

International Experience: A Gateway to Professional Development

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MY INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES IN THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE began in October of 2001 with a scoping trip to the national parks of Argentina and Venezuela. Members of the team I was to have been a part of opted out due to the events of September 11. My sense was that it would be a very safe time to fly and I proceeded with the scheduled trip. As I look back upon that international experience and others throughout the past decade, I realize that they have evolved and been directly linked to the progression of my professional responsibilities within the agency, beginning with the technical assistance to South American parks, going to relationships with global island parks in the Asia-Pacific region, and currently evolving to the role of participant in the broader international community of World Heritage protected areas, resulting in the establishment of sister volcanic parks from around the world. With each very different assignment I grew professionally in ways I could not have foreseen. I've developed relationships that have continually been strengthened and which will last a lifetime, while gleaned ways in which we could share best practices in park management, integrating them into our respective global situations.

Most recently I am immersed in international biosphere reserve and World Heritage programs at the local, state, and international level. In spite of the fact that the US national park system has been a model in the world for so long, our own country's response to World Heritage and biosphere reserve designations seems less passionate. Perhaps this is because 17 of the 21 US World Heritage sites are units of the national park system and thus already protected with that designation, and of the 47 biosphere reserves in the US, 31 contain national parks. Yet as an ambassador for the national park system and Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park, I recognize that our international responsibilities are often as great as our domestic roles under the Organic Act, and that as a park manager I must accept the global responsibility that is inherent in the World Heritage and international biosphere reserve designations of Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park.

Our participation in the international arena of protected areas benefits us both at home and abroad. We share a park system that is many things. It is a center of excellence in man-

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agement and function, and a benchmark for environmental change. It is a champion of a broader landscape-level approach to ecosystem protection, and an environmental leader promoting economic development and tourism in a sustainable way. It uses interpretation and education to achieve success in preservation and restoration efforts. Our long historical traditions have evolved from unique host cultures of the land that we steward. As major international destinations, the US national parks share in the common challenges of preserving biodiversity and maintaining ecosystems while, in many places, also preserving sacred, cultural landscapes. Information we impart to international visitors about these special places is useless without a strong link to people's experiences.

Sharing best practices is also important to do locally. At Hawai'i Volcanoes, we highlight World Heritage and the obligation we have—in our local community, on our island, and in the state—to protect the outstanding universal values that come with the inscription. Sister park relationships have brought us together in unique ways that benefit us all economically, socially, and politically, and this is of particular importance to islands in the Asia-Pacific region. The characteristics that make our places unique as a place to live also make them unique as places to visit.

We were a host park to one of the first USNPS World Heritage Fellows, and we will soon welcome an intern from Gaolugongshan National Park in China as part of her formal leadership training. The on-the-ground experiences are invaluable for both countries. Sometimes it is the simple things that mean the most. Perhaps the description shared by a colleague best sums it up:

The trip to US 2008 would be my fondest memory for my whole life. For me, it was not only a eyes open experience but also a inspiring journey. It yields outcomes: not only from surface. We now have our own logos and uniforms, but also the underneath. It influences my leadership in my organization. Now, we create a vision and mission statement for the park that would be among the first through China's nature reserve.

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