

Social and Integrative Approaches to Health in Zion National Park

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Introduction

WELL BEFORE THE INCEPTION OF THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE (NPS) IN 1916, protected places were viewed as health-promoting areas (Cronon 1995). As the system of national parks in the United States slowly took shape, they came to “be seen as sacred spaces: places set apart, where normal boundaries are lifted and where people can experience new ways of being” (Ross-Bryant 2012). Building on the American transcendentalist legacy, which viewed natural areas as a place to connect with a higher power, as well as on the reaction to the Progressive Era population explosion in urban centers, parks also began to be seen as a refuge from the stresses of modernity and industrialization (Ray 2009). Coupled with an emphasis on perfecting the physical body, the rhetoric of parks now includes promoting physical, mental, and spiritual health.

One of NPS’s stated goals for the next century is to “expand the use of parks as places for healthy outdoor recreation that contributes to people’s physical, mental, and social well-being” (NPS 2015: 6). While we have just noted a deeper historical legacy of viewing parks as health-promoting landscapes, interest in that idea recently was renewed by the Healthy Parks Healthy People Congress, organized by Parks Victoria in Australia in April 2010 (NPS 2011). Spiritual renewal, attention restoration, and increased desire and ability to exercise are among the park-related health benefits studies have documented (Felsten 2009; Boone-Heinonen et al. 2010; Coombes et al. 2010; Heintzman 2012; Hassell et al. 2015).

However, one factor in the effective delivery of park-based health benefits has gone mostly unappreciated: the health of park staff themselves. Health benefits for visitors cannot be

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realized when a park's workforce faces increased visitation and decreased funds; this combination of higher work stress and lower levels of autonomy has led to what many are calling *compassion fatigue*—a combination of stress, burnout, and secondary trauma.

Currently, it is the frontline NPS staff who are dealing with the effects of higher visitation, decreased budgets, a reduced workforce, and stagnant prospects for hiring. This is particularly true at Zion National Park. The fifth-most-visited US national park in 2016, Zion boasts beautiful scenery and is highly popular with visitors from around the world. According to NPS, visitation has increased 65% in the past decade, growing from 2.6 million in 2007 to nearly 4.3 million visitors in 2016 (NPS n.d.). At the same time, congressional funds allocated to the park have decreased by approximately 3.5%. Nevertheless, those who work at Zion and elsewhere in NPS report high organizational commitment, especially to the agency's mission (Yehle 2016).

The term *compassion fatigue* was first coined by Carla Joinson over 25 years ago and later popularized by Dr. Charles Figley (Leiter et al. 1998) and is still a topic of great relevance to the health and wellness of NPS employees. *Burnout* is defined as the process through which workers' behaviors and attitudes about their work become negative in response to job strain (Gates and Gillespie 2008). Experts in the healthcare industry now commonly refer to the suite of thoughts and behaviors known as compassion fatigue as *secondary traumatic stress disorder* (STSD; Messmer et al. 2011), similar to *post-traumatic stress disorder* (PTSD), but resulting from indirect exposure to traumatic experience (National Child Traumatic Stress Network STSC 2011). Experiencing PTSD correlates with increased job dissatisfaction, burnout, and, ultimately, resignation (Middleton 2015).

In November 2017, NPS, in collaboration with the George Wright Society (GWS) and the University of Utah, funded a session of GWS's ongoing Park Break program, a five-day park-based field seminar for graduate students. The November 2017 Park Break was held at Zion National Park, and was the first to focus on health (Figure 1). The theme of Healthy Parks Healthy People provided a venue for nine graduate students from around the country and across disciplines (recreational therapy, physical rehabilitation, exercise and sport science, public health, and natural resource management) to partner with park staff in a multi-day discussion of ways to improve their health and wellness (Figure 2). The program included social health approaches, such as peer support

Figure 1. Zion National Park set the stage for the 2017 Healthy Parks Healthy People Park Break. Photo by Derek Herrmann.





Figure 2. Park Break participants pose with leaders and NPS facilitators in front of the Zion Nature Center. Photo by Kelly Bricker.

and laughter, as well as integrated health approaches, such as fostering one's contemplative faculties, meditation, sit spots, realistic goal setting, and yoga. In this paper, we describe the events that took place, the rationale behind the health intervention, and our personal experiences as scholars.

Social health approaches

Compassion fatigue activity. The superintendent of Zion National Park, Jeff Bradybaugh, provided Park Break participants with a powerful narrative of the stress that NPS employees face on a daily basis. He particularly noted the incident-related stress of the search and rescue team and the pervasive stress that impacts seasonal staff in their quest for a defined, sustainable career path. During a panel discussion with managers from various units at Zion National Park, additional stressors were identified, including the responsible use of public funds, seasonal removal from social networks to pursue employment at the park, and the constant interactions with members of the public due to increased visitation (Figure 3). Such stressors can lead to burnout, which can result in compassion fatigue.

In an effort to address the topic of compassion fatigue, a one-hour training session was provided to approximately 20 individuals at the Zion Nature Center by Derek Herrmann, a masters degree in public health student from Indiana University. This interactive presentation focused on education and consciousness-raising through describing the history of com-



Figure 3. Zion National Park employees lead a panel for Park Break participants. Photo by Matthew Brownlee.

passion fatigue, the signs and symptoms, how to recognize symptoms within yourself, and what resources or strategies currently exist. Participants were given two tools for assessing risk for compassion fatigue: a simple self-assessment by Pfifferling and Gilley (2000) and the Professional Quality of Life (ProQOL) Assessment (Stamm 2010). Strategies for prevention and intervention included education, working with mental health professionals, exercise, nutrition, and mindfulness. This opportunity to relate back to the other Park Break presentations on mindfulness, the contemplative faculty, and yoga demonstrated how the themes of Park Break were so delicately interconnected. As evidenced in the literature, mindfulness has been preliminarily shown to reduce psychological symptoms and improve overall well-being (Duarte and Pinto-Gouveia 2016) and is also positively correlated with compassion satisfaction (Thieleman and Cacciatore 2014). *Compassion satisfaction*, the opposite of compassion fatigue, was presented as the professional ideal.

Derek's perspective. I am forever indebted to the George Wright Society, NPS, the University of Utah, and my fellow Park Break participants for offering such an amazing scholastic experience. Learning first-hand about the challenges park employees face, while also witnessing their passion and dedication, gave me a new perspective on the importance of worksite health and wellness. Our country's national parks are an unparalleled treasure and we are obliged to care for NPS

employees in order to protect such valuable lands as Zion National Park. To read about the positive effects of nature on health is not sufficient; we must experience the grandeur and beauty of the parks on our own, which is one reason why the Park Break experience was personally meaningful.

Active listening activity. Despite extensive day-to-day work-related stress, park rangers have the opportunity to facilitate lifelong connections between fragile environments and growing visitor populations. Thus, finding strategies to mitigate burnout are vital. While individual interventions provide substantial value, we must also consider interventions at the group or organizational level that can relieve stress. Research has shown that organizational commitment and work group cohesion are two factors that mitigate stress. Therefore, in this program, we provided activities that support work group cohesion, following Tuckman's model of organizational development (Tuckman 1965; Ulrich et al. 2010).

As a component of the social health approaches, Sara Newman from the University of Colorado-Denver led park staff in an effective listening exercise. The rationale for this activity was that teaching systematic ways of helping employees provide peer support would improve group cohesion and lessen the burden of stress that employees individually face. This was taught through an active listening demonstration, facilitated dialogue, suggestions for opportunities to practice the skills, and a question and answer session.

Sara's perspective. As a third-generation park ranger and public health scholar, I was incredibly excited to participate in this year's Healthy Parks Healthy People program. Having been an interpretive ranger at a very-high-visitation park (Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park), I put myself in the place of park employees who are struggling with extensive daily social engagement with visitors. Combined with my public health perspective, I decided the thing I would want to know if I were a member of park staff attending this training is how to best provide and receive support with my fellow co-workers. I met some of my closest friends through the Park Service and I found the social aspect of the job to be life-changing. Connecting with fellow employees certainly reduced my psychological burden when dealing with so many visitors. We can all find ourselves ruminating about negative experiences, rather than proactively helping each other cope. In this training, I aimed to help people focus on effective ways of listening, redirecting, ruminating, and fostering support among employees.

My experience at Zion National Park with the George Wright Society was incredible. I consider myself to be well versed in the intersection of public health and public lands, yet I learned so much from my co-students' perspectives and their disciplines. I now know to include recreational therapists in any interdisciplinary activity, I have begun to integrate the contemplative perspective into my own research, and I personally began a meditation practice because of this experience. I am incredibly grateful to be involved.

Humor and socialization activity. An abundance of research examines the psychological, social, and economic benefits of positive workplace environments that foster interpersonal relationships and socialization (Jehn and Shah 1997; Tews et al. 2014; Plester and Hutchison 2016). While the benefits have been clearly demonstrated, systematically incorporating socialization and fun into the workplace is not always easy. As national park staff battle with ever-growing pressures from increased visitation and decreased financial resources, creating work environments that foster positive relationships, humor, and enjoyment can help lift employee morale and lead to a positive workplace culture. Such changes could also increase efficiency and effectiveness on the job.

A session titled “Laughter is the Best Medicine: The Value of Humor and Socializing On and Off the Clock” was led by Elizabeth Oliphant and Mayra Robledo from North Carolina State University. The session allowed participants the opportunity to get to know one another better and provided a space for discussing how Zion National Park could better facilitate positive social interactions among staff. Ten staff members (year-round and seasonal workers representing different park divisions) participated in the session. The highlight was a discussion on how staff currently use socialization and fun to combat workplace stress and ways they could be better incorporated. Barriers, such as lack of time and opportunity and lack of unity among the various divisions at the park, were brought to the forefront. Participants also discussed the role of permanent and year-round staff in creating a culture of inclusion and positivity for the benefit of all park employees and visitors. This session was just the beginning of the discussion, as park staff were invited and encouraged to continue the conversation and take the lead in creating a positive culture at Zion.

Mayra’s perspective. Something that stood out to me throughout our workshop was the separation among park staff members from different departments. We learned that people across the park socialized exclusively with others from their own department. The language and social humor used is different in each sector of the park, making it difficult for humor and social relations to be developed systemwide. It is understandable and expected that not everyone is going to laugh at the same jokes. However, everyone is able to share the experience of park stress and the desire to alleviate it. I was encouraged to see how many staff members were eager to learn and actively engaged in the humor and socialization activity.

Elizabeth’s perspective. The most valuable part of the Park Break experience for me was the opportunity to consider the challenges facing the National Park Service while surrounded by the awe and majesty of the park itself. As a student of parks and recreation management, I find that park management can get bogged down by the details of visitor numbers, resource impact, and maintenance backlogs. However, keeping the broader perspective of why we care about these places, why we study them, and why so many commit their lives to protecting them can help us endure the more trying aspects of working in a highly visited and under-resourced park. Speaking with park employees about the realities of their work experiences

reminded me of the importance of nurturing my own passion and commitment to these places, regardless of the challenges. Our session on the value of socialization and humor at work reignited my desire to create a culture of friendship, support, and stewardship with those around me.

Integrated health approaches

Contemplative faculty activity. In southwestern Utah, the North Fork of the Virgin River meandered through the Navajo Sandstone for millennia to carve out the fifteen-mile-long Zion Canyon. To view the chilly waters from the same vantage point as one of the California condors that recently have colonized the park, one can make the two-and-a-half-mile trek up to Angels Landing. After 21 switchbacks, 1,488 feet of elevation gain, and a heart-pounding pass across the narrow sandstone ridge you are rewarded with a spectacular view of the valley below. It is here, 5,785 feet above sea level, where one is engaged in the moment. The sheer expansiveness of the landscape elicits awe, drawing us into the grandeur of Zion National Park. The scenery cultivated inner contemplation and effortless attention to the moment, and there are few places that have such tremendous power to do so. Frederick Law Olmsted stated in a report on the Yosemite Valley and Niagara Falls that the purpose of these sites is to encourage individuals to experience the park “in an absorbed and contemplative way,” and that in this moment the “attention is aroused and the mind occupied without purpose, without continuation of the common process of relating the present action, thought or perception to some future end” (cited in Sax 1980: 20). Olmsted would go on to argue there is little else that has the ability to engage the contemplative faculty in this way.

Extraordinary landscapes certainly have a great capacity to engage the contemplative faculty. However, properly cultivated, we may be able to reap these benefits during everyday experiences, regardless of the environment. A session presented by Tommy Means from Indiana University attempted to encourage daily utilization of the contemplative faculty. *Contemplative practices* are defined as experiences that focus one’s non-judgmental intention inward and within the present. The Tree of Contemplative Practices (CCMS 2011). was presented to provide common examples of contemplative practice, such as meditation, yoga, journaling, and volunteerism. Philosophical approaches to and techniques for leading a life that cultivates the contemplative faculty were also introduced. The Japanese forest-bathing technique of *Shinrin-yoku* (taking in the forest atmosphere) and the Scandinavian philosophy *Friluftsliv* (free air life) were discussed because of the purported benefits regarding attention to present awareness in natural settings (Park et al. 2008; Beery 2013). Finally, the general topic of mindfulness was discussed within the context of the Buddhist *eight-fold path* as another approach to cultivate one’s contemplative faculty. Participants left the session with a renewed desire to engage the contemplative faculty during their everyday life and to intentionally maximize the opportunities for meaningful reflection provided by the Zion National Park setting.

Tommy’s perspective. Four years ago, I read an essay by Frederick Law Olmsted regarding the purpose of our national parks and it has become the driving force

behind my desire to study the impact of these beautiful landscapes on visitor well-being. Olmsted argued that places like Zion National Park have the power to engage the contemplative faculty unlike any other physical space. It was an absolute dream come true to not only present on the topic of contemplative practices within one of the most stunning parks, but also share that information with our park rangers who are tasked with protecting these spaces and helping to ensure visitors have a fulfilling experience. I was struck by how invested and passionate these rangers are in their stewardship of our land. I know Olmsted would agree that our parks are in good hands.

Mindfulness activity. The practice of mindfulness has been shown to effectively mediate the negative responses related to chronic stress (Carmody et al. 2009; Chiesa and Serretti 2009), including anxiety (Hoge, Bui et al. 2013; Hoge, Guidos et al. 2017), depression (Segal et al. 2002), and job dissatisfaction (Klatt et al. 2008; Hulsheger et al. 2013). Our national parks are one of the original ways in which we promoted this concept of mindfulness by supporting the connection between society and nature. The national park experience, from the perspective of both the employee and the visitor, should be one in which individuals can intentionally shift their perceptions, promoting a sense of mindfulness that overflows into all areas of life. Unfortunately, most employees at parks with high visitation rates are experiencing the negative effects of chronic stress first-hand. Bringing mindfulness back to our parks, starting with park employees, is an important aspect of our efforts to improve the wellness of those who serve our country in this way.

The introductory mindfulness session, facilitated by Raven Berman from the University of Utah, included a variety of exercises that incorporated mindfulness' wide-ranging effects. By encouraging participants to reflect on their personal stressors and their usual responses, we were able to demonstrate the many ways mindfulness can be used in various settings to address diverse problems. The ultimate goal of the session was to provide park employees with an effective tool that can be utilized to promote a healthy and productive response to stress. The hour-long program started with a brief introduction to the concept of mindfulness, its benefits, and its broad application. Next, the fourteen participants engaged in a mindful-eating practice and reflective discussion. The focus then shifted to the common stressors that each employee faces on a daily basis and how mindfulness could be used as a coping mechanism. The session concluded with a breathing meditation, and a number of resources for continued mindfulness practice were provided.

Raven's perspective. As an avid outdoor recreationist and passionate advocate for the improvement of health and wellness across society, I was honored to participate in the 2017 Healthy Parks Healthy People Park Break. Being afforded the opportunity to work directly with the park employees to develop a deeper understanding of their constant struggle was essential to our directive. The experience that I shared with my fellow scholars elicited a powerful combination of compassion, critical analysis, and practical problem-solving. The mindfulness session, a single component within

the broader picture of improving the well-being of Zion National Park employees, was intended to revitalize their attention to the present moment.

Sit spots and goal-setting activity. The sit spot and goal-setting program, facilitated by Kevin Naaman from Indiana University, was created to help participants identify how to utilize nature and reap specific wellness benefits. A *sit spot* is a place where one sits quietly to cultivate an awareness of being in the present moment. For example, if an individual wants to improve mental wellness, her or his goal might be to meditate outdoors at least once a week for 10 minutes. To help participants calm their minds and be able to think reflectively, the presenter added a 15-minute solo sit spot experience. Participants used this time to connect with a spot outdoors using their senses. This contemplative practice was then followed by a 15-minute goal-setting exercise in that same spot. Prior to these activities, the participants learned about sit spots and gained the skills necessary to set realistic goals. For instance, participants were instructed how to set goals that could be built upon and accomplished over the long term rather than setting unrealistic ones that lead to burnout and failure.

This program draws on the rising use of ecotherapy among certified mental health professionals (Chalquist 2009; Wolsko and Hoyt 2012). Although the efficacy of ecotherapy is still being debated, numerous studies demonstrate the health and wellness benefits from connecting with nature in a variety of contexts (Chambliss 2013). Therefore, the sit spot and realistic goal-setting program was believed to be well-suited to Zion's unique park setting and the needs of the park staff. The activities allowed all participants to decide how they wanted to benefit from outdoor recreation, making it more likely for individuals to follow through with the realistic goals they set.

Kevin's perspective. My academic background is quite broad. I have received degrees in psychology, anthropology, and will soon graduate from Indiana University's School of Public Health with a master's degree in outdoor recreation. With this broad background, I was able to utilize my understanding of human behavior and public health to create a program that would help participants adopt healthy lifestyle habits. I used my understanding that changing another person's behavior and ambition to improve his or her wellness is out of my control. It is ultimately up to participants to follow through with the goals they set. This is why I chose to create a program that would empower individuals to autonomously create goals that would connect them to nature and help improve their wellness over the long term.

Chair yoga activity. Yoga is a health technique that integrates mind and body by incorporating breathing, posture, and meditation (Khalsa 2004). It has become a popular therapeutic technique for individuals who experience high levels of stress. For example, one study reported lower stress and anxiety levels among participants after they did one hour of yoga for 10 weeks (Smith et al. 2007). Individuals who experience stress at work may look into ther-



Figure 4. Park Break scholar Alysha Walter leads NPS employees in chair yoga. Photo by Matthew Brownlee.

apeutic yoga as an option to reduce stress during the workday. Yoga may be practiced with a teacher, therapist, or on one's own.

The chair yoga session (which used the Lakshmi Voelker chair yoga method) was facilitated by Alysha Walter from Clemson University (Figure 4). It was wonderful to see park staff of all ages flow through the yoga sequence and allow their bodies to tell them what level of yoga poses they should be attempting. The following group discussion indicated that participants were thinking about continuing to pursue yoga as a stress reduction technique.

Alysha's perspective. Experiencing the Healthy Parks Healthy People Park Break in Utah was a life-changing experience for me. As a recreational therapist, my goal is to improve the quality of life for all individuals. When this opportunity presented itself, I knew that I had to be involved. My professional and academic career focuses on improving the well-being of others, which frequently occurs in a controlled environment. I grew up appreciating wildlife and the outdoors, but as I grew older, I found myself either in a classroom or in an office. I never thought I would have the opportunity to merge my appreciation for NPS with my passion for improving the well-being of others through adaptive recreation (i.e., complementary and integrative health techniques). This experience undoubtedly changed my life and my career path for the better.

Conclusion

It is our hope that increased attention is given to the problem of employee stress and burnout due to overcrowding in our nation's protected areas. As future academics, practitioners, and park employees, we are encouraged to see passionate, dedicated, and intelligent students collaborate to address a pertinent issue from multiple perspectives. Our desire is that our work and information-gathering in this Park Break initiates a dialogue that can directly improve programming available to national park employees, service and support given to rangers, and supervisory attention to this problem. Sustained collaboration with the National Park Service and other public lands agencies will be needed if these conversations are to become something more than a one-time exercise. Through partnerships and opportunities that promote such collaboration, these conversations can continue to support the stewards of our nation's public spaces.

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