

# Rethinking Ethnography in the National Park Service

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HENRY LEWIS, AN ANTHROPOLOGIST FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA, once observed that within academia anthropology as a discipline ranks closely with departments of religious studies and the dramatic arts, but without “occupying the moral high ground of the former or having the entertainment value of the latter.” Anthropology’s major contribution, Lewis maintained, is found in its perspective and in its examination of our own culture’s assumptions (Lewis 1992:15).<sup>1</sup>

The National Park Service (NPS) ethnography program (cultural anthropology) was established in 1981 primarily to consult with traditional and/or ethnically distinct communities and document park places and resources that are culturally significant. A logical by-product of this work, in keeping with Lewis’ notion, is an exercise in “compare and contrast”: comparing the agency’s assumptions about what is significant with the assumptions of significance found in traditional communities. Hence, there is a need to understand our own assumptions enough to indicate where they differ from the communities we serve. Simply put, the program’s establishment meant that the agency had determined that there was value in finding how others, in an often overlooked diverse citizenry, viewed and valued the places and resources—views often different from those of the agency. An understanding of these cultural similarities and differences would conceivably help park managers, at the very least, to understand an often neglected element of the context within which they must make decisions: the local living cultural context. It was hoped that a better understanding of these NPS and community similarities and differences could lead to constructive resolutions to on-going and potential management conflicts.

## **Early leadership**

At the time, the use of anthropological methods to understand these diverse perspectives was a novel approach among federal land-managing agencies. In this regard, the National Park Service took a leading role. “Cultural programs” in agencies primarily meant archaeology or history (as they still do). But social events in the country brought more attention to contemporary matters. The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s brought Americans face-to-face with the effects of denying basic human rights to neglected communities. During the early 1970s, the American Indian Movement gained attention with their occupation of Wounded Knee, South Dakota. This incident focused attention on the rights of the country’s

indigenous peoples and their grievances. The nation was beginning to understand that cultural diversity was not an abstraction: it had social, legal, and moral consequences that could not be ignored.

Federal land management agencies were not immune to the increasing pressures to recognize local community needs and cultural values. While the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (NHPA; PL 89-665) was important in addressing the local as well as the national significance of cultural places, the ethnography program was the National Park Service's direct response to the increasing demands from cultural groups lacking a voice in resource management issues. The program was established on the heels of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (AIRFA), passed by Congress as a joint resolution in 1978 (PL 95-341). This law made clear the already existing religious freedoms for Indian peoples—but freedoms that had been denied largely as a result of national and local policies derived from underlying cultural assumptions (i.e., misunderstandings and prejudice) of the dominant culture (Andrus 1979; Keller and Turek 1998; Spence 1999; Burton 2002). AIRFA challenged federal agencies to examine their management policies to determine if they placed barriers to the free exercise of Indian religion. Key individuals within the Park Service (including Jerry Rogers, a contributor to this volume) understood that a cursory examination of existing policies did not go far enough for a land and resource management agency such as NPS. Indigenous peoples had consistently indicated their desire to access places and resources within parks to conduct religious ceremonies and to have a voice in the management of lands that were so important to their cultural heritage. Understanding these requests for access to specific places (sometimes solitary or exclusive access), as well as to botanical, biological, and mineral resources, was necessary to find ways to accommodate American Indian needs while at the same time preserving these same places and resources for future generations. Documenting these culturally significant resources (later to be classed as “ethnographic resources”) and conveying their importance to park management became a major goal of the ethnography program.

The establishment of the program was also coincident with the passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980 (PL 96-487). This law doubled the amount of land in the national park system and provided subsistence rights to rural residents of the state. In time, the ethnography program provided vital social and cultural (and resource harvest) information directly related to subsistence hunting and gathering rights. Elsewhere, the program's leadership role expanded beyond aboriginal communities to focus on the perspectives of non-Native culturally distinct communities having close affiliations with specific sites or parks. Studies of traditional ranchers in Montana and Wyoming, Hispanic communities in the Southwest, African American communities in the East, and fishing communities on coasts of the US provided important insights into resource management plans, public education and interpretive programs, as well as day-to-day management decision-making within parks.

### **Leadership lost**

The ethnography program grew in the early 1990s to include positions in regional offices

and in a few parks around the country. However, since that time the program has largely remained static or has diminished. The position of chief ethnographer has remained unfilled since 2003 and the ethnography program support positions in the Washington office have been left vacant. Consequently, the program's profile has faded and there exists no national leadership to meet existing and emerging needs and challenges. This lessening of the program's profile is not due to fewer demands on agency resources from Indian tribes or other distinct cultural communities. On the contrary, these demands have increased.

The 1992 amendments to the NHPA and the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (NAGPRA; PL 101-601) increased agency responsibilities to consult with Indian tribes throughout the country. Law, regulations, executive and secretarial orders, departmental memorandums, and specific court decisions have highlighted the need for such consultation on a wide range of issues related to tribal interests and cultural perspectives.<sup>2</sup> In 1990, the publication of National Register Bulletin no. 38 (on traditional cultural properties, or TCPs), brought much-needed attention to the full consideration of local community values placed on sites and how these sites contributed to community identity—and the need to consult with community members (and not simply agency professionals) to determine if properties were eligible to be placed on the National Register of Historic Places (Parker and King 1990; King 2009).

There is an increasing need to understand how differing cultural perspectives affect parks and park visitation. Research indicates that ethnic and racial minorities are virtually absent from the major parks in the system. Efforts have been made to engage these populations by establishing park units that directly reflect minority history. But the fact remains that visitation by minorities in most park units is low relative to their numbers in the general population. Goldsmith (1994) provided visitation figures in the 1990s illustrating this point: although the proportion of African Americans in the general national population is 12%, only 0.4% of Yosemite National Park's visitors arriving by car and 3.8% of those arriving by bus are African American. At Grand Canyon National Park, the percentage of African American visitors equals that of Latino visitors (3.5%). Similar figures were reported by Floyd (2001) a few years later. Low figures for Hispanic/Latino visitation should be viewed against the fact that population figures for Latinos in the general population have increased dramatically (see Fry 2008). More recent studies have reported that general (not park-specific) visitation is more evenly distributed, but the great majority of visitors are still non-Hispanic whites (NPCA Diversity Task Force Report 2009). All studies point to the need for more research to address the issue of under-representation of minority population visitation. If NPS desires to engage these growing minority populations in the new century, there needs to be greater emphasis on studying the multiple underlying factors that presently limit such engagement. The ethnography program, along with other social science disciplines, can contribute significantly to this effort.

### **Ethnography and international concerns**

Establishment of the national parks in the United States is often referred to as the country's "best idea." The rest of the world seems to agree. Governments, often in partnership with

international conservation organizations and private land owners, have established parks, preserves, and protected areas at an astonishing speed. As reported by West and Brockington (2006, citing Chape et al. 2005) by 2005 there were more than 100,000 protected areas in the world covering more than 12% of the world's land surface—over 20 million square kilometers. These numbers continue to grow.

Efforts to preserve areas for wildlife protection or protect general biodiversity should be applauded. But the rapid proliferation of parks and protected areas around the world has raised the issue of impacts to local, indigenous human communities caught up in the web of these efforts. Anthropologists, rural sociologists, rural development personnel, and other social scientists have all watched as conflicts have grown between large-scale conservation activities and local indigenous communities. Indigenous peoples themselves have voiced concern. As many as 120 representatives from indigenous, mobile, and local communities converged on the 2003 World Park Congress in Durban, South Africa, to express the need for the international conservation community to pay more attention to their perspectives and needs when protected areas are established (Brosius 2004). The imposition of Western-style conservation philosophy and policy is not always consistent with local community cultural, subsistence, or economic needs. At stake is not only the livelihood of communities, but the integrity of their traditions—their living cultures. While the world's focus has been on the preservation of biodiversity, the effort to assist affected communities to preserve their traditions and cultures—if they choose to do so—has been neglected.

Cultural anthropologist Mac Chapin has called on international conservation organizations to pay more attention to ongoing and potential conflicts between biodiversity conservation efforts and the needs of local indigenous communities (Chapin 2004). Since the publication of Chapin's work, those involved in international conservation efforts have turned more attention to this issue and are making efforts to more fully understand and consider local indigenous cultural perspectives.<sup>3</sup>

This call to understand the differences in perspectives of cultural significance between agencies and communities mirrors the early mandate given to the ethnography program within the NPS. At a time when the volume of the discourse on these issues has been rising, the voice of the NPS has diminished—or has been altogether silent. In many ways NPS led the field when it came to determining the impacts of preservation policy on traditional communities. Today, it is a follower and has largely become disengaged from this increasingly worldwide important issue.

## **Conclusion**

The social and cultural pressures that gave rise to an ethnography program in NPS have not diminished. On the local and national levels these pressures have increased with new legislation, regulation, policy, and guidance. Changing demographics in the new century will give rise to the need for new strategies to address the needs of growing minority populations. These populations presently are under-represented in the visitation to parks, and NPS will need to understand the differing cultural perspectives that affect visitation rates and public support for the agency's mission. For these reasons alone there is a need to revitalize the

existing ethnography program. On the international scene, the conversation NPS began in the late 1970s and early 1980s concerning preservation efforts and their impact on indigenous and traditional communities has only increased. Parks and protected areas in countries outside the United States and Europe are promoted by major conservation groups and established by some governments with limited capacity to manage these areas—or to deal with conflicts with resident minority communities. The long experience of the Park Service, through its various programs, including the ethnography program, has much to offer and should become engaged in this issue.

Henry Lewis' assessment of the place of cultural anthropology within academia can be mirrored in an assessment of the ethnography program's place within the National Park Service. Cultural anthropology within the Park Service works with contemporary cultural issues, but it also works with traditional communities and their use of, and the value they give to, places and natural resources. Ethnography is a social science methodology that, within NPS, investigates links between community cultural values and park natural and cultural resources. Consequently, in a practical way, ethnography actually resides in some liminal space between the cultural and natural resource programs. Efforts to re-establish or revitalize the program should consider the advantages of interdisciplinary work.

Though the ethnography program's profile has been diminished in recent years, there is now an opportunity to rethink the role of the program within the agency. With this in mind, the following list is a set of suggested tasks that can easily be undertaken to rethink the program's strengths and weakness and to maximize the contribution it can make to the work of the National Park Service.

1. Fill the chief ethnographer position with a person qualified in the field and who also possesses strong leadership skills. This position has been vacant since 2003. This vacancy has left the entire program, in the parks and in other agencies, without national program leadership.
2. Develop a long-term (ten-year) strategic plan for the ethnography program to achieve specific goals and address changes in national, regional, and park priorities and needs.
3. Fill vacant ethnographer positions within the ethnography program in WASO (the NPS central office in Washington, D.C.). These positions have been vacant since 2007.
4. Position the ethnography program on an equal footing with all other cultural and natural resource programs.
5. Develop standard documentation guidelines for ethnographic resource research results and publications (including an easy-to-use database consistent with NPS data standards).
6. Identify and establish standard measures of program accomplishments and staff performance.
7. Develop several pilot research projects in various parts of the country that are carefully planned to be interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary in character to better serve all aspects of park resource planning and management.

8. Evaluate ethnography, NAGPRA, and tribal liaison functions and find productive ways to establish partnerships, leading to cross-program products and efficiencies.
9. Ensure that the ethnography program works with the social science program to deal with the rapidly changing demographics of the American population, as emphasized in the report of the National Parks Second Century Commission.
10. Partner with the NPS Office of International Affairs on issues that relate to the increasing attention being given to indigenous peoples and protected areas in other countries.

## Endnotes

1. Henry T. Lewis' work focused on the impact on the environment by cultural activities of indigenous populations in North America and in Australia. Of special interest was how the aboriginal use of fire affected changes in local and regional environments. His research and writings focused on gaining a greater understanding of indigenous ecological knowledge, and on indigenous technological knowledge—knowledge that is based on traditional ways to manipulate and shape local or regional environments. This work has been continued and expanded by more recent researchers (see Anderson 2005; Berkes 2008).
2. The relevant laws are those just mentioned—AIRFA, NHPA, and NAGPRA—along with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA; 40 CFR 1500). Relevant court cases include *Lyng v. Northwest Indian Cemetery Protective Association* and *Bear Lodge Multiple Use Ass'n v. Babbitt*, 175 F. 3d 814 (10th Cir. 1999). Executive and other orders include Executive Order no. 13175, "Consultation and Coordination with Indian Tribal Governments," 2000; Executive Order no. 13007, "Indian Sacred Sites," 1996; Executive Order no. 12898, "Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations," 1994; [Interior] Secretarial Order no. 3206 ("American Indian Tribe Rights, Federal-Tribal Trust Responsibilities, and the Endangered Species Act," 1997); National Register Bulletin no. 38; and NPS *Management Guidelines*. Most recently, see NPS Director's Draft Order no. 53, "Special Park Uses."
3. For an extensive review of this issue and other related issues see West, Igoe, and Brockington 2006.

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