources—was born with the Yosemite Grant 150 years ago. Since that time, the park idea has spread around the world and in the process created a world-wide conservation community. Yosemite is part of that community and shares a mission and a commitment to preserve natural and cultural resources for the future.

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International Affairs program overview

Although Yosemite had several sister parks and annually plays host to as many as 50 visiting delegations from all over the world, it was not until 2013 that Yosemite established an International Affairs (IA) program. This paper outlines how we built the program, identifies a number of its key elements, and discusses how the program benefits Yosemite and its staff. It also briefly touches on why the park values participation in the global conservation community.

Yosemite's 2020 Strategic Vision identifies the development of an international affairs program as a priority action to help achieve the park's goal of being a leadership and learning campus for the NPS. This goal launched a two-year effort to establish a sister park on each continent, increase participation in international technical exchanges, and promote the international visibility of the NPS.

Foundational elements of the International Affairs work group. The IA program was formed through the collaboration of Yosemite staff and others from the Yosemite community, including staff from the park's concessioner, our nonprofit partner the Yosemite Conservancy, the University of California at Merced, and several retired employees. These individuals were recruited through "all comers welcomed" meeting notices in the park's electronic newsletter. Involvement in the program is a collateral duty, which results in a high level of commitment from those who participate.

Many of the working group participants have long-standing connections to other countries through personal travel, family ties, and work or academic experience. This diversity quickly became one of the program's biggest assets by providing personal contacts and on-the-ground knowledge of sister park candidates.

Initial discussions at the meetings quickly made it apparent that the IA program needed a guidance document to establish the dimensions of the program and to identify short and long term goals. To fulfill this need, the team developed a charter, which helps focus and guide the program's projects. It also provides a mechanism and guide for other park staff to understand what the group is responsible for, how it relates to park management, and the program's strategic goals. Other guidance documents developed by the group include an evaluation form for sister park nominees, a work plan, and a travel directive. All of these documents make up the program's foundation.

Program components. The International Affairs Program is comprised of three components: formal sister parks, technical exchanges, and visiting delegation hosting. Although each component can have separate activities, it is important to note that each element relates to the others. For example, hosting visiting delegations has led to interest in sister park arrangements and technical exchanges. In one instance, hosting a World Heritage Fellow from Jordan led to a technical exchange, which, in turn, is developing into a longer-term sister park relationship.

Sister parks. The sister park program currently includes four officially designated sister parks: Huangshan and Jiuzhaigou national parks in China, Torres del Paine National Park in Chile, and Berchtesgaden National Park in Germany. Each park has an official arrangement signed by participating park superintendents (or the equivalent), which establishes a mutual commitment to share knowledge and collaborate in areas of common interest. Typically, the agreements have a three- to five-year term. Once the sister park arrangement is in place, representatives from both parks jointly develop an action plan which outlines the kinds of projects the parks plan to work on together. The action plans also describe the terms and frequency of staff exchanges.

Several sister park arrangements are currently in the last stages of preparation. These include Wadi Rum in Jordan, famed for its climbing and a park with which Yosemite has had a technical exchange; Parks Nepal, which will make Yosemite sister to three Nepalese national parks, Sagarmatha, Langtang, and Chitwan; Ngorongoro Crater Conservation Area in Tanzania; and

Lake Hovsgol National Park in Mongolia. Sister park relationships between Yosemite and Mount Aspiring National Park in New Zealand and Cumbres de Monterrey in Mexico are in more preliminary stages of development, but with a 2016 goal for completion.

Keys to success and lessons learned

Although Yosemite's IA program is still in its early stages, a number of key lessons have emerged that can be used to inform IA programs elsewhere. For example, prior to the establishment of the IA workgroup, sister park relationships often went dormant when key staff left Yosemite. In order to establish sustainable relationships, even after employee turnover, the IA program remains inclusive to all interested staff and encourages multiple Yosemite liaisons for each sister park. Additionally, park arrangements, contacts, and action plans are available to the entire IA team. Other key components include staff commitment (at all levels), partnerships, and program funding.

Commitment from senior management and staff. Yosemite's Executive Leadership Team (ELT) not only recognized, but embraced the idea that Yosemite is part of a larger, global community of parks and protected areas that are working to preserve the world's natural and cultural resources. The strategic decision to increase the park's role in international conservation through developing a robust IA program underlies all of the subsequent IA program efforts.

Staff commitment is also important. By making participation open to staff from all career levels and divisions—from first-time seasonals to long-term NPS veterans, from Facilities to Resource Management and Science divisions—the IA work group has attracted people with international expertise and high levels of personal interest. The IA meetings are well-attended and the work of managing the program is shared readily among participants.

In addition, as with other relationships, it takes time to build the mutual understanding and trust necessary to develop useful, collaborative projects with sister parks. A sustained commitment from senior management and the IA team are essential to building long-term, mutually beneficial relationships with sister parks, as well as conducting useful technical exchanges, and improving the park's capacity to accommodate visiting delegations.

Partnerships. Partnerships have played an important role in Yosemite's effort to build international relationships. We work closely with members of the NPS International Affairs Office in Washington, DC. They provide key advice on the diplomatic and geopolitical issues. The Washington office also provides important connections to senior staff at parks in other countries, guidance for managing official international arrangements, travel requirements, and advice on coordination with other federal agencies, including the U.S. State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Yosemite's IA also team works closely with UC Merced staff on our international relationships. The Yosemite Leadership Program (a park leadership/management program on campus) recently assisted with identifying a candidate sister park in Mexico. Additionally, Yosemite is also working with Global Parks and the Mongol Ecology Center, among other nonprofit groups. External organizations can provide resources, in-country contacts and expertise to round out what already exists in Yosemite.

Funding. One of the most significant challenges to the program is obtaining sufficient funding to support travel and hosting expenses. Solidifying relationships with sister parks inevitably requires in-person exchanges, which can hinge on the availability of funds. A grant from the Yosemite Conservancy, the park's official philanthropic partner, provided critical funds support travel to Germany, Tanzania, China, and Nepal to finalize sister parks agreements in those countries and identify on-the-ground collaborative projects. While the IA work group will continue to seek grant money from the Conservancy and other donors, it is also important to recognize that selection of sister parks (or parks for technical exchanges) may be done strategically to take

advantage of funding from other official U.S. sources. For example, the U.S. State Department has funded some of Yosemite's exchanges with Torres del Paine as part of a larger agreement to provide technical assistance to Chile.

It is important to mention that technology offers a means to reduce some of the need for travel. Yosemite's park liaisons have been able to utilize Skype, Facebook, video training and conferencing, and telephone calls as means of on-going contact with representatives in our sister parks. Although not a substitute for face-to-face meetings, these modes of communication are important ways to augment travel and can facilitate effective dialogue.

Conclusion

As one of the world's most widely recognized national parks—and the very place where the idea of the “national park” was born—staff at Yosemite recognize and embrace a sense of responsibility and opportunity to collaborate on park management and conservation around the globe. With its large staff and on an unusually large range of management issues, Yosemite is well-positioned to share its experience with other parks.

The IA program serves as a cross-cutting initiative that addresses several other park-specific goals outlined in the *Strategic Vision*, such as developing leadership skills among staff, fostering workplace enrichment, encouraging innovation, and building quality partnerships. These are positive outcomes for individual staff, Yosemite as whole, and the National Park Service itself.

We also recognize that today's world is smaller and more connected than ever. In an era of tight budgets and close scrutiny of government agencies, working with parks in other countries in a “community of practice” leverages our existing resources and expands our capacity to carry out our mission.

Seeking connections to other parks and protected areas (in order to share expertise, collaborate on solutions, and to devise innovative strategies) to address today's conservation issues is necessary in a world of boundary-crossing challenges, such as climate change and landscape connectivity. Forming international partnerships through sister parks and technical exchanges can leverage our efforts to better understand and manage natural resources.