

# Linking NPS to the World: The Role of the National Park Service Office of International Affairs

*Stephen Morris and Jonathan Putnam*

THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE (NPS) HAS A LONG AND PROUD HISTORY of international leadership and engagement, a story not particularly well known among either the NPS rank and file or the general public. Since even before the creation of NPS in 1916, countries around the world looked to the US as a leader in the global parks movement, and indeed the very concept of national parks that began with the creation of Yellowstone National Park in 1872 has been viewed by many in and outside the US as “America’s best idea.” Likewise, from the earliest days the leadership of NPS and the Department of the Interior believed strongly in the international work of the Park Service, and, importantly, not just in helping other countries develop and manage their own parks. It was understood that NPS had much to learn from the experiences of other park agencies around the world. From the development of the NPS interpretation program in the 1920s to the use of all-taxa biological inventories today, NPS has gained much through international engagement.

The creation of the NPS Office of International Affairs (OIA) 50 years ago—in November 1961—was an important milestone, and not only in the NPS’s history. Its establishment put NPS in the vanguard of US government involvement in international conservation. Through its various international programs over the last century, NPS has been involved in park creation, development, and management in nearly every country in the world, and has helped train thousands of park managers. This history and the need for NPS to be engaged internationally is well covered in Brent Mitchell’s recent contribution to the NPS Centennial Essay Series in this journal (“Projecting America’s Best Ideals: International Engagement and the National Park Service,” volume 28, number 1, 2011).

While NPS has ceded much of its international leadership role over the last decade or two, the need for international engagement—both for NPS itself and for international conservation more broadly—has never been more urgent. The world is facing multiple environmental crises: climate change, biodiversity loss, air and water pollution, loss of habitats, etc., and while the number of protected areas worldwide has grown significantly, it is acknowl-

---

*The George Wright Forum*, vol. 28, no. 3, pp. 259–268 (2011).

© 2011 The George Wright Society. All rights reserved.

(No copyright is claimed for previously published material reprinted herein.)

ISSN 0732-4715. Please direct all permission requests to [info@georgewright.org](mailto:info@georgewright.org).

edged that many, perhaps most, of these areas are still “paper parks” that are not successfully fulfilling their conservation mandate.

Furthermore, it is increasingly understood that the resources of our parks are intertwined with, and impacted by, the wider world. Nearly all park managers now understand that they cannot possibly succeed in protecting or interpreting their resources if parks become ecological or historical “islands” surrounded by a sea of development, and that they need to be connected to and protected within much larger land- and seascapes. However, it is increasingly clear that the extent of these connections is much greater than most people have appreciated: the migratory movements of many wildlife species (ranging from warblers and butterflies to sea turtles and whales) protected in NPS units means that, for example, Denali National Park and Preserve is connected to Patagonia in Chile and Argentina (among many other places), Great Smoky Mountains National Park is connected to rainforests in Costa Rica, and the National Park of American Samoa is connected to Fiji and Indonesia, just to name a very few. Air pollution in Alaska and even the Rockies may originate as far away as Asia, and invasive species and of course climate change are truly global threats to the integrity of US parks and protected areas. Cultural parks and heritage sites also exhibit the same kind of international connections, as is evidenced by the current joint efforts of NPS and agencies in Canada to commemorate the bicentennial of the War of 1812.

NPS Director Jon Jarvis, a career NPS employee and former regional director, fully understands the need for NPS to be engaged with foreign counterparts and supports strengthening the Park Service’s international outreach. Within a week of beginning his tenure as director in September 2009, Jarvis traveled to Canada for a meeting of the heads of protected areas agencies from around the world and announced to his counterparts, “We’re back!” (on the international stage). Several months later, he repeated the announcement to enthusiastic applause at a meeting in Mexico at which he and his Mexican and Canadian counterparts signed a tripartite agreement on cooperating to protect wilderness in North America.

Despite difficult budgetary constraints, Director Jarvis has begun making good on his pledge in numerous ways, perhaps most significantly by agreeing to assign for several years a senior NPS employee to the Global Protected Areas Program of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). IUCN is the world’s largest conservation network, with both government and nongovernmental members. In 2008, its commitment to protected areas appeared to be waning with the departure of the director of the protected areas program and a reorganization that merged the program with others. Several of the leading countries’ protected areas agencies, like NPS also IUCN members, were concerned by the apparent de-emphasis on protected areas within IUCN. To spur a reinvigoration of the program, the following year they issued a challenge to IUCN—if it would hire a new protected areas director and otherwise bolster the program, then the three agencies (Australia’s Parks Victoria, Parks Canada, and NPS) would each make available a member of their staff on detail to continue the effort to rebuild IUCN’s work on protected areas. David Reynolds, the former NPS Northeast Region chief of natural resources and a person with significant international experience, has now been assigned to work on the Global Protected Areas Program on capacity development. Reynolds will continue this work through the next World Parks Congress in 2014.

Director Jarvis has also taken the reins as the chair of the committee working to implement the recently signed Memorandum of Understanding on North American Wilderness and Protected Areas, which facilitates cooperation on parks and wilderness among Canada, the United States and Mexico. NPS will host the next committee meeting and working group in late 2011 and 2012.

Beyond specific initiatives such as these, the director is using his bully pulpit to promote the need for and the value of looking beyond our national borders as the Park Service goes about its mission. For one of his monthly “flat hat chat” videos posted on the Park Service’s intranet website, he championed the work of the OIA, and in this context the value to NPS of international outreach. His actions in this regard are setting an important tone that is much needed after the many years in which NPS leadership downplayed or actively discouraged international engagement, fearing in part that it would draw unwanted attention from Congress. It will take time to build a culture within the organization that views international work as relevant and important, but with his credibility in the organization and the passion he brings to the topic, Jarvis has made a good start.

It’s unlikely that NPS efforts in the international realm will see a return anytime soon to a level of engagement similar to the height of its activities during the 1960s to 1980s period, when, with a dedicated and significant international affairs budget, the agency was able to sponsor major training initiatives, allocate large amounts to technical assistance projects in developing countries, and send employees overseas for extended periods of time. The budget realities confronting the agency in today’s world simply won’t permit it. In any case, the global conservation arena has evolved significantly since those days. Unlike the early days of OIA, today there are many other players actively involved in international conservation initiatives, including several large nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as well as a few federal agencies such as the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the US Forest Service. Other countries have strengthened their capabilities and outreach as well, which is a measure of the success of the global protected areas movement. Thus, the gap left by the NPS’s drawdown of international activities has been at least partially filled by these other organizations. Rather than reinventing the wheel and creating duplicative initiatives, NPS now looks to focus on specific “niches” where its expertise is deep and, perhaps, unmatched by others. It also needs to be more strategic in targeting NPS-funded international assistance in areas where the benefits to NPS and park resources can be clearly demonstrated. It can and will continue to provide assistance more widely on a cost-reimbursable basis, as it has done for many years.

There are a number of ways in which the Park Service is doing this. For example, rather than hosting a single large seminar on protected areas management, as was done for many years, NPS, through OIA, has sponsored several smaller targeted international workshops focused on specific topics of interest. A recent workshop highlighted NPS’s experiences with private-sector partners in managing visitor services through concessions, leases, and other partnership arrangements. It was organized with Colorado State University and held at Golden Gate National Recreation Area in San Francisco and at Yosemite National Park, and brought together representatives from Europe, Asia, Latin America, Australia, and Africa. Around the world, there is growing interest in how protected areas can engage with the

private sector to provide services and generate economic opportunities, particularly for nearby communities. In developing countries especially, protected areas are woefully underfunded and are looking for ways to generate revenues through partnerships with private businesses. NPS has decades of experience in this area, beginning with some of our earliest parks, which were established in coordination with the railroads and the tourism industry. Along the way, the Park Service learned quite a bit and also made some mistakes; it can pass those lessons on to countries such as Brazil, which is just beginning to think about how to increase visitation to its parks in anticipation of hosting several major international events in the near future, including the Olympics and the World Cup. A related workshop on visitor use management and planning was held in 2008 at Yellowstone National Park. This is another field in which NPS has deep expertise, given the emphasis placed on welcoming visitors to national parks since the Park Service's inception.

Though it currently has very limited funding to conduct international technical assistance, NPS through OIA remains involved in designing and implementing assistance programs in natural and cultural resource management around the world. For example, NPS and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) have received funding support from the US State Department to develop a multi-year program of assistance and exchange with Chile's national parks and marine protected areas. This includes the development of a new sister park partnership between Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve and the Francisco Coloane Marine and Coastal Protected Area in Patagonia, a development which was highlighted by President Obama during his March 2011 visit to Chile. Under this partnership, Glacier Bay will be sending its science advisor to Chile for a six-month assignment to help Francisco Coloane develop tools to monitor park resources and to minimize threats to whales from ship strikes within the park.

As another example, in partnership with a contractor for the US Agency for International Development (USAID), Development Alternatives, Inc., NPS is working with Rwanda's national parks on a range of issues, including concessions, fee management, and the development of trails. NPS is also working with the national park agency of Colombia and USAID on a two-year action plan to help Colombia's parks develop programs in interpretation, concessions, natural resources management, and climate change.

A core function of OIA is to provide guidance to parks interested in establishing a sister park relationship with a foreign park with similar features or facing similar issues (see <http://www.nps.gov/oia/topics/sisterparks/sisterparks.htm>). The primary benefit of the sister park concept is the long-term nature of the partnership: rather than just a quick "one-off" technical assistance mission lasting a week or two, through a sister park partnership NPS and its partners can develop initiatives that deepen over many years. In a sense, the sister park concept started in 1932 with the creation of the Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park (the world's first transboundary park; Figure 1), but it has expanded considerably over the last decade or so, with more than 40 such relationships having been established. While many of these partnerships are with parks in Mexico and Canada, they also include some with areas as far away as Poland and China. Two case studies are discussed elsewhere in this issue: one of the more active partnerships links Rocky Mountain National Park with the Tatras



**Figure 1.** The superintendents of Glacier National Park (US) and Waterton Lakes National Park (Canada) shake hands across the border in this photograph from about 1960. Ed Hummel of Glacier is on the left; T.W. "Tony" Pierce of Waterton Lakes is on the right. The parks, which adjoin one another, form Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park—the world's first such designation, dating from 1932. Since 1995, the peace park is also recognized as a World Heritage site. Photo by Jack E. Boucher, courtesy of US Department of the Interior, National Park Service Historic Photograph Collection, Harpers Ferry Center.

National Park in the Carpathian mountains of northern Slovakia and southern Poland, and is described by Rocky Mountain Acting Deputy Superintendent Ben Bobowski. The part-

nership has attracted support from the US Embassy in Poland. White Sands National Monument Superintendent Kevin Schneider also summarizes the sister park relationship between White Sands and Mexico's Cuatrociénegas Reserve.

While OIA has no dedicated funding for sister parks (with some very specific exceptions), the office helps identify partners and ensures that the relationships are clearly articulated and well founded. OIA keeps track of the arrangements even when, as sometimes happens, the initial interest in the partnership wanes as a result of staff turnover. The most active and enduring sister park relationships result when enthusiastic park managers are motivated to seek the outside funding necessary to support exchanges and other activities. The best relationships are those that are broad enough to include friends' groups and representatives of local communities around the park who can ensure some level of continuity. For example, several parks in Minnesota and Wisconsin, led by St. Croix National Scenic River, have initiated a new partnership with Corcovado National Park in Costa Rica, described by Christopher E. Stein in this issue. Right from the start, the parks are looking to include other local partners in the relationship, including friends' groups, state and local governments, and others.

Among OIA's other core activities is the International Volunteers in Parks program (see <http://www.nps.gov/oia/topics/ivip/ivip.htm>) through which approximately 100 foreign volunteers annually serve in national park system units all over the country for periods ranging from a few weeks to six months or longer. OIA is authorized by the State Department to be the official sponsor of the volunteers and, when necessary, helps secure the appropriate visas. The volunteer program enriches not only the individual volunteers, who are mostly students (though they also include protected area professionals), but also helps NPS staff in critical ways. For example, volunteers from countries in Latin America participating in the Park Flight Migratory Bird program (see <http://www.nps.gov/oia/topics/flight/flight.htm>) have been able to connect with local Hispanic communities around their host parks in a way that local staff had not been able to.

The Office of International Affairs is the main point of contact for foreign delegations interested in meeting with NPS staff while in the US. Given the high profile of America's national parks around the world, the interest from overseas in how the parks are managed is very high. Some of the delegations are sponsored by the State Department, which runs an active International Visitor Leadership program. NPS is requested to make available staff with a wide variety of backgrounds and expertise to meet with foreign leaders. A recent Kenyan delegation was interested in exploring how NPS deals with research benefits-sharing, particularly in cases with potential commercial applications, such as microbial organisms found in geysers at Yellowstone National Park. In many cases, meetings take place at NPS headquarters in Washington, but also involve study tours to offices and units of the national park system. OIA worked with Yellowstone and Glacier recently to organize a study tour for a high-level South African delegation interested in commercial lodging facilities as they consider whether or not to authorize such a facility in Kruger National Park. The office hosts several hundred individuals annually for meetings of this kind.

A major responsibility of the OIA is serving as the staff office for the World Heritage program, under the direction of the assistant secretary of the interior for fish and wildlife and

parks. As documented in Peter Stott's article in this issue, the US was an early leader in the establishment of the World Heritage Convention, one of the leading global conservation instruments. Chester Brown, then chief of OIA, was one of the experts who drafted the convention in April 1972. Since that time, NPS representatives, including staff of OIA as well as senior agency officials and representatives of the assistant secretary's office, have regularly performed the role of "technical experts" who, together with their State Department colleagues, have made up the US delegations to annual sessions of the World Heritage Committee. The responsibilities of the delegation, and particularly NPS staff, have been especially demanding during periods when the US has served as one of the 21 countries on the World Heritage Committee. (The US's last term on the committee was from 2005 to 2009.) In addition to formulating US positions on various policy issues, NPS staff on the delegation review proposed nominations of new World Heritage sites as well as state-of-conservation reports on threatened sites. Even as an observer delegation, the NPS participants take an active role in working groups during the two-week-long meetings and gather information that informs our US World Heritage program.

Since 2003, when the US rejoined the United Nations Educational, Cultural, and Scientific Organization (UNESCO) after a 19-year absence, NPS's World Heritage responsibilities have expanded. (The US continued to participate in the World Heritage Convention even when it was not a member of UNESCO.) In 2004–2005, the Office of International Affairs coordinated the development of a comprehensive periodic report providing a status update on each of our US World Heritage sites, as well as a national overview of how the convention has been implemented in the US. The report was coordinated with Parks Canada and a joint North American report was included. Subsequently, OIA oversaw the development of a new US World Heritage Tentative List of potential future nominations. Though no US sites had been proposed for nomination since 1994, the Bush Administration was interested in nominating sites and believed it was time to develop an updated candidate list to replace the previous one from 1982. Revising the list was a three-year effort, based on applications reviewed by individual experts as well as a committee convened under the auspices of the State Department's US National Commission for UNESCO (NPS partnered with the George Wright Society on the project). At the end of the process in 2008, a new Tentative List with 14 properties having good potential for nomination was submitted to UNESCO. Immediately following the submission of the Tentative List, OIA was given the charge to begin nominating two sites from it. The nomination process is a multistep effort involving an interagency advisory panel, *Federal Register* notices seeking public comment, and the completion and review of nomination documents prepared by the site managers. The sites selected, Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument in Hawaii, and George Washington's Mount Vernon estate in Virginia, were nominated in early 2009. Ultimately, in August 2010, Papahānaumokuākea, proposed for both its natural and cultural values, was inscribed by the World Heritage Committee, becoming the first US addition to the World Heritage List in 15 years.

Currently, OIA is overseeing the development of two new nominations: a serial proposal for 11 Frank Lloyd Wright-designed buildings in six states from New York to California; and one for Poverty Point, a vast earthwork of concentric rings built by a hunter-gatherer cul-

ture 3,500 years ago in what is today northeastern Louisiana. While the nomination documents are being written by the respective sponsors, OIA is providing overall policy and editorial guidance to help ensure that all the World Heritage requirements will be met. OIA will also coordinate review of the nominations by a federal interagency panel before the completed documents are sent to UNESCO in late 2012 or early 2013.

There is much more to the World Heritage program than nominating sites, however. In 2009, the office was involved in responding to petitions from environmental groups to the World Heritage Committee to add Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park, a single Canadian-US transboundary World Heritage site, to the List of World Heritage in Danger. The petitioners feared that energy development in the Canadian portion of the Flathead River valley posed grave danger to the watershed, including Glacier. The committee asked the US and Canada to invite representatives of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre and IUCN to visit the site and make an independent evaluation of the situation. OIA helped negotiate the terms of the review visit with Parks Canada. The resulting mission report warned that mining and energy development would be devastating for the ecology of the World Heritage site and, as a statement by the world community on the potential threats, played an important role in the agreement reached a few months later by British Columbia and Montana authorities to withdraw the Flathead Valley from consideration for any energy development.

OIA has worked closely with Everglades National Park, recently re-listed on the World Heritage in Danger List, to develop a "Desired State of Conservation for Removal from the Danger List," which consists of benchmarks in the Everglades restoration efforts that should indicate at what point the ecosystem has improved to a level at which most would agree that the park and larger ecosystem are no longer seriously threatened.

In line with the US's view that the World Heritage community needs to place more emphasis on conservation of World Heritage sites, NPS, along with partners including the United Nations Foundation, the National Park Foundation, and the George Wright Society, has developed the US World Heritage Fellows program (see [http://www.nps.gov/oia/new/New\\_Page/WH\\_Fellowship.htm](http://www.nps.gov/oia/new/New_Page/WH_Fellowship.htm)), in which promising mid-career World Heritage site managers from the developing world receive fully funded fellowships to travel to and train in US World Heritage sites managed by NPS. (Seventeen of the 21 World Heritage sites in the US are NPS units). To date, seven individuals have participated and there are several more anticipated over the next year. OIA coordinates the program in cooperation with the host parks.

Given its small staff and budget, OIA has expanded its work with partners, including the State Department, USAID, and other federal and nongovernmental organizations. A particularly successful partnership that lasted from the 1970s to the late 1990s was between NPS and the Peace Corps. NPS helped train incoming Peace Corps volunteers and organized projects in protected areas around the world. Some observers have described this as the "single most successful international conservation program implemented by the US government." Discussions are currently underway to revive this partnership.

OIA also plays a role in coordinating, consulting about, and sometimes promoting international work that takes place in parks and programs throughout the agency. The sister parks program, discussed earlier, is but one example. The Intermountain Regional International

Conservation Office (IMRICO) funds international projects between NPS units in that region and partners in Mexico and Canada. Since 1991, NPS, through the Alaska Region, has maintained a Shared Beringian Heritage program, which provides research and community assistance grants to recognize and celebrate the natural resources and cultural heritage on both sides of the Bering Strait. As part of a major diplomatic initiative to improve relations with Russia, beginning in 2010 the State Department has provided funding to NPS to increase exchanges between the countries and explore ways of formalizing this cooperation.

Many of the requests from overseas for technical assistance or other specialized expertise comes directly to specific individuals and park units. Often these are “one-off” requests, such as to give a paper at a conference, or to advise or provide training on a specific issue or problem. Generally, when the requesting entity has funding to cover travel expenses, NPS will make its staff available to provide assistance. To ensure overall benefits to NPS, OIA reviews all requests from staff for foreign travel.

More programmatic international activities also take place throughout NPS. For example, through its Public Health program, the Park Service is participating in a new global initiative, Healthy Parks, Healthy People, focusing on the health benefits of contact with nature, and particularly on parks as a place for healthy activities. The Park Service’s executive leadership training, a two-week course held annually in conjunction with the University of California–Merced, has recruited a significant number of international participants, which the sponsors believe enriches the experience for all the participants. The NPS Climate Change Response program, which sponsors the George Melendez Wright Climate Change Fellowship, will be recruiting fellows from Canada and Mexico in its next cycle. NPS Natural Resources programs have numerous partnerships with Parks Canada, and discussions are underway to create similar cooperation on cultural resource matters.

NPS’s international activities respond to administration and departmental priorities. As mentioned above, increased cooperation with Russia in the Bering Straits region is a direct result of White House and State Department initiatives. Similarly, OIA has been working with Big Bend National Park in response to Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar’s strong interest in increasing cooperation between the park and the Mexican protected areas across the Rio Grande. The administration has announced that a limited border crossing linking the park and the Mexican village of Boquillas will be re-established after having been shut down following the events of September 11, 2001. The reopening of the border will facilitate cooperation between NPS and its Mexican counterpart and an action plan has been developed to carry that work forward. This is a very significant step in realizing the notion of an international park between the two countries, something first discussed by President Franklin Roosevelt and his counterpart more than 70 years ago. Cooperation with Mexico in the Big Bend region is discussed in Joe Sirotnik’s article in this issue.

## **Conclusion**

Over the last few years, NPS has begun to rediscover its rich legacy of international cooperation and take steps to renew and strengthen its international role. This renewal is taking place in tough budgetary times and with the full knowledge of how much more complicated the field of international conservation has become since the 1960s and 1970s. However,

there is also a keener awareness now that working across national boundaries and being an active participant in global initiatives is no longer optional, but rather essential in an increasingly interconnected world in which cultural and natural resources face threats that can only be addressed at a global scale. The Office of International Affairs is playing a key role in guiding, coordinating, and promoting the efforts of many different parts of the National Park Service to help ensure that the agency successfully responds to the mandate in its mission statement to cooperate “with partners to extend the benefits of natural and cultural resource conservation and outdoor recreation throughout this country and *the world*.”

**Stephen Morris**, National Park Service Office of International Affairs, 1201 I Street NW, Washington, D.C. 20005; [stephen\\_morris@nps.gov](mailto:stephen_morris@nps.gov)

**Jonathan Putnam**, National Park Service Office of International Affairs, 1201 I Street NW, Washington, D.C. 20005; [jonathan\\_putnam@nps.gov](mailto:jonathan_putnam@nps.gov)