

Ethnography in a National Park Service Second Century

Jerry L. Rogers

ON A SUB-ZERO JANUARY DAY IN YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK, midway through my work as chair of the Cultural Resources and Historic Preservation Committee of the National Parks Second Century Commission, prominent historian and fellow commissioner Gary Nash surprised me with a comment. The commission had been convened by the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) to envision what the National Park Service (NPS) needs to be and do in its second century of work beginning August 25, 2016. Throughout most of my 34 years with the Park Service I had developed and pursued long-range visions for where cultural resource management and historic preservation programs should go, and I had been trying hard to transfer that approach to the work of the commission. Nash pointedly stated that a number of my recommendations began with words such as “recover,” “revive,” and “re-institute,” followed by strengths the Park Service had possessed a decade ago but that had since been lost or seriously diminished. He wanted to know why I had used so much backward-looking syntax in a proposal for the future. This was not a pleasant question to answer. There were plenty of brand-new ideas, but in a distressing number of instances losses in funding, staffing, professional capability, and especially leadership between 2001 and 2009 had been so extensive that making progress almost meant starting over.

Let’s skip the sugar coating about our task. Creating a sound NPS ethnography program by the time of the agency’s centennial means starting over. In the words of a World War II song, “we did it before, and we can do it again.”

Building the first ethnography program

Doing it the first time was not easy. At the beginning of the 1980s, Associate Director for Cultural Resources F. Ross Holland and Chief Anthropologist Doug Scovill hired a dynamic cultural anthropologist named Muriel (“Miki”) Crespi, and enlisted support from the Society for Applied Anthropology. Together with Mesa Verde National Park Superintendent

Robert Heyder and Rocky Mountain Regional Director Lorraine Mintzmyer, they had gotten Director Russell Dickenson's blessing to convene a World Conference on Cultural Parks, the first ever of its kind. Budgets were tight, however, and Dickenson was unable to secure budget increases either to plan and conduct the conference or to staff the program Crespi was supposed to run. At that point, Holland retired and I succeeded him as associate director with responsibility for cultural resource management (history, architecture, archaeology, curation, and ethnography) in the parks and also the wide range of historic preservation programs that worked to preserve tens of thousands of places in other ownership throughout the United States.

To their great credit Mintzmyer, Heyder, Scovill, and Crespi pulled together enough public and private money, staff time, and labor from a wide variety of sources to make the conference happen. Eager delegates from dozens of countries crowded into Mesa Verde's historic Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) Auditorium in September 1984 to discuss three broad themes: technology and preservation of cultural parks, tourism and use of cultural parks, and cultural parks and native cultures. Each theme featured outstanding papers, discussions, and resolutions; but with Crespi and Scovill guiding the planning it cannot have been an accident that the conference was dominated by the third theme—cultural parks and native cultures—and that the conference turned out to be a declaration to the world that nations needed to deal respectfully with people who were not members of dominant cultures but who lived in or near parks or had traditional ties to parks.

Although lack of money and staff delayed the publication of proceedings, the conference articulated a reason for the ethnography program and provided a beginning upon which to build. From it, Crespi and I developed a vision of at least one professional ethnographer in each National Park Service regional office, with funding for special studies coming from appropriations to the ethnography program and from other sources, such as the budgets for construction projects that needed the information. At the time, Native American issues, such as repatriation of sacred objects and human remains, archaeological site protection, identification of cultural landscapes, development of tribal cultural preservation programs, and access to national park lands for traditional practices were confronting the Park Service, and we presented our vision of an ethnography program as a means for NPS to understand tribal perspectives and needs. Priorities of the time caused the program, always intended to deal with the full array of ethnic populations important to the Park Service, to be born with an emphasis on American Indian issues.

Still we remained unable to get the necessary staff and money included in administration budget requests. Fortunately, through a special committee from the Society for Applied Anthropology, with representation from the American Anthropological Association, New Mexico Senator Pete Domenici learned of our vision and arranged for a small appropriation to begin to carry it out, although the amount was far too small to establish the program in every region. Knowing that some regional directors strongly desired the program, and aware that regional directors influenced their peers, we implemented the program by offering them incentives. We offered the most interested regions sufficient money to hire an ethnographer for a period of three years, with the condition that by the end of that time the region would have adjusted its own budget to keep the ethnographer working. When a region had suc-

ceeded in making the adjustment, we would then offer the seed money to a different region with the same condition. Fortunately the first regional directors to take up the offer were among the most influential, and over time we were able to get the program up and running throughout most of the agency. Frequent articulation of the vision and constant encouragement of others—in the Park Service and beyond—to join in its pursuit, were key to our progress.

Loss of vision

Vision, however, must be maintained, updated, and kept constantly in front of those who have to carry it out. Vision is one of the primary functions of leadership. When leadership falters, vision wanes, progress stops, and programs atrophy. From the secretary of the interior down through the senior executive levels directly in charge of the cultural resource and historic preservation programs, beginning in 2001 the officials occupying what should have been leadership positions devoted more effort to controlling, limiting, and shrinking the National Park Service than to inspiring it to great achievements. Reorganizations rewarded loyalty to the hierarchy rather than talent and motivation. Instead of program-building, attention focused on reductions in budget and staff. Doug Scovill had accepted a field assignment, and Miki Crespi passed away. The top position in ethnography was left vacant for an extended period, presumably as part of the drastic reductions in staffing being imposed on cultural resource and historic preservation programs. During a desultory effort to recruit a chief ethnographer, a certificate of candidates known to have included highly qualified professionals was rejected by the associate director on implausible grounds. Workplace doldrums spread throughout the cultural resource management directorate. In just over a decade, cultural resource budgets declined by 26% when adjusted for inflation, staffing declined by 27%, and the National Academy of Public Administration found the whole field devoid of leadership.¹ That is where we are now, and that is why we must begin again.

The National Parks Second Century Commission

Beginning again means developing a new vision for a new time, one that serves to inspire and motivate people. In doing so, the work of the National Parks Second Century Commission—specifically its Cultural Resource and Historic Preservation Committee—may provide a useful foundation. The commission, chaired by two distinguished former United States Senators, Howard Baker of Tennessee and J. Bennett Johnston of Louisiana, and including 26 other distinguished Americans, did its primary work in six committees: Connecting Parks to People, Education and Learning, Budget and Finance, Parks of the Future, Natural Resources and Science, and Cultural Resources and Historic Preservation. I had the honor of chairing the last-named committee, which also included James McPherson, Pulitzer Prize-winning Princeton University historian; Carolyn Finney, professor at the University of California–Berkeley; and Richard West, director emeritus of the Museum of the American Indian. We were assisted by de Teel Patterson (“Pat”) Tiller, retired NPS deputy associate director for cultural resources, who was engaged as a consultant by the commission, and by

NPCA staff liaison James Nations, a cultural anthropologist who coordinated an article elsewhere in this issue.

Six points to consider in a new vision

The committee's vision for the National Park Service in its second century is broad and comprehensive: "a 'Century of the Environment' beginning August 25, 2016 in which history, nature, culture, beauty, and recreation are parts of sustainable community life and development everywhere and in which the National Park Service preserves and interprets selected outstanding places and provides leadership to all others in similar work." This vision is based on a continually evolving concept the committee called "the national park idea." The idea began with great scenic and natural areas such as Yellowstone, expanded to include battlefields by the late 19th century and prehistoric sites by 1906, and eventually came to include national historic and natural landmarks, far-reaching public-private partnership programs associated with the National Register of Historic Places, a rivers and trails program, and national heritage areas. Anyone, anywhere, who is working to preserve a bit of nature or a historic place, protect scenic beauty, or provide recreation is carrying out part of the national park idea. In this nationally encompassing vision, no part or program of the Park Service will limit its concern to what is inside parks or outside parks, but instead will be cognizant of both. Partnerships, heretofore generally conceived of as donations by outside fundraisers to NPS, or as assistance by a Park Service program to an outside entity, will more frequently become two-way mutually beneficial exchanges. Leadership will not epitomize control over others, but rather will be "servant leadership" in which the Park Service encourages, enables, and assists others who wish to preserve culture, history, nature, or scenic beauty; provide recreation; or educate people about such places. The focus of the Park Service will be not only on parks but upon the national park idea, wherever and everywhere in the United States someone is trying to carry it out. *To function within a National Park Service properly attuned to its second century, the ethnography program must envision itself in a similarly broad scope.*

A new vision for ethnography in the National Park Service must bring forward and build upon the best of the past without being restrained by it. The program of the future must maintain, repair, and improve the collegial work it has done with American Indian tribes and other Native American organizations. Here in particular are opportunities for mutually beneficial exchanges. The committee report points out that tribes and the National Park Service can be of great importance to one another, and together of great importance to the United States and the world. Past National Park Service interactions with tribes have in some cases contributed significantly to a renaissance among indigenous cultures. *Much remains to be done in positive interactions that benefit tribes, and such interaction must be a prominent part of the future.*

Where is the mutual benefit? The report goes on to say that

Barely in time, before some traditional knowledge is lost altogether, the National Park Service has begun to recognize that benefits of working with tribes flow to the Service from the tribes

as well as the other way around. As the Service works to help visitors comprehend their own interdependence with other species, traditional tribal reverence for the earth and her systems is becoming a persuasive addition to the findings of science and scholarship. Today's coldly utilitarian views must be moderated if the dominant cultures are not to overtax the earth's ability to sustain a large human population. This change will happen more readily if the lessons of science are presented in tandem with the older, deeper, and more spiritual lessons from generations of indigenous cultures. It is not unusual for National Park visitors to liken an opening among giant redwoods to a cathedral, or to describe their experiences in nature as sacred. Such metaphor is important to what National Parks stand for, and to the willingness of the public to use and support parks. That willingness can benefit greatly by learning from cultures for which the concept is more than metaphorical.²

Learning about and from other cultures is at the heart the ethnography program. If ethnography can help the Park Service reach beyond park boundaries, it can similarly help to reach beyond national boundaries. It is time for the National Park Service to move past its pride in the United States having created the first national park in the world, 136 years ago, and to recognize the many lessons we can now learn from other nations. With our "empty lands" now mostly filled up, the United States will generally be creating new park units that have ranchers, farmers, and even city dwellers living in them and using them for traditional uses—and, in some cases, for economically productive activities not normally carried on in American parks. Knowing how to do this right will require ethnographers along with a host of professionals from other disciplines.

Within the authorized boundaries of many parks are areas of privately owned property that the Park Service has intended to acquire eventually, sometimes because of fear that an owner might someday be motivated by profit to build some facility or development that is detrimental to the park. We call these properties "inholdings" and frequently cite their acquisition as high-priority projects necessary for protection of the parks. Often this is correct, but when the inholdings include significant cultural resources not central to the major themes of the park, it equally often is mistaken. Such inholdings that have been generally well maintained by private owners instantly become, upon acquisition by the parks, relatively low-priority cultural resource maintenance problems. Well-known examples include historic dude ranches, fishing villages, and tourist inns and cabins that may have been well-enough preserved in private ownership but that suffer neglect or worse in consequence of being acquired by parks. In these cases, new approaches such as heritage areas, use of preservation easements, or leasing of historic structures may offer better management opportunities than more traditional models. *The skills of ethnographers will be helpful in figuring out whether certain inholdings are or are not cultural resources that the Park Service should preserve.*

The Second Century Cultural Resources and Historic Preservation Committee declared that few coming changes will be as important as the rapid and fundamental ways in which the American people ourselves are changing. When we are barely thirty years into the second century, there will be 400 million Americans—about one-third more than now. Much of the increase will result from immigration, mostly from countries other than those that previously provided almost all immigrants. Groups now called "minorities" will increase as per-

centages of the population and together with new arrivals become the majority. The United States has experienced significant demographic changes before, but never with the speed and scale of changes now underway and expected to continue. In consequence of these demographic changes, basic assumptions about nature, beauty, recreation, and history may change, possibly in fundamental ways. The meaning of “historic place” may come to be very different than at present.

The National Park Service must lead the change or else be led by it. Viewed as opportunity, this situation offers the Park Service a chance to grow into the future it should pursue even if doing so were not imperative. If the National Park Service conceives of itself as serving all peoples of the world—because that is what the word “American” is coming to mean—it can better fulfill its role in the United States and among nations. The effects of these changes will come not only from new and different needs, values, and perspectives, but also from the time-honored practice of immigrants settling initially in places they find most amenable. People naturally choose to live near others who speak the same language, eat similar foods, and follow familiar practices. Where new immigrants choose to settle will have a significant effect on what the National Park Service must do in those localities as well as nationally. As one example, Lowell, Massachusetts, has recently come to have the largest concentration of ethnic Cambodians in the United States, and this makes a difference in the work of Lowell National Historical Park. *A strong ethnography program will be needed if the Park Service is to understand and deal with new concentrations of ethnic populations.*

These six points imply a substantial part of what a renewed vision must include to revive the ethnography program and guide it into the future. A vision is best developed by those who will work to carry it out. The task therefore belongs to what remains of the ethnography cadre inside the National Park Service and to outside professionals who are closely associated with it. A good group to begin the process would be the remaining ethnographers in the Park Service (some of whom are authors here), other authors who have contributed to this special issue, and readers who find it of interest. Eventually the process and its recommended vision must have the blessing of the National Leadership Council and the director of the National Park Service.

How to use a new vision

When the vision has been articulated, it will be important for everyone to understand that a vision is not a goal or objective that one expects to accomplish and then check off as “done.” It is, rather, a moving target that stays ahead of us, drawing us onward as we approach it. An excessive preoccupation with accomplishment of measurable objectives leads to a culture of “bean counters,” in which process and procedure drive out creativity—as to some degree the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) has done. My fellow Second Century commissioner Peter Senge wrote in *The Necessary Revolution* that the important thing is “not what the vision is, but what the vision does.”³ What a vision does, when properly used by leaders, is to engage the creative imaginations of myriad individuals in pursuing the vision, each in his or her own individual way. National Park Service employees at many levels should have performance standards linking in some way to the ethno-

graphic vision, but it will be best if each individual conceives his or her own annual standards in pursuit of the vision rather than having them imposed.

Examples of actions

Just as the vision for an ethnography program must be developed by the National Park Service rather than proposed by me, so must action steps in pursuit of the vision be developed by the working professionals. In hope that those professionals might find them useful, I list below several action steps recommended by the Cultural Resource and Historic Preservation Committee that seem relevant to ethnography.

- Hold a Second World Conference on Cultural Parks to further the work begun at the first conference in 1984.
- Mutually improve laws, policies, and approaches with Canada, Mexico, and other nations whose boundaries adjoin or are near the United States.
- Update landmark themes and new area studies to focus on aspects of the American story that are inadequately or inaccurately covered; examine parks for opportunities to preserve and interpret forgotten, overlooked, or omitted stories.
- Review for cultural bias the policies that affect uses of parks and that govern historic preservation, heritage areas, Land and Water Conservation Fund, rivers, trails, and other related programs.
- Increase recruitment of Native Americans as National Park Service employees, and use native stories and languages in park interpretation.
- Facilitate connections by Native peoples and their living cultures to parks; allow private access for ecologically sustainable traditional cultural practices.
- Pair United States national heritage area directors with counterparts in France, Italy, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere for training and collaboration.
- Using staff professionals from the National Park Service and its partners, resume a strong international role for the United States in cultural and natural heritage.
- Help Americans learn from indigenous peoples that we do not inherit the planet from our ancestors but hold it in trust for our children and grandchildren.⁴

The time to begin is now.

I hope the authors and interested readers of articles in this special issue of *The George Wright Forum* will treat it as a call to action, using it to attract others to their cause. I hope you will carefully avoid narrow interests or preoccupation with the ways ethnography differs from other disciplines, but instead seek to make yourselves and your program valuable to all parts of the Park Service and to its partners. Go forward with the interests of the whole National Park Service in mind. You will do best when others see the value of your work to their part of the national park idea.

Act now; do not wait for direction! In a mature and confident National Park Service, leadership will flow upward through the organization as a result of individual initiative, as well as downward in execution of policy. Top-level leaders who measure up to what the

National Park Service must be and do in its second century need their subordinates to be creative, courageous, and self-starting. Help them by being so.

Endnotes

1. Frank Hodson, James Kunde, and Denis P. Galvin, *Saving Our History: A Review of National Park Service Cultural Resources Programs* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Public Administration, October 2008).
2. "A Different Past in a Different Future: The Report of the Cultural Resource and Historic Preservation Committee of the National Parks Second Century Commission," July 6, 2009. Much of the remainder of this essay is from this report, of which I was principal author.
3. Peter Senge, Bryan Smith, Nina Kruschwitz, Joe Laur, and Sara Schley, *The Necessary Revolution: How Individuals and Organizations are Working Together to Create a Sustainable World* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 324.
4. Christina Cameron, "The United States National Park Service in the 21st Century," a paper offered as advice to the Cultural Resource and Historic Preservation Committee of the National Parks Second Century Commission, 2009.

Jerry L. Rogers had a 34-year career in the National Park Service, including 14 years as associate director for cultural resources with responsibility for cultural resource management in the national park system and historic preservation programs covering the entire United States. He retired as chair of "Discovery 2000: the National Park Service General Conference," and recently served as a member of the National Parks Second Century Commission. He lives near Santa Fe, New Mexico, with his wife and partner Nancy Burgas, where they are engaged in several volunteer activities in pursuit of the national park idea. You can read the Second Century committee and commission reports at www.visionfortheparks.org.