

# Passing the Torch: A Conversation Between Generations about Resource Stewardship

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## Jeff Connor Natural Resources Specialist, Rocky Mountain National Park

What's a favorite memory or experience of yours while with the National Park Service?

There are lots of those. Being on top of a mountain watching the sun rise or set, floating the Colorado River through Cataract Canyon, watching a three-toed woodpecker feed its young, finding the first confirmed peregrine falcon eyer post DDT in Canyonlands NP at the confluence of the Colorado and Green River. Pulling 23 ticks off of me after climbing up to a peregrine falcon hack box. Being evacuated off a mountain due to a raging wildfire rushing up the mountain and flying in a helicopter over it looking down into the jaws of hell and feeling the temperature, with the ship buffeting in the updrafts caused by the heat... Sharing a night on a beach deep in the heart of Canyonlands NP with Ed Abbey debating the Yin Yang of being a Fed. Finding and documenting a cache of arrowheads on a sandstone bench high above the Colorado River...

What expectations do you have for the next generation of resource stewards?

I worry about people losing touch with the outdoors.

In this day and age it seems like most of us are more administrators, that we're behind a desk more than being in the outdoors and we lose those outdoor skills. I've never had problems with wandering off by myself through the woods, being out for a few days – that wasn't a big deal to me. A lot of kids nowadays are being raised without being outdoors a lot – they're more indoors. And so I worry that future employees in the National Park Service will start losing that feel of being comfortable with the outdoors and with managing natural and cultural resources from the outdoors—not just from a desk. I always tell people, you can't manage everything from behind a desk.

Even though you're forced to spend a lot of time behind a desk, you've got to get out into the Park,

you've got to experience the resources – you've got to get rained on, you've got to get snowed on, you've got to be threatened by lightning, wind in your face, you need to be able to stand on top of a mountain, all those types of experiences – because that's what National Parks are all about: they're about the outdoors. They're about the elements, and you experiencing those elements. We need to make sure for employees that are coming up that they're not just thrown right into a very heavy administrative job, that they are provided the opportunity to spend a fair amount of time in the early part of their career in the outdoors. I think employees are getting that, but I worry about future employees, that they may come to a park and may not have the know-how to be able to go out into the outdoors and it could be a safety issue, or they may not want to because they may be too scared.

*“What’s important in our jobs is that we manage places in such a way that people still will be able to get that same experience.”*

*-Jeff Connor*

*“Doing a good job wherever you are is important.”*

*-Jack Potter*



## Jack Potter Chief of Resources, Glacier National Park

What's a crazy experience you've had in the Park? Last summer, in the fairly narrow Waterton River valley, I heard a pack of wolves howl, then a few minutes later a tremendous roar and bellowing by a bear, followed by the wolves in the same area. I wonder what was happening!

What's one of the best things you've done for yourself in regards to progressing your career? I think the ability to make contacts – depending on what the issues are – whether they be with researchers or whether they be with fellow agency people or whether they be with peers in other parks. There are contacts that will help you depending on your career goals, but there are also contacts that will help you do your job better. The bottom line that I'm trying to get at is,

don't try to do it alone.

That it's not just you and your supervisor, but if you engage a lot of people, it's amazing how much more effective you can be.

How do you define success? Success comes in many forms but I suggest that make sure you understand and celebrate all the smaller ones on the way to the bigger ones and stay involved but don't get frustrated when some things happen that you don't understand or you don't feel anyone was listening to you. I think you really need to think about what are the reasonable goals for any issue. For me, sometimes success is nothing more than fending off threats, which is very frustrating in the sense that you feel that instead of



being proactive you're being reactive, and that's a very common theme you hear in the Park Service, but it's a combination of both. You have to understand that there's this end point that you should envision – if you don't have some idea of what you feel will be the success, then it will be really frustrating for you. I think it has to be a combination of some things that you want to achieve that are proactive, but understand that

a lot of what you're going to have to deal with, particularly as you get higher up, is reactive.



## Introduction

Every year veteran resource stewards are leaving the field as they retire from a long career devoted to the National Park Service. As they move on to retirement and other places, many young people are moving in to fill the ranks as entry-level employees. Because these workers come in without the past knowledge that experienced employees have, Passing the Torch was created for gathering that knowledge and making it available to a wider audience before we lose those sources that can help prevent us from reinventing the wheel. By sharing their knowledge and experience through this conversation, experienced resource stewards provide a meaningful step in passing the torch to those who will continue the mission that has been carried from one generation to the next since 1916.

## The Project: A Conversation

Five veteran natural resource managers were interviewed in the summer of 2010 to record advice on career development and insight based on experience in their field of work. That information was gathered in writing, by phone, and at a special event that was organized at Rocky Mountain National Park.

The questions for the interview are grouped into four categories that examine work experience in different ways. The answers are

intended to assist new workers with direct advice, share with them what these veterans have learned, explain benefits from their experiences, or share what they hope for in the future. Each answer is meant to serve as a constructive example for guiding entry-level employees in their own career paths. In addition to the questions that are answered verbally, a pre-interview biographical questionnaire is included in the project. This gives a little background information about the interviewee and puts some of their experiences in context for the future audiences of the project.

## The Goal: A Heritage

Experience can only be gained over time. For young employees with just a few years as resource stewards under their belts, personal career experience is just beginning. By learning more about past experience, workers early in their career can better relate to those who are further along the career path and realize that they have the potential to reach that high level of achievement. This will help them grow professionally and enhance their time with the National Park Service. Passing the Torch will foster cross-generational communication that's influential in more effectively stimulating progress and development, both collectively as an agency and personally as resource stewardship professionals.

## Things to Consider

- Clear goals and expectations
  - What information are you trying to capture?
  - Who is your audience?
  - How will this help a young employee?
- Privacy – respecting the individual and the intent of their message
- Appropriate messages – sharing the message to help the next generation
- Scheduling and time commitments – Experienced employees usually equals a busy person, planning is important
- Technology – capturing the information in a user-friendly way often at a distance (phone and email)

## Lessons Learned

- Everybody has great stories and experiences
- Relationships and trust are critical to be made
- Peers to peer connections need to be made
- Schedule needs to be flexible to accommodate surprises
- It is amazing what you learn when you ask

## What You Need

- Clear idea of what you want to do
- Person with interviewing, writing/editing and computer skills
- Voice recorder, microphones, digital storage
- Flexible scheduling
- Employees willing to share their stories

*“The challenges you guys are going to face are going to be so much greater.”*

*-Tom Olliff*

*“There have to be rewards greater than monetary.”*

*-Fred Bunch*

## Fred Bunch Chief of Resources Management, Great Sand Dunes National Park

What are some of the different projects you've taken part in? Underground work in a cave, working with peregrine falcons and bighorn sheep, water rights, night skies monitoring, fire research, historic interpretation, archaeological surveys, natural history interpretation, fish surveys, firefighting, snow surveys, elk/bison research, dune movement surveys, air quality monitoring, horse patrols, river patrols, high elevation lake sampling and many more.

What advice could you give to us about finding fulfillment in this work? The National Park Service has such a noble mission and I've talked to many of my peers and said, “You know, if I wasn't working for the Park Service I probably wouldn't be

in government service.” So the key is – it's idealistic, you have these great wonders of nature and these great Park areas that you're entrusted with and so it gives you a great feeling to be part of that and to be a responsible party there to a certain extent where you can actually make a difference in helping the preservation. And I think – like in my situation here – I get up in the morning and I look and if there's a big pile of sand out there then I'm doing the right thing. The resource should change only if it's meant to be changed by things that are outside of the human realm. But back to the question about the next generation finding gratification – I hope that that passes on that their experiences in enjoying National Parks, and in believing what the National Park Service does,

creates that legacy, and a key thing from that is there have to be rewards greater than monetary – it has to be a reward of being a part of something greater than themselves and getting a real enjoyment from the natural world and

just standing in awe with the wonders of nature. And then along that line, have a lot of outside interests in things that are related to the Park. It's a very fulfilling job and it's funny because the greatest fulfillment comes from not changing things, from allowing the processes that have created what it has become to continue.

## Group Interview Session at McGraw Ranch



In July 2010, Bert Frost (top right and middle left) and Tom Olliff (bottom right and middle center) were interviewed by intern Chelsea Frost (middle right) in front of an audience of 20 seasonal and term employees at Rocky Mountain National Park. The audience was encouraged to ask questions. Rocky Mountain Chief of Resource Stewardship Ben Bobowski (top left) provided some context for the group before the interviews. Interview photos by Peter Biddle.



## Tom Olliff NPS Landscape Coordinator, Great Northern Landscape Conservation Cooperative

What's your favorite memory while with NPS?

So many memories: skiing to backcountry cabins dotted around the wilderness in YELL; watching comet showers from the summit of Avalanche Peak; canoeing in the moonlight across Yellowstone Lake; riding horseback across mountain ranges and alpine meadows; carrying wolf crates into the holding pens at Crystal Bench and Rose Creek during the 1995 reintroduction; seeing grizzly bears recover from around 150 when I arrived in Yellowstone in 1975 to over 600 today; delisting bald eagles and peregrine falcons; standing outside at 40 below, the world covered in snow and dead still, listening to trees pop and crack as the water in their xylem froze and exploded; creating the Yellowstone Science Learning Center to get scientific information out to managers and the public—I could go on and on.

What advice would you give to a seasonal intending to make resource stewardship in the Park Service a permanent career?

I think a couple things. One is, be a go-to person, be competent – because I think every supervisor is looking for somebody to take care of an issue. And I think that's probably the biggest thing in my career that I've done. I'd also manage my career totally different than I did, so giving advice here that I didn't follow here, which is: move around. Working in Yellowstone my whole career – and it's a big park you could probably get away with it there – but in general in the Park Service the more experience you have I think the broader base of knowledge you have. So I think

when you have a chance, try different parks out.

What advice do you have for finding mentors in our careers? I think I'd start with somebody you really respect. I think that's the most important thing. If you're looking for a mentor, find somebody you really respect and see what you can learn from them. Formal relationship or not, I think that's the key. All mentors are human, and we've had ones that were flamed out, but still they were smart people that I think we learned things from. But I think somebody you share a common bond with and somebody that you really respect is the first key.

*“One of you guys had better be sitting in my chair fifteen years from now.”*

*-Bert Frost*



## Bert Frost Associate Director, Natural Resource Stewardship and Science

At what point in your life did you realize what you wanted to do when you grew up?

I am still working on it. I always thought I wanted to work for a state fish and wildlife agency, either as a game warden or a biologist. However, those jobs are hard to get. When I finished my masters, I was a seasonal game warden with the State of Wyoming and had a good chance of getting on permanently. I was also accepted to graduate school to work on my Ph.D. I had to make a decision on whether that would be my career or was there something bigger and better. I decided to go to graduate school. As I was finishing up my degree, I thought I wanted to do research but wanted to go work for a management agency for a couple of years so I could see what managers

dealt with on a day-to-day basis, but I once told a colleague that I didn't want to for the park service. Jobs are hard to come by so when this permanent wildlife biologist job at Gettysburg opened up and they made me an offer, I figured I would be there for a couple of years and then move back to academia or to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service or U.S. Geological Survey.

After about 2-3 years with NPS, my blood turned green and here I am.

However, I also wanted to work in a park my entire career and I had no desire to

work in a regional office job or in WASO. I did both. I have also liked to keep an open mind and look at opportunities as they arise. As a result, I am where I am today. Not sure I ever had my dream job but I have had some spectacular jobs and experiences.

If you were to write an autobiography of your NPS career, what would the title be and why? “How Did I End Up Here – the Story of a Wildlife Biologist turned Bureaucrat.” Why? Because never in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine that I would end up working in Washington DC, sitting in meetings with the Secretary of the Interior, testifying before Congress or having programmatic oversight of all the natural resources in the 84 million acres of the National Park Service. I am dumbfounded.

