

# Rocky Mountain National Park's Sister Park Relationship

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IN SEPTEMBER 2007, Rocky Mountain National Park signed a sister park agreement with the Tatra National Parks in Poland and Slovakia (Figure 1). All three parks are mountain parks and international biosphere reserves, and all share mutual issues and concerns involving the conservation, preservation, and management of national parks, including natural and cultural resources, for the purpose of conservation, recreation, and public education. Since 2007, we have engaged in numerous staff exchanges and conferences, initiated joint science projects, and shared numerous work products, lessons learned, and ideas. To those who engage in the sister park relationship, there are unique and invaluable experiences gained that enhance careers and the protection of parks.

As with any relationship, it takes time to nurture and foster a sister park agreement. In this day and age of advanced technology, some of this can be done while in our own parks, but the fullest experience and greatest learning is obtained by physically visiting the parks and meeting and sharing face-to-face with our counterparts; each of the three partners agrees with this fact. All aspects of going to the other parks (e.g., travel, communication and language, culture, food, facilities, etc.) broadens one's viewpoint from previously held impressions and gives new energy to meeting the mission of managing these parks for preservation and enjoyment. Issues that once seemed specific to one park or one country are seen through a global lens and recognized as being common to many protected areas. Creativity in problem-solving is enhanced and the traditions of our respective agencies questioned as we compare and contrast how each protected area, and each democracy, approaches problems or opportunities.

The US State Department has been a significant partner in our sister park success. The US consulate in Krakow, Poland, as well as the US embassy in Bratislava, Slovakia, have provided assistance and leadership in maintaining local relationships with park staff. For example, each year in honor of Earth Day a thematic conference is sponsored by the US consulate in Krakow to enhance our knowledge about management challenges and opportunities we all share. This conference has evolved to include other Polish parks as well as border parks from the Czech Republic and, of course, Slovakia. Similarly, conferences have occurred in Slo-

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**Figure 1.** The three parks in the sister park relationship: Tatra National Park (Tatranský národný park; Slovakia); Rocky Mountain National Park (USA), Tatra National Park (Tatrzański Park Narodowy; Poland).

vakia. One of the highlights came in 2010 when Rocky Mountain National Park moderated a significant national conference in Slovakia titled “Forest Management in the Tatras: Preserving Protected Areas in the Era of Climate Change.” We have had success in collaborating in many aspects of park management, including the opportunity to observe Tatra National Park of Poland implement its first volunteer program—an outcome of our sister park relationship.

“Diplomacy through science” has evolved to be an area of emphasis for our international program. As similar mountain areas, we share similar environments, similar species, and a similar ecology. Air quality, climate, history and cultural practices, migratory species, and an ever-increasing human population are but a few issues in common that lend themselves to shared research questions in which the collection of data generally transcends cultures and governments, and provides for shared learning. Since 2007, we have collaboratively cultivated relationships with five universities (three in the US, one in Poland, and one in Slovakia) sharing research, our first Fulbright Scholar will travel to Poland in 2012 from the University of Northern Colorado, and our local high school (in Estes Park, Colorado) has established weather and ozone monitoring stations in both Estes Park and Zakopane, Poland, to engage students in both locations. The growth of our science efforts has been enhanced through participation of sister park staff in Rocky Mountain National Park’s biennial science conference.

The general premise of the sister park relationship is that each park hosts visits of sister staff. Once sister park staff arrive, support is provided to help reduce expenses and the stress associated with international travel. Support can include assistance with transportation, housing, and meals. Over the years, funding to support this relationship has been from a mixture of sources, including donated funds, university and grant funding, and, on occasion, US embassy support for travel expenses of individuals from Europe to America. As with many initiatives, sustainability of funding is enhanced through many partnerships.

Our experience suggests that a sister park relationship is time well invested. And, like many investments of relationship, the tangible benefits are shown over time as trust builds, shared visions evolve, and resources become available. For those who have been fortunate to travel abroad the experience has been career-changing; for those who spend time with staff from another country, their careers have been significantly enhanced. The future of protect-

ed areas management is global in nature. We believe the more we as individuals, as parks, and as an agency embrace the sister park concept, the more relevant and protected our parks will be for future generations.

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