

Park Break: Engaging Students in Social Science to Inform Decision-making in Parks

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Introduction

THE GEORGE WRIGHT SOCIETY (GWS) is primarily concerned with bringing scholars and practitioners together to share their expertise about protected area stewardship. Although not explicitly included in its mission statement, GWS has grown to include future practitioners, and future scholars. Engaging the next generation of park managers and scholars is essential to the long-term viability of parks and protected areas, not just in America, but worldwide. Additionally, there is a need to include the voices of youth and diverse populations in protected area management. In 2007, the board of directors of GWS was keenly aware of these issues, and came together (primarily behind the leadership of board member Gillian Bowser) to create a program to help overcome some of these obstacles. Through the leadership of GWS and various other entities (e.g., US Geological Survey, Student Conservation Association, National Park Service), Park Break was born.

Simply stated, Park Break (PB) is a weeklong experience in a protected area (typically a national park) for graduate students to (1) learn about the complexity of park management, and (2) engage students in addressing a specific issue or problem facing the host park (for more information, see <https://www.georgewright society.org/students>). Students who have an interest in protected area management are recruited from universities around the United States. The only prerequisite is that the students be currently enrolled in an MS or PhD program at an accredited university, which provides a tremendous amount of flexibility for finding the best students that fit the particular needs of the host park. Furthermore, PB has targeted populations that have been traditionally underserved in the parks and protected area realm. This level of cultural and disciplinary diversity is a core strength of the program, and is often responsible for the new, fresh ideas that come out of the week-long sessions. This fact,

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along with the ability to bring students in contact with the resource (i.e., a park), community members (i.e., stakeholders), and relevant scientists (e.g., biologists, social scientists), enriches their understanding (and the park's) of the complexity of protected area management. In this paper, we discuss the value of PB for students and the host parks, as well as the evolution of the program. We also highlight the student experience by focusing on the most recent outcomes, future possibilities, and lessons learned.

Since the first session in the spring of 2008, a variety of issues have been tackled, which is a strength of the PB model. The framework of PB is simple: bring bright, motivated students with fresh ideas to a park for a week to examine issues from a different perspective. The topic of each PB is extremely flexible and dependent on the host park's needs. One of the first PBs, in Acadia National Park, brought together students from universities across the country to discuss how civic engagement is a critical component of park management. Issues ranging from conservation policy (Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area), to global climate change (Gateway National Recreation Area), to the wildland-urban interface (Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore) have been topics of discourse. These early PBs were mainly focused on student engagement and providing an experience that could facilitate their future involvement in protected area management, either through academic or practitioner endeavors.

Although there were tangible outcomes in the early PBs, they mainly focused on student reflection and efforts to publish their work (George Wright Society 2017). As PB has continued to progress, the focus has shifted to providing the host park with a usable product as a result of the work the students have been involved with while on-site. This product is based on the needs of the park, but has recently manifested itself as technical reports for the host park (Burroughs et al. 2016). As the PB idea continues to evolve, the value for park managers and students may also continue to evolve.

The value of Park Break for students and host parks

The PB program has proven to be valuable for the student participants. Many have gone on to careers in protected area management, and they attribute much of their current path to PB. Additionally, PB has acted as a meeting place to bring together like-minded, yet diverse, individuals. In fact, one student summed up the experience by stating, "Park Break is not just about a week in a park, it is intended to create an ongoing community of motivated young professionals" (Vezeau, Lindsey, and Mora-Trejos 2012: 376). Even though the program has tackled a variety of subject areas, PBs have been rated as successful by the participants. Mora-Trejos et al. (2011) compiled an early evaluation of the program. They found that 95% of the students they spoke with were happy with the overall experience. Students said they learned skills and ideas that would carry over into their future careers, that the experience provided a grounded perspective on conservation, and that they made lifelong connections with other professionals in the field. The on-site and immersive nature of the experience also yielded several dividends (discussed in the next section).

Students spend most of their time at PB gaining a thorough understanding of how a park "works" and the complexity of daily operations. This is a unique component of the PB program. Students often stay in park housing, eat meals on-site, and spend 8–10 hours a day with park managers discussing various issues related to the overall theme of the specific PB. Many

other programs do not offer this level of access to park managers to truly understand the parameters under which they work. Additionally, students have the extraordinary opportunity to interact and learn from a variety of protected area professionals, including wilderness rangers, park biologists, natural resource specialists, park planners, chiefs of resources and interpretation, cultural resource specialists, and park superintendents, to name a few. This is a rare and unique experience that, for most students, is the first time they have had this level of engagement with such a diversity of protected area managers. The reverse is often true as well: many managers and specialists have not had the opportunity to engage with students on this level.

The PB program is offered to graduate students working on research related to protected areas in some way, and students are selected based on their level of knowledge for the topic being explored by the host park. Often, students work on their research in isolation, disconnected from their peers and the ways their work may have real-world applications. The PB program provides students an opportunity to see the connection between research (i.e., academia) and application in a dynamic protected area management setting. This setting also fosters the relationship between researcher (i.e., student) and their research subject (e.g., park management). Students gain a deeper understanding of what questions to ask, how to ask them, and how to frame their questions to help park managers answer difficult, often complex problems. The success of the PB program in delivering high-quality experiences for students is clear, but just as clear are the host park's positive experiences.

The hosts for PB have stated that the experience provided them with new insights into existing issues. They've indicated that the students provided them with different ways to think about common problems, and that their efforts will help them with future planning processes. A host park manager who worked with students on understanding hydrological cycles in a park stated:

I can't even begin to tell you how much the park learned and the benefits we gained from this project—the students' work really helped us break new ground. We were able to accomplish things that would have taken us years to accomplish through another path. Having all that energy and knowledge in the room and in the field made for a great synthesis of ideas.

Another park manager, who has hosted multiple PBs (most recently related to social science), went so far as to say:

It was a very exciting and stimulating week here at the park that challenged my staff and myself with meaningful discussions about the major issues that not only faced the park, [but] the area, the park service and the environment in general. We did not have all the answers, and through these discussions it caused us as managers to reflect and re-evaluate our current management practices. I was very impressed with the caliber of students, and I know in the years since 2009, the students have gone on to accomplish many great things, including pika research, sustainability, planning, and some are in NPS careers themselves. I just hope that the students learned as much as I did as their host.

This last quote is of particular interest for this analysis, as it highlights the utility of a specific focus for a PB experience: social science.

The value of Park Break to social science research and protected area planning

To this point, PB has been discussed in terms of general organization, and general success of the program. However, as was discovered during the first social science-focused PB, this program has tremendous potential to provide protected area managers with tangible, immediately useful information to help with current and future planning efforts. Additionally, social science-focused PBs can deepen students' understanding of the applicability of this method of research, which can help them with their current studies and help inform future career decisions. The following case study at Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve (GRSA) in Colorado highlights the value of a social science-focused PB, and how the program can pay dividends to the host park or protected area.

Case study: Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve

Managers at GRSA have a long history of support for student involvement, and specifically the PB program. The park hosted a PB in 2009 focused on climate change that provided a functional foundation for the social science-based PB in the fall of 2015. As is the case with many of the successful PB programs for the past ten years, the staff at GRSA identified some potential avenues for student engagement. One of these related to the development of a backcountry and wilderness management plan. Park managers anticipated a future planning process that would rely heavily on the incorporation of social science in the decision-making process. It was at this time that staff at GWS and GRSA (along with financial and logistical support from the National Park Service Social Science Branch) came to the conclusion that a social science-based PB could be of real value to a future planning process. Students would be selected for the program based on their knowledge of parks, protected areas, park planning, and social science-related research to inform a social science needs assessment for GRSA. This project would yield a document that would provide the park with a roadmap of what social science information was needed to make informed decisions related to their backcountry and wilderness management plan.

The social science PB brought eight exceptional graduate students from universities across the country (e.g., North Carolina State University, University of Utah, Colorado State University, Clemson University) to GRSA for a one-week experience at the park. Additionally, staff members from the Social Science Branch of the National Park Service and faculty members from Clemson University and Kansas State University helped facilitate the experience. Throughout the week, the students met with park managers, local community members, and stakeholders (Figure 1), and visited key sites in and around the park, all the while contemplating the direction of the needs assessment. Through an intense effort over the final one and a half days of the PB session, the students as a group developed a Social Science Needs Assessment as the final product (Burroughs et al. 2016).

The Social Science Needs Assessment identified three research themes and associated key research topics: park visitors and experiences; relevancy, diversity, and inclusion (RDI); and natural resources in the park and preserve (Burroughs et al. 2016). Each research theme



Figure 1. Students at a Park Break hosted by Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve hear from a local rancher (and park stakeholder) about sustainable agriculture. Photo courtesy of Fred Bunch.

included key topics that would further the park's ability to make informed management decisions. The key research topics identified informational gaps for which social science research could be used to understand, and thus aid, manager decision-making in a complex environment. Following the publication of the Social Science Needs Assessment, many of the students from the PB hosted a panel discussion at the 2017 George Wright Society Conference that focused on advancing thoughts and practices of topics such as place-based conservation. The discussion with the audience following the panel session prompted an idea for a regionally focused visitor use monitoring protocol that would be coordinated between multiple park units during spring 2018. This advances the inaugural social science PB needs assessment from providing information to park managers to also providing mechanisms to monitor important park resources and understand visitor impacts at a regional scale.

Long-term benefits of social science-based Park Breaks

PB offers a range of benefits to all who participate, including park staff, faculty, and students. Park staff are able to connect directly with students and faculty to build connections and provide applied context for students' theory-based graduate research. The PB program also

provides managers an opportunity to inform students of the complexity of protected area management and how this knowledge can inform their careers as researchers or practitioners. Faculty benefit by mentoring students during the experience and acting as a bridge between research and practice. Additionally, faculty gain a more grounded understanding of park-based social science needs and what research can be done to address these needs. Students are able to see first-hand the daily operations of a park as they shadow and interview interdisciplinary specialists. This immersive experience provides opportunities for students to interact with a variety of park staff (Figure 2) and explore professional paths that could lead to a career in civil service. PB also contributes to career development through networking, developing a useful product for parks to use, and building communities of practice with other graduate students doing similar work. Finally, all who participate in PB benefit from the opportunity to understand place-based visitor use management issues; have engaging dialogue with stakeholders, park staff, and academics; and work together to identify real-world solutions that the park can implement.

While the research themes developed during this PB were specifically for GRSA, the outcomes of the social science-based needs assessment might be applied in a variety of other park settings. The following types of information, identified as a result of a research theme, could be considered in future decision-making in multiple settings. An accurate understanding of visitors through social science helps facilitate positive visitor experiences, as well as fostering resilient communities and increasing stakeholder involvement. The use of social

Figure 2. A ranger at Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve explains the role of water in shaping the dunes to Park Break students. Photos courtesy of Ryan L. Sharp.



science to maintain relevancy and increase diversity and inclusion could help parks meet agency directives; coordinate national, regional, and local RDI initiatives; reduce conflict between user groups; and inform management of existing barriers and constraints that prevent diverse user groups from visiting. The impacts of visitor use on natural resources gathered through social science data collection might inform future planning efforts and bring multiple agency partners together to develop comprehensive monitoring and planning initiatives. This could contribute to the socio-economic monitoring effort currently being developed by NPS (see Pettebone and Meldrum, this volume). The research themes generated during the GRSA PB are products of one PB experience, but in general, social science can be used to inform decision-making for natural and cultural resources, as well as visitor experience, across diverse settings and for many different resource management agencies.

Several lessons were learned from the inaugural social science-based PB. Having a clear goal in mind before the on-site portion of the program is essential. All members of the PB planning team met several times to clearly articulate that the primary outcome of the week-long experience would be a social science needs assessment to inform an upcoming Backcountry and Wilderness Management Plan at GRSA. Although this outcome may seem simple and practical, specifying it was essential for the success of the PB. The students were assigned reading to inform them of what the plan would look like and why it was being written. Without this clearly stated goal, and some upfront work done by the students, it would have been extremely difficult to complete such a complex task in a week's time. Due to the compressed nature of PB, intense planning for the management team is also required. A detailed itinerary for the week is essential; however, this suggestion comes with a cautionary tale. All PB programs, and especially the one highlighted in this paper, are intense and demanding experiences for all involved, often requiring students and organizers to be engaged for 12–14 hours a day, for five to seven days. There is a fine line between under-programming and over-programming. A common point of feedback from students after the PB programs had been completed was lack of time to explore the park on their own. Although there is much to be done during the PB experience, providing students some unsupervised time in the park would provide them with time to further connect with it, informally observe use patterns, recharge, and build relationships with their peers.

Social science-based Park Breaks: On the horizon

The potential for other parks and protected areas to take advantage of the social science-based PB model is limited by the individual agency's ability to allocate the necessary funding; however, education is a foundational point of many agency's missions (especially that of NPS). Beyond funding, one of the major obstacles to future social science-based PBs is simply knowledge of the program. Many managers are unaware that such an opportunity exists and are equally unaware of the potential benefits to their parks. For example, at the most recent (2017) GWS conference in Norfolk, Virginia, the groundwork was laid for a social science-based PB focusing on regional visitor use management at Joshua Tree National Park, Mojave National Preserve, and Death Valley National Park in California. Clearly, raising awareness of the program among protected area managers could lead to more opportunities in the future. We now have 10 years of successful PB programming to provide as examples

to managers. This track record clearly displays the benefits for the host park and the participating students. Additionally, there will be examples from two social science-based PBs conducted so far to serve as a successful blueprint for other parks and protected areas.

It is no secret that parks and protected areas struggle with budgetary and staffing issues. Managers must do more with less. These conditions make PB an ideal program to help alleviate some of these issues by bringing highly motivated, exceptionally bright, diverse students to a park to help answer questions that may otherwise fall away under the demands of everyday operations. The PB program does require funds to operate, but the payoff for the modest amount invested in this endeavor is exponential. The students who apply for PB want to help parks and protected areas and understand how the research they do can be applied to a real-world setting. They are interested in knowing the behind-the-scenes workings of large land management agencies. Perhaps most importantly, these students are interested in working with, or directly for, land management agencies to help improve physical and experiential conditions so these special places exist in perpetuity. The PB program, and especially the social science-based PBs, provide all of these opportunities for managers and students to work towards a common goal that benefits them both as well as the protected area.

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