

How Can the National Park Service Use Healthy Outdoor Recreation to Become Relevant to More Americans?

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THE CHALLENGE TO MEET THE DEMAND of “How can the National Park Service use healthy outdoor recreation to become relevant to more Americans?” was a café conversation. Jennifer Stein and Stephanie Tepperberg guided the structure of the meeting as well as floated between the multiple conversations during the different rounds. Each round was a chance to sit and discuss with new people and tackle a new question. These questions simulated a discussion relevant to race, culture, age, and various other backgrounds. A reoccurring theme appeared, and we found we were asking, is “how do you make the initial connection between communities and the parks to be able to share the health benefits?” At the end of the conversation, the session returned to the entire group and summarized what we had shared in small groups. Ideas included a breakdown of successful programs as well as a development of a communication model for parks both externally and internally, as well as a model broken down for how to establish connections.

Some examples, shared in the main group discussion, on how to tackle the issue were explored. Pamphlets, promoting nearby parks, in doctors’ offices were the most direct connection of how to make clear the relevancy to people. The group also found that an effective way in engaging specific populations was by holding culturally relevant celebrations in the park and using the opportunities to promote healthy activities. These events could look like “The Cesar Chavez bike race to the park” or the “Celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. Day at a local pool.” It’s these combinations of culture and park use that proved the chance to expose populations to the parks and their health benefits. Perhaps the most popular and successful types of programs, making the desired connections, were the ones that bring the parks into new places. The Appalachian Scenic trail’s program, for example, “A trail in every classroom” brings together youth and the NPS through inviting teachers to the parks as well as having park representatives go into the classroom environment. This model was also discussed in the GGNRA’s Roving Ranger program that has had similar success in physically bringing an old converted bread truck (wrapped in park murals) to local universities and other areas where non-users are located and educating the local community.

Another major element addressed in facilitating relevancy included communication behaviors. The model was broken down by external and internal focuses. External communication models that brand towards family-oriented healthy behaviors are significant. This, in combination

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with cultural relevancy and expressed accessibility (e.g., transportation, physical access, varying ability access), created a model for external communication model. The internal aspect of this model emphasized sharing information between the different parks of NPS as what has worked and what hasn't. The importance of engaging partners was highlighted as well, finding local organizations engaged in the task such as doctors, community leaders, and non-profit organizations. Another element discussed was promoting role models in the communities that are already connected with the culture and park use. By utilizing those who already have "trail blazed" in the park, diverse cultures within the communities would more likely be able to relate to the parks and be open to interpretation.

Reflection

The examples and models established in this discussion tackled a very complex and important issue. How the parks stay connected to health in the ever shaping nation is not easily answered. The discussion discovered that the NPS can make progress through inroads in underserved communities and formatting their message into a relevant, open approach. By promoting the communities themselves and making the park part of those experiences, the NPS can create connections. It's through these connections the park system can promote their own interests, including healthy park use. In answering the question the discussion highlight the importance of sharing resources and ideas within the park system. The question was unraveled by sharing experiences and ideas different communities had experienced. It's this process that lead to an enriching experience and a better understanding of current challenges facing the park system.