

## International Experience: Personally Rewarding and Good for NPS

*Bob Krumenaker*

IN 1998, THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE (NPS) NORTHEAST REGION and the Glynwood Center in upstate New York collaborated to put on the first “international short course” in decades. Students came from several Eastern European countries; instructors, including me, were NPS employees from the region. My role was to teach natural resource management on Thursday of the week-long class. I knew almost nothing about the experience level of the class members, so came early to observe and tailor the lesson plan to their needs. As I also had no experience at that point in international affairs, I didn’t know what to expect.

It didn’t take long to realize that these people already knew at least as much as I did about natural resource management, as they were senior park and protected area managers from some of the most ecologically significant places in Europe. Protected for centuries by kings and then communist elites as private reserves, opening these “new” parks and protected areas to public use was what they came to the US to learn, though protecting nature clearly was their priority. What they wanted from us was, in some ways, a comparative anatomy class—in other words, how did we do it in the US?

What also emerged from the first few days was that these highly experienced protected area professionals were far less experienced with cultural resource management; in fact, it puzzled them. These were natural areas, why were we talking about cultural areas?

Nora Mitchell, who was there to teach the cultural resources section, and I decided to change plans and integrate our sessions. But we struggled, failing to connect with the students with the idea that cultural resources were important. We didn’t know their parks; was it possible that there really weren’t any cultural resources there?

We decided to try one more thing and asked the class to divide up by country and discuss the stories people told about the places that were now their parks and protected areas. When the students came back to report on the discussions, the room buzzed in several unfamiliar languages. A dignified man named David from the Republic of Georgia, whose voice I had not heard all week, rose to speak first. I hadn’t realized until then that he neither spoke nor understood English. He walked to the front of the room and began to draw a map on a

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*The George Wright Forum*, vol. 28, no. 3, pp. 305–306 (2011).

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flip chart, explaining the story excitedly in Georgian to his colleagues as he added lines, dots, dates, and arrows to his map. One of them translated his words into Russian, and then another interpreted for the rest of us in English as he kept adding features to the map. No doubt the tale was lengthened by the need to repeat it three times, but David's rendering of 12 centuries of human history held us spellbound. Adding to this remarkable moment was the fact that in his free hand our Georgian colleague was gesticulating for emphasis with an 18th-century US sword, a Revolutionary War-era artifact that had been found on the Glynwood property.

I'll never forget that moment. The Eastern Europeans "got" cultural resources. I got hooked on working with colleagues from other parts of the world.

Since that time, I've participated in two International Ranger Federation congresses, the first in Australia in 2003 and the second in Scotland in 2006, both on my own time and dime. Finding common interest and experience with men and women whose passions are similar to mine, yet who live and work in so many different parts of the world and usually under far more trying conditions than we have in NPS, has been both fascinating and humbling. One surreal moment occurred while listening to a ranger from the Congo give a PowerPoint presentation in French-accented English dispassionately discussing how civil war is very bad for park wildlife. My job seems pretty simple in comparison.

In 2005, I went on my first official international trip for NPS, to Sweden, where then-Yellowstone Superintendent Suzanne Lewis and I met King Carl Gustaf and were treated like royalty ourselves as we toured several Swedish national parks after a conference at which we both gave papers—Suzanne's the keynote, mine rather less visible. In 2007, I had the keynote experience when I was asked by the Office of International Affairs to represent the NPS director at a conference in Seoul commemorating the 20th anniversary of the Korean National Park Service. My only lament about these two official trips was that they were whirlwinds, altogether too short—but my own comparative anatomy lessons were hugely rewarding as I learned from colleagues (who quickly became friends) about how parks were run in their countries.

Along with about two dozen other park managers, I participated in the inaugural National Parks Institute class in 2010. I've been fortunate to have had a lot of leadership training, but this was an intense two weeks focused on the challenges park people face. It would have been great had all the students been colleagues from NPS, but with half the class from overseas, the vibe was different and even better. We delved into the issues each one of us faced, and—again—it was refreshing to recognize the commonality of experience, regardless of country of origin.

International colleagues have become friends, and sharing experience in park and protected area management has provided me with a perspective and context that has deepened my commitment to park management. It's been personally rewarding, but I believe it's also been good for the NPS as I can now go all over the world—electronically, at least—for ideas, as the network keeps growing and growing.

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