

# THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE INTERPRETATION AND EDUCATION EVALUATION SUMMIT

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## **Learning Together: A Summary of the National Park Service Interpretation and Education Evaluation Summit**

*Edited by Julia Washburn*

*Note: This article contains excerpts from Learning Together: Proceedings, Evaluation, and Applying Lessons Learned—National Park Service Interpretation and Education Evaluation Summit (Duffin et al., in preparation). The report was prepared by the Education Evaluation Coordination Team of the National Education Council, National Park Service, in collaboration with Michael Duffin and Catey Iacuzzi, through a cooperative agreement between the NPS Conservation Study Institute and Shelburne Farms. The complete report, along with other related evaluation resources can be found at [www.nps.gov/interp/evaluation](http://www.nps.gov/interp/evaluation).*

### **Introduction**

THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE (NPS) convened an Interpretation and Education Evaluation Summit at the University of Denver, Colorado, on October 25–26, 2006. This event brought together education, evaluation, and organizational development experts from across the country with members of the NPS National Leadership Council, deputy regional directors, three former NPS directors, 15 park partners (including the National Park Foundation), NPS field staff, regional chiefs of interpretation and education, and members of the National Park System Advisory Board. One of the more notable features of the summit was the diversity of the participant list in terms of role, region, and ethnicity, coupled with thorough representation from the senior leadership of NPS.

Collectively, more than 120 people worked together to better understand the role evaluation can play in shaping the future of interpretation and education in the National Park Service.

Dan Ritchie, chair of the board of the University of Denver and chair of the National Park System Advisory Board Education Committee, hosted the event. The overarching goal was to generate useful dialogue about “creating a culture of evaluation” within interpretation

and education as a way to keep America's national parks relevant in the 21st century. Such an organizational culture will be characterized by continuous learning and decision-making based on audience analysis and outcome data. In his introductory remarks [reprinted in full later in this issue], Ritchie explained why the National Park System Advisory Board is so committed to effective interpretation and education:

The survival of the national park system in the 21st century depends on how it interacts with society and how much society values it. The Interpretation and Education Program is the primary means by which the National Park Service engages diverse publics with their national parks, provides access to meanings, establishes relevance, and connects people and communities to national heritage.

Newly appointed NPS Director Mary Bomar delivered her support for this concept in the keynote address [also reprinted later in this issue], stating that "this evaluation summit is the beginning of our interpretation and education renaissance ... and an important first step in looking ahead to our centennial." The interpretation and education renaissance is a commitment to build on existing success, and to learn, grow, and respond to our changing society. A culture of evaluation is critical to enable parks to be flexible and adapt to the needs of audiences, while staying focused on conservation and preservation.

A renowned evaluation expert, Michael Quinn Patton, facilitated the summit, helping to focus the discussions as well as share insights and advice on how to encourage evaluative thinking within an organization. Patton came to the summit both as a professional evaluator and as a long-time supporter and visitor of the national parks. He has spent his career working to make evaluation results meaningful and useful for organizational development, and focuses his research on the effective use of evaluation data for decision-making and program improvement. Patton was pleased with the seriousness of purpose and commitment of summit participants. He writes:

The dominant theme of the NPS Evaluation Summit was creating a *culture of evaluation* within the National Park Service. This theme is consistent with research on the utilization of evaluation showing that evaluation findings and processes are more likely to be useful when there is strong leadership support for evaluation, when the organizational culture supports inquiry, reality-testing, and learning, and when people throughout the organization value and demonstrate evaluative thinking. This shift in emphasis is critical, it seems to me. It means looking beyond the use of discrete evaluation findings reported at a moment in time, as significant as that can be. Rather, the conditions for evaluation use are understood to be embedded in the values, attitudes, and behavioral patterns that are manifest day-to-day as people throughout the organization interpret what is important, pay attention to what gets rewarded, and notice what priorities get attention.

## Background

The evaluation summit was one link in a series of actions that NPS is taking to reinvigorate itself as it heads into its second century of service. During a historic general conference

seven years ago (Discovery 2000, held in St. Louis, Missouri), NPS reaffirmed the critical role of interpretation and education in conservation, particularly in the context of globalization and America's changing demographics. Shortly thereafter, the National Park System Advisory Board issued its watershed report *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century*, urging NPS to embrace its role as a national education institution. The NPS National Leadership Council responded by holding a series of six education seminars, resulting in the publication of *Renewing Our Education Mission*. This led to the formation of the NPS National Education Council and a call to establish a comprehensive interpretation and education program business plan, the final draft of which is slated to be released in early 2007. Additionally, a Scholar's Forum on Civic Engagement was held in January 2006.

At each step along the way, the critical role of education was reinforced; standards, goals, and priorities were clarified; and evaluation became increasingly seen as an essential component of the overall effort. In October 2006 the National Leadership Council unanimously endorsed the interpretation and education renaissance action plan, which was developed by the National Education Council to realize the tactics described in the evolving business plan. This true "renaissance" has five key pillars: standards, access, technology, partnerships, and evaluation. In concert with the I&E renaissance action plan, a sub-committee of the National Education Council has drafted a servicewide interpretation and education evaluation strategy. The evaluation summit was a first step in implementing this evaluation strategy. Collectively, these steps aim to move the NPS from "good" to "great" in its ability to engage the public with their national parks in new, dynamic, and relevant ways.

A summary of the summit proceedings follows.

### **Panel One: Why Should We Do This?—Creating a Culture of Evaluation within NPS: Vision and Rationale**

The first panel of the summit brought together experts from various fields to talk about what evaluation is, what a culture of evaluation looks like, and to provide their ideas about how to make evaluation successful.

**Martha Monroe, Panel One moderator, associate professor, Natural Resources Education and Extension, University of Florida.** Monroe began Panel One by highlighting the importance of allowing for risk-taking in a culture of evaluation. She provided the example of Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream, who have a "flavor graveyard" at their factory in Vermont celebrating flavors that have been unsuccessful or otherwise discontinued. Monroe encouraged NPS to engage field staff and build the capacity for evaluation, starting with the field. She pointed out that the more people are involved in the whole process of evaluation, the more engaged and excited they become.

**Jon Wergin, professor, Antioch University Ph.D. Program in Leadership and Change.** Wergin continued the conversation by presenting his research on evaluation within higher education. In this research, it was discovered that often people go along with evaluation without any real commitment to the process—what Wergin called a "compliance mentality." While this is common, he also offered hope that it can be overcome. Wergin noted that when both leadership and staff within departments are open, self-reflective, and communicative, evaluation is more likely to be successful.

**Reginald (“Flip”) Hagood, senior vice president for strategic initiatives, Student Conservation Association (SCA).** Hagood pointed out the importance of accountability and the use of evaluation for survival as an organization. In addition, he highlighted the partnership between SCA and NPS and spoke about the several types of evaluations and the value that they have added to SCA. Evaluation has helped SCA to diversify funding, move to meet the needs of the market, and continue to thrive as a business. Hagood’s central message was that evaluation helps an organization meet the goals it sets for itself.

**Carol Stapp, director, Museum Education Program, George Washington University.** Stapp shared her experience as an educator within the museum world and the role that evaluation has played in her work. She noted that shifting to a culture of evaluation is both valuable and challenging. Stapp provided the example of working with her students and their reactions to evaluation. As she noted, her students often take several semesters to adjust to the idea that evaluation does not have to be punitive. As she comments, it is difficult to promote positive attitudes about evaluation. In order to accomplish this, she encouraged focusing on competencies and building capacity for evaluation.

**Les Baxter, deputy director for evaluation, Pew Charitable Trusts.** Baxter described ways that evaluation can inform program planning and design. He noted that without evaluation, you do not know where you are going, if you are accomplishing what you set out to accomplish, or if you are making the best use of limited resources. Baxter shared two examples of the benefits of evaluation that he has witnessed at Pew. In the first example, evaluation played a central role in a major internal reorganization of Pew. The second example highlighted the fact that although an evaluation may indicate changes, the process of organizational change still takes time.

**Emma Norland, Ohio State University.** Norland spoke about the importance of evaluation occurring within a broader context and a more robust system. She provided the example of the PARKS Project, a large, 36-park evaluation. She described some of the learning that was garnered but emphasized that the episodic nature of the evaluation meant that many of the best learning opportunities were lost. She noted that evaluation should be part of a larger picture. Finally, she encouraged NPS to create a large database in which all evaluation data could be gathered so that over time larger questions could be answered.

**Hazel Symonette, senior policy and program development specialist, University of Wisconsin–Madison.** Symonette highlighted for participants the “who” of evaluation. She spoke about working in collaboration with stakeholders rather than standing in judgment of them when conducting evaluations. Symonette talked about identifying our goals, both personal and organizational, and using evaluation as a learning tool to reach these goals. In particular, she highlighted the importance of including all stakeholders—front-line staff, partners, leadership—in a collaborative process of evaluation.

## **Panel Two: The Role of Evaluation in Enhancing the Power of Place-Based Learning**

The second panel brought together experts to discuss the use of evaluation in documenting the impact of services and improving programs. In addition, the use of evaluation in enhancing cultural competency was highlighted.

**Lynn Dierking, Panel Two moderator, vice president for special initiatives, Institute for Learning Innovation.** Dierking began the second panel of the day by sharing an example of an evaluation she has been involved with. In this example, the evaluation was initially imposed from leadership with limited buy-in at other levels of the organization. Dierking explained that the focus of the evaluation was shifted to include managers responsible for the day-to-day operations of the program. By engaging these individuals in the process, the attitude toward evaluation shifted. People in this organization are now excited about evaluation and are engaged in a wonderful learning experience.

**Theresa Coble, assistant professor of forest recreation and interpretation, Arthur Temple College of Forestry and Agriculture, Stephen F. Austin State University.** Coble continued the conversation by sharing the results of an outcome evaluation called Visitor Voices that she worked on with the NPS Intermountain Region. She explained that this evaluation was an outcome-based assessment. Coble also stated that the outcomes needed to be contextualized in order to be meaningful. By placing the results in context, this evaluation was able to provide information about the factors that contributed to the outcomes found. For instance, different types of experiences (e.g., park film, interpretive exhibit, guided tours, etc.) evoked different levels and types of meaning-making connections in visitors. One finding was that “ranger-led programs far surpassed any other type of programs as the ... number one most meaningful program.”

**Polly Nordstrand, curator, Native American Collection, Denver Art Museum.** Nordstrand began her presentation with a story about her mother’s experience of being “invisible” as a result of her brown skin in a predominantly white society. She continued by sharing stories of her own experience of discrimination as a Native American when she was formerly an employee of NPS. Nordstrand described how it is often more difficult to collect data from non-white groups, and also emphasized that these groups have valuable information to share. She noted that most NPS sites have a Native American story, but that these (and the stories of other marginalized groups) are not always shared with visitors. Ultimately, Nordstrand urged NPS to use evaluation as a means of making those people who have been invisible, visible.

**Doug Knapp, associate professor, Indiana University.** Knapp shared his findings regarding the powers of the national parks to impact visitors. He offered examples from Clingman’s Dome in Great Smoky Mountains National Park, George Washington Carver National Monument, and Denali National Park and Preserve. In each of these examples, Knapp explained that the experiential components of the interpretive and education programs had long-lasting impacts on participants. At Clingman’s Dome, children in the 5th grade retained information they learned one year later. At George Washington Carver National Monument, children continued to experience empathy for George Washington Carver a year after the program. Similar information was found at Denali. In each of these cases, the data from the evaluation have been utilized to continue to improve already effective programs.

**Veronica Thomas, professor, Department of Human Development and Psycho-educational Studies, Howard University.** Thomas began her presentation with a discus-

sion of cultural competency relative to NPS. She shared data indicating that NPS is not representative of the United States' population, either in staffing or visitors. As such, she emphasized the importance of asking those populations that NPS hopes to reach what they want and need from their national parks. Thomas noted that place-based learning can play a very important role in educating children "placed at risk" by offering programming that relies on local culture and local geography. Thomas distinguished between co-construction of a program and its evaluation versus a less rigorous process of collecting feedback from stakeholders.

**Allison Druin, director, Human-Computer Interaction Lab, University of Maryland.** Building on the idea of co-construction offered by the previous panelist, Druin offered examples of her work with children and technology. She shared a range of examples highlighting the ways that children can and should be included in the design, implementation, and evaluation of education programs. By offering participants the opportunity to co-construct their education program, their experience in parks becomes highly individualized and more meaningful. Ultimately, the more involved all the stakeholders (including visitors of all ages) are in this process of program design and evaluation, the more effective it will become.

**David Sobel, co-director, Center for Place-based Education, Antioch University New England.** Sobel shared some of the results from an evaluation that is ongoing involving the national parks. Partly in response to a foundation's reluctance to fund environmental education programs for youth because the outcomes were not considered measurable, several organizations conducting place-based education programs decided to create an evaluation collaborative and work together to find ways to measure and describe the outcomes of their place-based educational programming. As a result of a series of evaluations over several years, the programs have each undergone a variety of changes to better meet their goals. In particular, the NPS program "A Forest for Every Classroom" was able to more effectively and deeply engage local schools and the local communities. Ultimately, the evaluation conducted by Sobel's group has demonstrated that outcomes from place-based education are measurable and that the results of evaluation can be used to improve programs and enhance their effectiveness.

### **Large-group discussions**

Extensive dialogue between and among panelists and summit participants followed each formal panel discussion.

### **Presentation introducing the servicewide interpretation and education evaluation strategy**

Sheri Forbes, chief of interpretation, Mount Rainier National Park, and chair of the Education Evaluation Coordination Team, introduced the draft servicewide interpretation and education evaluation strategy (also known simply as the "evaluation strategy"). By conducting evaluations and identifying the tangibles of interpretation (i.e., evaluation data), the Interpretation and Education Program can be strengthened. Forbes commented on the possible benefits of engaging in evaluation, including greater focus on outcomes and results, the

ability to answer questions about programs, identification of the longer-term impacts of programs, and justification for financial decisions. As an example, Forbes outlined the results of an informal survey of parks that found that park staff are eager for information about visitors, program outcomes, input for planning, and how to conduct and use evaluations.

Forbes then outlined the primary goals of the draft evaluation strategy: (1) foster a service-wide commitment to evaluation; and (2) support all NPS stakeholders in implementing useful evaluation.

Effective implementation of the evaluation strategy will lead to continuous improvement, relevant programs, and accomplishment of the NPS mission. All participants were invited to review the draft strategy and offer feedback. Invoking Freeman Tilden, she concluded with reflections on how the science of evaluation can validate and improve the art of interpretation.

### Tactical discussions

A key step described in the evaluation strategy and the I&E renaissance action plan is to conduct a series of pilot evaluation projects. The rest of day two of the summit focused on detailed discussion in large and small groups regarding hoped-for selection criteria and process for pilot evaluations. The summit culminated in an interactive nationwide teleconference with NPS employees to share the outcomes of the discussions, as well as to engage field staff in this important effort to assess and improve interpretation and education programs across the National Park Service.

### Outcomes

A participatory and collaborative method was used for evaluating the summit in order to model organizational learning and a user-focused approach. The evaluation was accomplished through a public-private partnership that combined knowledge of NPS interpretation and education programs with professional evaluation expertise. Members of the Education Evaluation Coordination Team of the NPS National Education Council worked closely with NPS cooperating partners from Shelburne Farms to guide and design the evaluation plan. The cooperating partner team played a leadership role in data collection and analysis, and included evaluators Michael Duffin and graduate research assistant Catey Iacuzzi.

Data were obtained from a summit reaction form, small-group notes, participant question cards, lunchtime “scribbles” of questions and ideas, a previous survey of NPS evaluation practices, field notes, transcripts, and observations.

Two overarching themes emerged from analysis of the data gathered. Participants seemed *enthusiastically engaged* in the concept of creating a culture of evaluation within interpretation and education, while simultaneously *voicing concern* about how such a change will be implemented on the ground. These themes were distinct yet interconnected. The enthusiasm was tempered by the concern, and the concern was interpreted as evidence that the enthusiasm was strong enough for people to take the concept of evaluation seriously. Both themes are consistent with normal, healthy organizational responses to the possibility of major impending change. Data also suggested that the current status of a culture of evaluation within the NPS is that the agency is poised at a watershed of potential but has not yet



demonstrated systemic change. Future communication plans and action steps should address a wide range of readiness among NPS and stakeholders with respect to evaluation.

### **Next steps**

The official summit proceedings and evaluation will be published early in 2007 along with a DVD set summarizing and documenting the event. The servicewide interpretation and education evaluation strategy, currently out for peer review among NPS stakeholders, will also be completed and published sometime during spring 2007. Pending funding and authorization, proposed immediate next steps include: implementing pilot evaluation projects at the local and national levels; hiring of a NPS national evaluation coordinator for visitor experience; developing an on-line library of evaluation tools, studies, and results; creating a communication network for sharing evaluation results and how they are applied at parks; and providing training programs in user-focused evaluation for NPS staff and partners. All actions will be geared toward use of evaluation for organizational learning and ongoing program improvement.