

## Stories are Resources, Too: Embracing Broader Narratives to Build Parks' Personal and Public Relevance

**Fred MacVaugh**, Museum Curator, Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site, 15550 Highway 1804, Williston, ND 58801; [fred\\_macvaugh@nps.gov](mailto:fred_macvaugh@nps.gov)

WITHOUT STORIES, WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES IS MEANINGLESS. In fact, without stories, we'd know little about either. For it's from and through stories that we construct and transmit meaning. Thus, to preserve parks and other places of natural and cultural heritage—indeed, to protect humanity as well as plants and wildlife—we in the conservation movement, and the National Park Service (NPS) more specifically, need to change how we think about stories and the power of stories. They're no less foundational to our engagement with and understanding of the world and one another than air, water, and wildlife, or buildings, landscapes, and archeological sites. Indeed, as retired NPS Deputy Director Mickey Fearn (2014) claimed in his closing panel remarks at the Co-Creating Narratives in Public Spaces symposium, stories are the NPS's most important resources.

How could that be? Because stories shape people's perception of and engagement with others and the natural world. They create our individual and collective identities. Stories also make it possible for people to care. Take, for example, Mary Oliver's poem "The Sea Mouse" (1994, 41). In it, the narrator, strolling along a stormy beach, discovers an ugly worm-like creature nearing death. Rather than wander passed with an averted glance, the narrator picks up and studies the sea mouse. What her poem, a form of story, achieves—moving readers to feel empathy for a repulsive being—confirms that, regardless of form, stories have power.

Story can change one's thinking. Mary's poem alters readers' perceptions. She makes them care for this little-known sea mouse most would find revolting (Oliver 1994). If we, too, hope to change people's thinking about parks, nature, and place; if we hope to inspire individuals to pause and see as well as care for what's in front of them, we need more empathetic moments like Mary creates. We need many such moments. And that's the power and potential of story. It's why story matters. Here, I'll outline the values stories offer and how the conservation movement and NPS can strengthen their storytelling capacities.

What I'm claiming isn't of value only to the NPS. I work for the agency; it's the context I'm most familiar with. Story is universal, however, and the importance and values of story and how to

---

**Citation:** Weber, Samantha, ed. 2016. *Engagement, Education, and Expectations—The Future of Parks and Protected Areas: Proceedings of the 2015 George Wright Society Conference on Parks, Protected Areas, and Cultural Sites*.

Hancock, Michigan: George Wright Society.

© 2016 George Wright Society. All rights reserved. Please direct all permission requests to [info@georgewright.org](mailto:info@georgewright.org).

build storytelling capacity—these ideas and recommendations can be transferred to and applied by public and private parks and conservation organizations from the local to global levels. They're equally relevant for individuals, organizations, and governments *opposed* to parks and protected areas. This is another reason why story's importance and power in communicating our messages needs to be recognized.

People have to care first. That's what "The Sea Mouse" accomplishes. Mary's poem describes where the sea mouse is found and what it looks like. It describes the conditions in which the animal lives and dies (Oliver 1994, 41–42). None of that convinces readers to care, however. Readers come to care because Mary creates an experience and opportunity to empathize with the sea mouse. Through the poem's speaker, moreover, readers experience the narrator's discovery, compassion, and sadness. They're invited to feel. That invoked feeling is but one reason why stories are such vital and powerful resources.

Like archeological artifacts and DNA, stories *are* resources. Like artifacts, they're evidence of human values and relationships among one another, places, plants, and animals. Although similarities may exist among different cultures' stories, as in their artifacts, those stories are unique products created in response to specific environmental conditions. And that makes stories analogous to DNA: they can be sequenced to reveal their origins and evolution in place through time. In other words, as we've known since we were children creating and repeating stories around campfires or community center chair circles, stories change with each new telling. Like modifications in cellular structure, those changes can be traced back through history to identify not only their most probable time and place of origin but also the environmental factor(s) causing their emergence.

Stories are more than evidence, however. Without stories, we couldn't discover and understand or imagine those earlier artifacts, environmental conditions, and cultures. We couldn't empathize with other people and beings. It's through story—and only through story—that we individually and collectively correlate artifacts and DNA modifications with their sources. It's only through story that we can understand and communicate the relationships among changing environmental circumstances, tool development, and those artifacts' subsequent effects on environmental conditions and human development. Does it matter which came first? One affects the other in a continuous cycle: each artifact shapes people's relationships with place, which in turn shapes the artifacts people produce to interact with place and one another. The cycle is perpetual. Story helps us understand those relationships.

Stories also express and transmit people's values. Why do we protect Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon, and Independence Hall? Why do we protect wilderness? Because we value those places, conditions, and the heritage they signify. Because they're central to our individual and national identity. Why is that? Because each became formative of and associated with values codified and passed on in stories celebrating America's war for independence and Manifest Destiny. "Story—sacred and profane—is perhaps the main cohering force in human life," Jonathan Gottschall writes in *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (2012). "A society is composed of fractious people with different personalities, goals, and agendas. What connects us beyond our kinship ties? Story. . . . Story is the counterforce to social disorder, the tendency of things to fall apart. Story is the center without which the rest cannot hold" (Gottschall 2012, 138). Without a unifying story, America couldn't have become and remained a nation. The places where the nation's stories developed didn't, however, define America's values; they represented them. They still do. It's the stories, though, that instill and maintain those values. It's stories that can also challenge and transform them. And that's the significance and promise of parks and what they preserve: history, history's evidence, and stories of the possibility of change for the better and benefit of everyone.

But in the nation's parks, the value and power of story are diminished or muted by barriers, only some of which I can mention and inadequately explore: fragmented knowledge; persistent white privilege; aging advocates and visitors; impoverished biodiversity; a changing climate; population growth and related resource consumption; increased urbanization; decreased nature contact; indifference, politics, and disagreement. Of these, as E.O. Wilson suggests in *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*, the most harmful might be fragmentation of knowledge since the Enlightenment (1998, 8, 38–40, 182). Fragmentation emerged as a means to better understand and control a world increasingly perceived as a machine. In time, that mechanistic perspective became institutionalized in the structures of governance, work (for example, scientific management and the assembly line), and knowledge production. In universities today, knowledge is siloed, or professionalized, to such an extent that scholars in diverse disciplines explore the same or related questions and make similar or synonymous discoveries yet rarely, if ever, cross paths. These same siloed structures, adopted from the business sector to promote efficiency, define not only NPS organizational structure but also the perspectives of personnel. To create the unity of knowledge, or consilience, Wilson argues for, knowledge needs to be synthesized (1998, 269).

As fragmentation's effects accumulate, competition for finite and sometimes scarce life-sustaining resources accelerates, straining social cohesion. With respect to parks and protected areas, persistent white privilege, aging advocates and visitors, and youths' decreasing nature-connection reinforce fragmentation. Continued professional specialization isn't the best remedy for these effects in a changing climate and increasing global population and urbanization. The solution begins with the synthesis Wilson argues for. And story, a form of synthesis, is crucial for unity. As a means of protecting parks and other areas, however, story's value has gone unrecognized or underappreciated. That needs to change.

Joseph S. Nye, Jr. (2011), a former dean of Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, argues that power as traditionally conceived in the geopolitical context is no longer limited to two sources: military force and economic strength. That traditional understanding of geopolitical power's origins had expanded by the early 2000s to include a third source: story. In the past, possession of the largest and strongest military or economy, or both, had secured geopolitical power. That's not the case today, Nye (2011) argues; the nations or non-nation-state actors with the most compelling stories win people's commitment and conviction, their hearts and minds. And with commitment, the theory goes, people can resist and triumph over military and economic might.

How does this relate to parks and protected places? Nye's paradigm is analogically equivalent to the NPS's traditional sources of power and influence: workforce, budget, and story. With its stagnant or shrinking workforce and budget, equivalents to military strength and economy, story becomes the single source of power the NPS has the potential to develop and exercise to promote parks' public relevance. It's the agency's single source of power for growing public support for parks and the American ideals they identify, define, and signify.

But at present, NPS narratives are overwhelmed by the stories others manufacture for the popular media and advertising. Those narratives commodify America's past, places, and ideals to serve their creators' ends: selling products like Jeeps, or garnering support for business or special interests. If NPS storytelling doesn't challenge these marketing vehicles, if it doesn't win people's hearts and minds and engender their passionate backing, it's not the nation's parks alone that could be at risk. Without adequate and powerful NPS storytelling, America itself and the ideals it represents could be in jeopardy.

Telling stories is about more than identity and power, though. Today, it's about survival, and not just the survival of parks. It's about humanity's survival. "A culture creates its present and therefore its future through the stories its people tell, the stories they believe, and the stories that

underlie their actions. The more consistent a culture's core stories are with biological and physical reality," the biologist Carl N. McDaniel writes in *Wisdom for a Livable Planet*, "the more likely its people are to live in a way compatible with ecological rules and thereby persist" (2005, 228).

Because they synthesize diverse ways of knowing and knowledge, stories are key to achieving this outcome. NPS stories can not only challenge advertisers in the marketplace of identities and ideals, but also strengthen the public's awareness of the nation's parks, lands, principles, and potential. Stories can define what it means to be a citizen, steward, and an American. They can win people's promotional support and advocacy for parks, preservation, and ecological sustainability. Research has shown that stories are accepted and believed more than scientific facts and claims. Stories circumvent the public's distrust of professionalization. Stories are the primary mode of communication used in the media, where most people get information about science and technology: internet (35%); television (34%); magazines (9%); other print media (9%); and government agencies, family, friends, and colleagues combined (3%; Dahlstrom 2014).

Stories' power is more than people's acceptance of and belief in them. It is, in fact, their power that contributes to people's belief and acceptance. That outcome is realized because stories create a sense of experience and an experience of sense. Stories create and express memorable moments (those, for example, that produce a sense of awe). "The Sea Mouse" introduced readers to and created empathy for an animal most see rarely and would judge revolting (Oliver 1994, 41). Finally, as a result of their resonance—the combined impact of acceptance, belief, and empathy—stories effectively transfer knowledge and promote understanding. "Art [such as stories] makes images of feeling so that feeling is accessible to contemplation and thought," the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan writes in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. "Thought creates distance and destroys the immediacy of direct experience, yet," he continues, "it is by thoughtful reflection that the elusive moments of the past draw near to us in present reality and gain a measure of permanence" (1997, 148).

So how do we achieve memorable permanence? Learn from narratives of lasting influence, such as Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, and Edward Abbey's *A Desert Solitaire*. More immediately, cultivate cross-training in the arts, sciences, and humanities; personalize the inter-relatedness of people, place, nature, and culture; and nurture the public's participation as storytellers. Lasting results can be amplified by replacing a siloed organization with one that promotes integration and concision.

The values that cross-training adds to the conservation movement and NPS are many. Artists such as storytellers, including NPS interpreters, have been criticized for their scientific inaccuracies, while scientists have suffered harsh reproach for their inability to communicate with the public. If done successfully, cross-training can improve artists' scientific accuracy and credibility, while strengthening scientists' abilities to communicate to non-specialist audiences. Additionally, cross-training can make artists and scientists aware of their common ground:

- a desire to understand the world they live in,
- a passion for exploration and discovery,
- shared modes of experience (e.g., conception, perception, and sensation),
- reliance on metaphor to understand and interpret experience, and
- dependence on stories or theories (also stories).

Knowing their common ground can make each more receptive to different modes and interpretations of experience, the latter including the hard and soft sciences, humanities, and arts. Increased receptivity can in turn create opportunities for artists and scientists alone and together to

tell more inclusive and relevant stories. Gender, ethnic, racial, and environmental studies, among others, have since the 1960s deconstructed the grand narratives that shaped individual and national identity; though painful for many, these scholarly pursuits have broadened and enriched our nation's understanding of its history and places. Cross-training can help people learn to synthesize this broadened and enriching knowledge into more inclusive and relevant stories that form unifying national identities. Cross-training can help the conservation movement and NPS communicate system-unifying stories that, like wildlife corridors, link and unite places across the country and world into story corridors and ecosystems. Lastly, cross-training can help resource professionals and interpreters tell the same stories to audiences with different moral foundations or motivations for their beliefs and behaviors.

So, what is the take away? More diverse, inclusive, and relevant stories can reveal how and why people think and feel the way they do, can synthesize fragmented knowledge and experience into empathy and personally meaningful understanding, can communicate understanding beyond the human scales (e.g., geography and time), can influence people's emotions, thinking, and behavior, and, most importantly, can help repair the nature-culture chasm, that separation between humanity and the natural world that is a legacy of the Enlightenment, and the chief cause for anthropogenic climate change. If the conservation movement hopes to encourage people to steward the earth and its finite resources, Wilson writes in *Biophilia's* "The Conservation Ethic," it must join "emotion with the rational analysis of emotion in order to create a deeper and more enduring conservation ethic" (1984, 119). We can achieve this with cross-training and story.

## References

- Barthel-Bouchier, Diane. 2014. Professionalism and its discontents. *The George Wright Forum* 31(2):101–106.
- Dahlstrom, Michael F. 2014. Using narratives and storytelling to communicate science with nonexpert audiences. *PNAS* 111(Supplement 4):13614–13620. doi: 10.1073/pnas.1320645111.
- Fearn, Mickey. 2014. Closing remarks presented at the National Park Service Co-Creating Narratives in Public Spaces conference, Washington, DC, September.
- Gottschall, Jonathan. 2012. *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*. Boston: Houghton.
- McDaniel, Carl N. 2005. *Wisdom for a Livable Planet: The Visionary Work of Terri Swearingen, Dave Foreman, Wes Jackson, Helena Norberg-Hodge, Werner Fornos, Herman Daly, Stephen Schneider, and David Orr*. San Antonio: Trinity University Press.
- Nye, Joseph S., Jr. 2011. The future of power. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* June 5. <http://chronicle.com/article/The-Future-of-Power/127753/>.
- Oliver, Mary. 1994. *White Pine: Poems and Prose Poems*. San Diego: Harcourt.
- Reynolds, John J. 2010. Whose America? Whose idea? Making "America's Best Idea" reflect new American realities. *The George Wright Forum* 27(2):125–134.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. 1977. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- . 1991. "Language and the making of place: A narrative-descriptive approach." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 81(4):684–96.
- Wilson, Edward O. 1984. *Biophilia*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- . 1988. *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*. New York: Knopf.