Engaging New and Diverse Audiences in the National Parks: An Exploratory Study of Current Knowledge and Learning Needs

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Introduction

IN RECENT YEARS, THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE (NPS) HAS INITIATED PROGRAMS to more effectively engage diverse communities across the national park system. To better understand what constitutes good practice, the Conservation Study Institute conducted a multiphase research and evaluation project in partnership with the University of Vermont, the NPS Northeast Region Office of Interpretation and Education, and Boston Harbor Islands and Santa Monica Mountains national recreation areas.[1] This paper reports on research that examined the current state of knowledge and learning needs of the agency with respect to relevancy issues among new and diverse audiences.

Theoretical context

Under-representation of diverse racial and ethnic groups in national parks has been an issue for many years. Research has found consistent and substantial evidence of the under-representation of racial and ethnic minorities in outdoor recreation, particularly in national parks, and has also examined potential reasons for this under-representation and barriers to participation (Floyd 1999; Gobster 2002; Solop, Hagen, and Ostergren 2003; Shinew and Floyd 2005). If communities of color continue to be under-represented in the national parks, it will diminish the ability of national parks and NPS to maintain their relevancy in an increasingly diverse American society.

The NPS Northeast Region convened a conference in 2005 and published an associated report, titled *Keeping Parks Relevant in the 21st Century*, which developed a framework and identified key themes for addressing issues of diversity (Mitchell et al. 2006). More recently, relevancy, including issues of diversity and inclusion, has been highlighted as a top priority for NPS by Director Jon Jarvis.

Research has shown that there are substantial differences in national park visitation based on race and ethnicity. A nationwide survey conducted in 2000 found that 13% of blacks and 27% of Hispanics reported visiting a national park in the last two years, compared with 36% of whites (Solop, Hagen, and Ostergren 2003). A review of surveys conducted at national parks during the summer of 2010 showed that an overwhelming majority of visitors, often as high as 90% or more, are white (University of Idaho Parks Studies Unit 2010). Moreover, the workforce of NPS is approximately 80% white (Partnership for Public Service 2007).

Research has begun to explore potential reasons for under-representation of racial/ethnic minorities in national parks and outdoor recreation, identify barriers to visitation among racial/ethnic minorities, and understand differences in recreation choices and preferences between people of color and whites (Manning 2011).[2] Research has focused on socioeconomic differences between communities of color and whites (Johnson and Floyd 2006), differing cultural norms and socialization practices among communities of color (Ho et al. 2005), and contemporary forms of discrimination impacting communities of color (Philipp 1999; 2000) as potential reasons for under-representation of communities of color in national parks (Floyd 1999). Barriers to visitation by people of color can include transportation, knowledge, expense (both internal to parks and external), and the interpretative themes of parks (Payne et al. 2002; Tinsley et al. 2002).

Study methods

This study used qualitative, semi-structured interviews with NPS staff and select individuals from other organizations. The focus of these interviews, and foundation of the semi-structured questions, was to identify or determine (1) past and present programs designed to enhance cultural diversity in national parks, (2) the success or failure of those programs, (3) reasons for success or failure, (4) NPS goals and objectives regarding relevancy in the 21st century, and (5) reasons for under-representation of communities of color in national parks.

A total of 25 qualitative interviews were conducted for this project. Study participants were purposely selected because of their knowledge and experience regarding diversity issues in national parks (Maxwell 2002; Patton 2002; Berg 2007). Interviews were recorded and transcribed to allow for open-coding, a method of analysis in which qualitative data are broken into thematic categories (Miles and Huberman 1994; Coffey and Atkinson 1996). Of the participants, 16 were from NPS and 9 worked for other organizations. Study participants included superintendents, chiefs of interpretation and education, Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit (CESU) coordinators, park rangers, youth program coordinators, former NPS personnel, presidents of partner organizations, presidents of consulting groups, and academics. Study participants were geographically as well as racially/ethnically diverse.

Results

The findings from these interviews identified six themes key to the success of NPS diversity initiatives: (1) program sustainability, (2) inclusive interpretation and histories, (3) media and communication, (4) supportive NPS climate, (5) workforce diversity, and (6) community involvement. Subthemes that describe different aspects of the six themes were also devel-

oped from study data. The conceptual model shown in Figure 1 represents how these themes are generally connected. It is important to note that the model and associated themes are not one-dimensional. There is no identified entry point to the model because the data suggest a more comprehensive approach to addressing diversity is needed. The relationships among the themes in the model flow in both directions and all of the themes are connected through multidirectional relationships. Due to the need to comprehensively address diversity, the model is a simplified depiction of themes important not just to a single program in a park unit but to its overall management.

Theme 1: Program sustainability

> So the program died for these two reasons … because there was no sense of connection among the students and … because it was so [hinged] on one individual that when he left, there was no way to keep the program up.
>
> — ID#016

The notion of *program sustainability* emerged as an important part of program success for several reasons. For example, study data indicated that programs that go beyond "one-touch" (single-event) experiences appear to build more lasting relationships with community partners. One-time special-event programs may provide an entry point to new audiences, but study participants felt strongly that programs that take place over a few weeks or even months form deeper relationships. Study participants also described the ways in which program sustainability is linked with the ability to overcome budgetary and leadership changes, as well as with the development of strong partnerships. The above quote illustrates the importance of consistent leadership for programs to be successful. The three subthemes associated with program sustainability are (1) consistency in message, (2) people involved in the program, and (3) relationship-building.

Consistency of message means that everything an NPS unit does (e.g., interpretation, public information-sharing, workforce decisions) should reflect a commitment to diversity. Diversity-focused programs are one way to show a commitment to diversity, but many aspects of the park, even those seemingly not directly diversity-related, should reflect a strong commitment to this issue. According to study participants, this consistency communicates a commitment to addressing under-representation as well as efforts to be a welcoming place for people of color. For example, an NPS unit that has translated interpretive material into Spanish but has not provided facilities for extended family gatherings may not be sending a consistent message to the community because studies have shown that recreational styles between whites and people of color differ, and that facilities and sites need to be more universally designed to accommodate different styles of recreation (Chavez 2000).

People involved in the program refers to those individuals involved in the program as well as their degree of involvement. Study data strongly linked the notion of program sustainability to leadership and the individuals involved in the program. For example, numerous stories emerged from the data highlighting programs that deteriorated after a key individual left. The *people involved in the program* subtheme also refers to community members who are or could be involved in the program. Multiple members of a community can be involved to
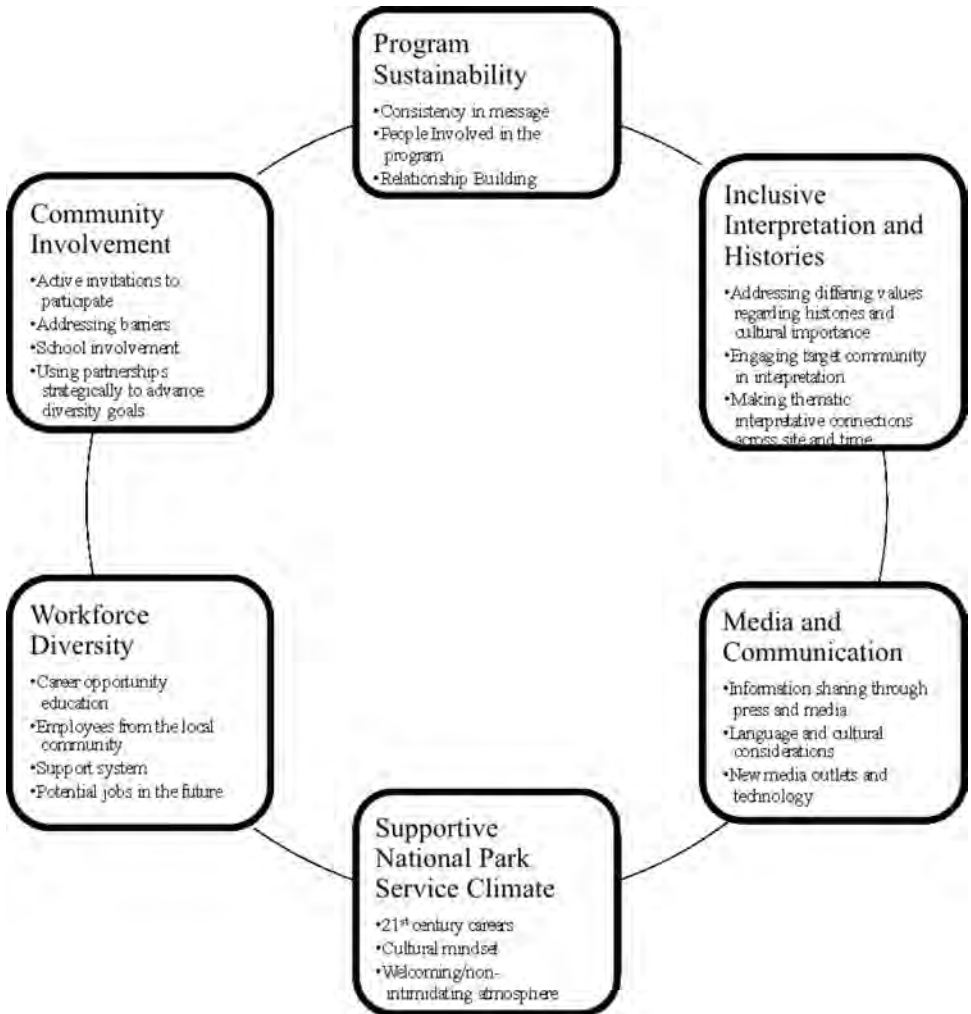
Figure 1. Relevancy model.

ensure program success and sustainability. Just like in park management, community leadership can change and impact vital programmatic connections.

Building meaningful, intentional relationships is a crucial part of program success and sustainability. While linked closely with the previous subtheme, this subtheme goes beyond individuals and refers to a more systematic approach to relationship-building. This subtheme also emphasizes the importance of long-term efforts: relationship-building takes time and parks must be committed to working and talking with community groups to build and maintain meaningful relationships. As described above, maintaining leadership and commitment is also key in developing lasting relationships with the community and other organizations.

Theme 2: Inclusive interpretation and histories

> Historical significance … has usually been determined around criteria of architectural significance as opposed to social or historical significance…. Very often the diverse communities have not been at the table when the importance of things or places is determined. So criteria used for the primarily European American community may or may not be applicable to why a place or a building is of importance to my community.
>
> — *ID#004*

The second theme represented in the model, *inclusive interpretation and histories*, looks at the stories interpreted at NPS units. The above quote describes one study participant's perspective on reasons why interpretive themes have not always been meaningful to traditionally under-represented audiences. Ensuring that interpretive programs encompass the experiences of diverse people associated with a particular story is crucial for increasing visitation and relationships with traditionally under-represented communities. This theme looks at not only what stories are told, but how and by whom they are told. The three subthemes associated with *inclusive interpretation and histories* are (1) addressing different values regarding historical and cultural importance, (2) engaging the target community in interpretation, and (3) making thematic interpretative connections across sites and time.

Addressing different values regarding historical and cultural importance focuses on ensuring that diverse groups are part of the decision-making process when defining what resources are considered "important" enough to interpret or protect. As the above quote illustrates, typical approaches to historic preservation may have excluded some segments of society. Study participants noted that many structures or places that are of historical significance to minority cultural groups may be located in buildings of little architectural significance. Consequently, the stories associated with these places may not be well-documented or -interpreted. Ultimately, study participants felt that in order for park managers to know what resources to interpret and protect, they need to continue to work with community partners to better understand the values, perspectives, and experiences of different cultural groups in a particular context.

Engaging target communities in interpretation refers to the inclusion of the specific community whose story is being interpreted. Study participants felt strongly that in order to tell inclusive histories and to present stories from various cultures, members of those cultures need to be part of the process, and when possible, participate directly in the interpretation of those stories. For example, the Underground Railroad is a significant story that transcends NPS units and boundaries. As an interpretive theme, it lends itself to interpretation by a broad base of individuals, not just NPS employees. Engaging target communities in interpretation may occur through increasing workforce diversity, partnering with local historical societies, and using volunteers from the target community.

Making thematic interpretative connections across sites and time refers to the ways in which interpretation at any specific site might connect to broader stories and themes across the National Park System. For example, study participants noted that there may be opportunities to thematically link Civil War sites and themes with civil rights sites and themes. This, in turn, may create the context for interpreting the stories of not only important historical fig-

ures and events, but how they were shaped and influenced by other events and people in the nation's history. While not every site in the national park system will relate to every racial and ethnic group, connecting interpretive themes in meaningful ways across time and space may help broaden the context and relevance of specific NPS units to include constituencies that have yet to be engaged.

Theme 3: Media and communications

> If we're thinking that the program alone is going to do it and we're relying on our normal pro-motional materials for the general public, it's a lot more hit or miss than when we're really also including active promotion through outlets that people will connect with.
>
> — *ID#005*

The *media and communications* theme refers to the use of nontraditional media outlets and technology to help ensure program success. Along with the use of new and different forms of communication, study participants felt that the type of information communicated is important for welcoming and engaging diverse audiences. Providing information that is spe-cific to target communities and fills knowledge gaps about NPS is important to engaging diverse audiences. As the above quote suggests, media and communications can not only encourage visitation to national parks but may also provide an opportunity for NPS to con-nect to a more technology-savvy generation. The three subthemes associated with *media and communications* are (1) information-sharing through press and media, (2) language and cul-tural considerations, and (3) new media outlets and technology.

Information-sharing through press and media refers to using the press and media to pro-vide communities with information about national parks and the range of programming they offer. This information-sharing can focus on numerous aspects of the national park experi-ence, including activities people can participate in at the park, special services a park might offer, and new exhibits and interpretive material. Study participants agreed that educating communities about NPS could be done successfully through effective and appropriate press and media. This approach would allow NPS to take advantage of information dissemination as a way to educate communities about opportunities and activities available in national park units.

Addressing cultural and language considerations is crucial when developing a media or communications plan. According to one study participant, learning about language and cul-tural differences and then adapting media and communications strategies appropriately will likely enable messages to reach broader communities. Several study participants noted that cultural barriers often go beyond language differences and it is important to understand ways in which different cultures access information. Traditional forms of public notices may not reach certain cultures; for example, radio spots may have more impact on one culture than another. Learning about and understanding these differences are crucial for a successful pro-gram.

Many study participants emphasized the importance of using *new media outlets and technology* for engaging youth. Study participants noted that when possible, NPS might think about incorporating newer technologies like MP3 players, Facebook, and Twitter. In

the minds of most study participants, exploring ways that technology can enhance a national park experience while bridging gaps between nature, culture, history, and technology will be increasingly important for engaging and making national parks relevant to youth, not just youth of color.

Theme 4: Supportive NPS climate

> [Relevancy] is not a 'nice-to-do,' but a 'must-do.' But that needs to be followed by a willingness to fund, a willingness to experiment.... We have very traditional ways of doing things in national parks and that can create cultural barriers. We need to do programs differently, offer services differently … based on what audiences might need.
>
> — *ID#005*

The *supportive NPS climate* theme refers to what under-represented park constituencies perceive as the agency's "attitude" or "orientation" towards diversity issues in a general sense. As the above quote illustrates, the vast majority of study participants felt strongly that successfully addressing 21st-century relevancy goals requires an NPS climate or organizational culture characterized by a willingness to experiment with new ideas as well as the commitment to fund initiatives. The four subthemes associated with a *supportive NPS Climate* are (1) 21st-century careers, (2) cultural mindset, (3) supportive authorizing environment, and (4) welcoming, non-intimidating atmosphere.

Twenty-first-century careers addresses NPS's ability to be competitive in the contemporary job market. Study participants commented on changes in society and the potential inability of NPS to remain current in the context of these changes. One study participant described it like this: "Now the estimate is that a youngster coming into the workforce may change jobs 15 to 20 times. And I don't know that the agency is prepared for that kind of turnover." Participants also brought up issues such as competitive salaries and desirable work locations as possible barriers to viable career opportunities.

The notion of a *cultural mindset* emerged from the data as an important aspect of a *supportive NPS Climate*. Study participants described this in different ways. For example, one agency employee stressed the need for NPS to continue to work toward broadening the perceptions that different cultural groups may have about the role of national parks as well as the mission of NPS. Another study participant described it this way: "I mean everybody's not going to stand in front of the scenery and get the same kind of impact. And I think that's hard for people to understand. So I don't think you can assume that just because you provide them with transportation that there's a foregone conclusion that they're going to first want to come, and to have an impactful kind of experience."

Supportive authorizing environment highlights the importance of strong and consistent support from all levels of NPS management, but particularly from the regional and national leadership environments. Study participants felt strongly that NPS personnel need to understand the importance of diversity and need to be advocates for including 21st-century relevancy and related diversity objectives and that various authorizing environments encourage, promote, and mandate diversity programs and initiatives.

Welcoming, non-intimidating atmosphere is closely linked to the *supportive authorizing environment* subtheme, but refers more broadly to the environment created by NPS employees, policies, and tradition. Creating a welcoming, non-intimidating atmosphere refers to both visitor and employee experiences. Several study participants reflected on the strong tradition and culture of NPS and the ways in which this can be intimidating, while making the work environment hard to navigate for some people of color. This notion extends to challenges that new hires, particularly personnel from minority groups, may have in navigating the agency's culture. For example, one study participant noted the struggle that people of color can sometimes have in remote locations where they are the only person of color on staff and in the community. Study participants widely agreed that support networks should be set up for new hires because creating a welcoming, non-intimidating atmosphere for park visitors also relies on supportive staff. One study participant noted all staff members need to be culturally competent because visitors can pick up on subtle, sometimes unintended signals that make them uncomfortable.

Theme 5: Workforce diversity

> If you have a cross-cultural workforce, then you have a cross-cultural connection to communities and that is extremely advantageous.
>
> — *ID#002*

Workforce diversity emerged from the interview data as an important theme in the overall context of NPS 21st-century relevancy and related diversity initiatives. According to many study participants, a diverse workforce demonstrates a commitment to diversity and creates a more welcoming environment for underrepresented visitor groups. Study participants felt strongly that, ultimately, the NPS workforce must reflect the ethnic and cultural diversity of the US population in order to achieve 21st-century relevancy and other related diversity goals. As the above quote suggests, a diverse workforce provides a broader range of interpretive voices and may create new avenues for connecting diverse communities with national parks. The four subthemes associated with *workforce diversity* are (1) career opportunity education, (2) employees from the local community, (3) support system, and (4) potential jobs in the future.

Career opportunity education refers to educating youth and other potential employees of NPS about the range of career opportunities available within the agency. Study participants noted that potential applicants from diverse communities may perceive NPS as only offering "ranger-type" careers. Several study participants felt that materials and/or outreach efforts that explain the possible avenues of employment in the agency may help ensure that individuals are aware of jobs and career opportunities beyond the traditional park ranger. Other study participants suggested using career fairs, developing relationships with high schools and universities, and using new media and technology to communicate with diverse audiences about the wide array of career opportunities in NPS.

Employees from the local community refers to the importance of hiring from the local community. According to many study participants, parks that are located in diverse commu-

nities have opportunities to attract local applicants. Hiring from the local community not only increases the diversity of the workforce but also strengthens bonds and relationships with key local partners. This relates to the community involvement theme discussed later in this paper. Hiring people of color from local communities can create a relationship between the park and that employee's social network, thus providing an entry point for other individuals to visit the park. Having a diverse workforce also provided opportunities for interpretation of histories and stories by group members and people closely associated or related to a story (as discussed in Theme 3).

The *support systems* subtheme focuses on the need that many new hires and interns have for some type of support system to ensure their successful transition into NPS. Study participants suggested the use of team-hiring practices as well as team-building retreats before employees report to their duty stations. Several study participants pointed out that bonds with other employees may be especially important for new hires of color assigned to units or offices that have little or no staff diversity. In some situations, these employees may also be the only person of color in the surrounding community, underscoring the importance of connecting these employees with people who understand this situation. Providing a mentoring network was also mentioned as an important part of increasing workforce diversity because it creates a support network for new employees, helping to ensure their success in the agency.

Potential jobs in the future surfaced as a very important element for ensuring creation of a diverse workforce. Numerous study participants mentioned that interns are highly qualified and trained by the time of they complete their internship but, in many instances, there is no position or opportunity to hire them. Study participants repeatedly suggested a "pipeline" approach, whereby NPS would create direct opportunities for interns to enter the agency upon conclusion of the internship.

Theme 6: Community involvement

> … I'm a proponent of going into the community and taking the park to the people. [Often] people are uncomfortable going into a new environment, and if they don't see people of their own … culture group, it's harder for them to feel comfortable.
>
> — *ID#022*

Community involvement emerged as an important theme associated with the ways in which national parks can effectively engage diverse communities. As the above quote illustrates, many study participants felt that community involvement can provide opportunities for diverse audiences to get to know their NPS unit and personnel. Many study participants emphasized the importance of community involvement both inside and outside park boundaries. This refers to interacting with the community within the park (e.g., special events and interpretative exhibits) and at locations and events within the community (e.g., churches and festivals). Study data associated with this theme also suggest that there may be substantial value in partnering with nontraditional groups already working to address issues of diversity. Developing partnerships with museums addressing diversity, local government agencies (e.g., housing authorities), and community groups working with communities of color (e.g., grassroots organizations, nonprofit groups). The four subthemes associated with *communi-

ty involvement are (1) active invitations to participate, (2) addressing barriers, (3) school involvement, and (4) using partnerships strategically to advance diversity goals.

Active invitations to participate requires more than just being open to visitors, but actively going into the community and reaching out to underserved audiences. A majority of study participants felt that providing communities with the opportunity to get to know the park, its mission, and personnel in a comfortable, familiar setting (e.g., local schools, recreation centers, churches) can help build a meaningful relationship between communities and national park units as a whole.

Addressing barriers to park visitation emerged as an important subtheme. Study participants felt strongly that park managers need to understand and respond to the challenges that some groups face in terms of visitation. For example, several study participants identified the lack of transportation as a potential barrier in some instances. This involves getting to know the specific needs of the community and crafting programs that respond to them.

School involvement also emerged as an important subtheme. Many of the programs that study participants felt had been successful involved schools, particularly those that brought park personnel into the school and used this opportunity to encourage full family visitation. Study data underscored the importance of engaging children to get whole families involved in park activities.

Using partnerships strategically to advance diversity goals emerged in many of the themes but primarily when study participants described initiatives that were designed to involve and engage communities. Study participants felt that NPS could reach beyond traditional partner groups and work with community organizations, such as churches and community recreation centers, to reach diverse audiences. NPS might also consider partnerships with organizations already addressing under-representation of people of color in other areas. Museums and zoos, for example, are developing programs and initiatives to increase minority visitation.

Conclusion

Previous research on the under-representation of people of color in national parks has focused mostly on visitation. Results from this study show that visitation is only one aspect of under-representation. Study participants spoke to the importance of addressing not only the lack of visitation by people of color but also workforce diversity and the role of national parks in the social fabric of local communities. To engage people of color in national parks, NPS staff will need to create welcoming environments that are inclusive and reflective of local and/or target communities. Moreover, for parks to accomplish those goals, they must develop long-term and dynamic relationships with local communities. Creating these kinds of welcoming environments, and, even more importantly, sustaining deep and meaningful relationships with communities of color, will require a highly culturally competent NPS workforce. Studies like this one—especially in the context of the Second Century Commission report and the director's associated "Call to Action"—can be used to advance NPS cultural competency in very specific ways.

Findings from this study, for example, reframe the issue of under-representation as not just about visitation but also about the role of national parks in communities and society at

large. The Conservation Study Institute is using these study findings, along with related efforts, to initiate a "community of practice" focused on the successful engagement of diverse communities.[3] Communities of practice are "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting" (Wenger et al. 2002). Institute projects assisting in the developmental evaluation of youth programming across NPS (including many of the Massachusetts-area national park units and Grand Teton National Park) are bringing together youth program practitioners to facilitate sharing of innovations, lessons learned, and promising practices. By sharing the experiences and findings from evaluation efforts, youth program practitioners are able to design and implement programming utilizing the best resources available and building on the experience of other practitioners.

Study findings can also be understood as intended long-term outcomes that result from engagement programs. The study data also emphasized the importance of addressing the issue of diversity and under-representation in a more comprehensive and systematic manner. The six themes identified in the paper should be addressed concurrently and with an integrated approach, when possible. Focusing on just one theme will likely not lead parks to effectively address broader issues of diversity and relevancy in NPS. All of the themes and subthemes identified in this study (as presented in Figure 1) interact, and therefore NPS engagement and diversity efforts will need to be cross-cutting to ultimately be effective.

Endnotes

1. See Rebecca Stanfield McCown, "Evaluation of National Park Service 21st Century relevancy initiatives: Case studies addressing racial and ethnic diversity in the National Park Service," PhD dissertation, University of Vermont, 2011.
2. Please see chapter 2 of Manning 2011 for a review of the literature.
3. Contact the Conservation Study Institute for more information about current projects: stewardship@nps.gov or visit www.nps.gov/csi/.

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