

Remarks from the Director, National Park Service

Mary Bomar

THIS EVALUATION SUMMIT IS THE BEGINNING of our interpretation and education renaissance. The National Leadership Council endorsed the interpretation and education action plan at their August 2006 meeting, and this event is an important first step in implementing the plan; an important first step in looking ahead to our centennial. As we look ahead, I think it is important to also look back for a moment and see whence we came. So I looked through the history of education in the National Park Service, and I went back to the beginning.

In 1918, the objectives drafted by National Parks Education Committee were clear, bold, and expansive: to educate the public in respect to the nature and the quality of the national parks; to further the view of the national parks as classrooms and museums of nature; to use existing publicity and educational systems so as to produce a wide result; to combine in one interest the sympathy and activity of schools, colleges, and citizen organizations in all parts of this country; to study the history and science of each national park and collect data for future use. These objectives are among the earliest expressions of the National Park Service's founding fathers regarding the educational aspects of park management.

A resolution adopted by park superintendents in 1922 made it clear: "The mission of the National Parks is to provide not cheap amusement, but healthful recreation and to supplement the work of schools by opening the doors of nature's laboratory to awaken an interest in natural science as an adjunct to the commercial and industrial work of the world."

If there were any doubt about what Congress thought about the Park Service's education program, it was put to rest by the Historic Sites Act of 1935. While the act placed the National Park Service squarely in the middle of a maturing historic preservation movement in this country, it also charged the Park Service with developing an educational program for its newly acquired cultural parks. "The Secretary of Interior shall develop," it declared, "an educational program and service for the purpose of making available to the public facts and information pertaining to the American historic and archaeological sites, buildings and properties of national significance." The act also formalized the National Park System Advisory Board to advise the secretary of the interior on the administration of parks.

To mark the 20th anniversary of the National Park Service, the Department of Interior published *Research and Education in the National Parks*. It was divided into two parts: the educational program in the national parks, and the history of the educational movement. This publication was clearly designed to praise the accomplishments of the Park Service's

educational program. It itemized various ways the Park Service delivered educational information to the public from auto caravans, nature and historic trails, exhibits, lectures, and campfire talks, to museums, libraries, college and university field classes, and the Yosemite School of Field Natural History, all built upon a foundation of solid research.

Let us now fast forward to the future, 20 years from now. What will the historians write about us in 2026? What will they write about education in the National Park Service in the years surrounding the centennial? And if you agree with Emerson that “there is probably no history, only biography,” what will it say about us?

I am by nature an optimist, and I see the glass as already half full. There has been much work by the National Education Council and the National Interpretive Advisory Council in the past two years, including a business plan and an action plan, endorsed by the National Leadership Council. Together, with the National Park System Advisory Board, most of us here attended the Scholars Forum last January in Philadelphia. The Northeast Region has an on-going evaluation of its educational programs. So in many respects we are building on the good work of the past, good work that began in the era of Stephen Mather and of more recent vintage.

This past, it is said, is the key to the future. When we look back over the National Park Service of 15 years ago, how far have we come? In 1991, we had the Vail Agenda—looking for ways to diversify our workforce, broaden our stories, and reach new groups of visitors. And in a published version of the report, there were some interesting predictions. Everyone will belong to a minority group. Whites will no longer be a majority group in several states, such as California. Asian and Hispanic populations will dramatically increase, with Hispanics outnumbering African-Americans by 2010. Politics will be altered by 2000. Many mayors in the nation’s great cities will be people of color. Racial cross-over voting will be common. The Vail Agenda also recommended that the Park Service should revise its list of cultural themes to more accurately reflect the breadth of American culture; that individual units publicize their unique purpose to their employees and the local population of visitors; and that new studies by the Park Service include the need for cultural diversity throughout the national park system.

In 2001, the National Park Service Advisory Board developed *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century*. That group was chaired by one John Hope Franklin, a great thinker and a most humble man despite his many accomplishments. And while the report was the work of many, I sometimes like to think that it was he who penned these words: “The public looks upon the National Parks almost as a metaphor for America itself. But there is another image emerging here, a picture of the National Park Service as a sleeping giant. Beloved and respected, yes. But perhaps too cautious, too resistant to change, too reluctant to engage the challenges that must be addressed in the 21st century.” Later that thread continues: “The Park Service must ensure that the American story is told faithfully, completely and accurately. The story is often noble but sometimes, as we all know, shameful and sad. In an age of growing cultural diversity, the Service must continually ask whether the way in which it tells these stories has meaning for all our citizens.”

The world is, indeed, different from the time the original National Parks Education Committee was established. The U.S. population was 110 million in 1922 and 300 million

today. It is expected to double yet again in this century, and the demographic forecast in the Vail Agenda Report was pretty much on the mark. With changing population, demographics, and technology, it is clear that our approach to interpretation and education must also change if we are to continue engaging the American public with their natural and cultural heritage. We can certainly use the newest in technology to reach our visitors in many ways, both those who physically visit a park and those who do it in the virtual realm. And we must embrace partners who can help in this effort.

We sometimes need that outside shot in the arm to help us change. We also need a culture of evaluative thinking as a way of doing business, not only in interpretation, but throughout the disciplines within the National Park Service. When people ask me for my vision of an ideal park, my mind's eye takes me to a very special day at Independence when I was the superintendent. I left the office after a very long day, and I walked through the park. As I arrived at Independence Hall, I saw my perfect vision of what a park could be. Our staff were busy keeping the grounds and buildings looking good. A group of school children were there listening to one of our rangers give an Underground Railroad tour. And all around me I heard languages from all over the world from our visitors who had traveled from far corners of the globe. Our parks are not just special places for Americans, but they are special places for the entire world, and that is my vision for our national parks, not just for one day, but every day; not just for one park, but for all our parks. That is the true challenge for our centennial—to make the best idea America ever had the best it can possibly be. With the vision outlined by President Bush, with the leadership of Secretary Kempthorne, and with your help, that perfect vision can become a reality.

I congratulate you. But we must demonstrate results if we wish to garner the resources we need to move forward. You have my support. You've had my support over the last two years with my involvement with the National Education Council. Now it's up to all of you to roll up your sleeves and make it work.