Looking at Risks Facing the Natural Resource Professions
Improving Employee Safety in the National Park Service
Jerry M. Mitchell (retired) and Samantha Richardson, NPS Safety Leadership Council

Abstract

The National Park Service Safety Leadership Council hosted a webinar with agency natural resource professionals to discuss the risks they face and the professional culture they work within. Environmental hazards, zoonotic diseases, wildlife handling, hazardous tools, pesticides, and other risks were identified. Concerns were voiced about limits on and need for training, impacts of travel caps, impediments to information sharing, and organizational/cultural influences that affect the health and safety of employees. This poster reviews the webinar discussion, discusses safe work practices, and examines the top four accident/injury categories in the National Park Service and identifies corrective measures for them.

Key Words: Safety, hazard, natural resources, training, accident, work practice

Occupational safety meeting and webinar

The October 2010 NPS Safety Leadership Council (SLC) meeting in Yellowstone National Park focused on the risks and occupational safety issues faced by the natural resource professions and included a webinar discussion with natural resource personnel from across the National Park Service. The SLC is a cross section of NPS leaders with the mission “to transform safety from a discreet program to a leadership practice across the service.”

The SLC’s interest in the risks faced by natural resource professionals stems from the recent loss of two natural resource employees in on-the-job accidents. Eric York, a wildlife biologist at Grand Canyon, died from pneumonic plague contracted from a mountain lion during a necropsy. Marina Gigglemann died in an ATV accident while monitoring sea turtle nesting success on the beaches of Padre Island. These losses left voids in the lives of coworkers, friends, and families.

The webinar discussion covered risks and professional culture, including the following:

- Some environmental hazards cannot be eliminated from our daily work, but awareness and solid backcountry skills can mitigate the risks. Inherently risky activities include animal capture/use of drugs, work in abandoned mines, and traveling in remote wilderness areas.
- Zoonotic diseases pose a less obvious but no less important threat; we need to raise awareness.
- Border hazards—including encounters with the drug trade and other illegal activities—pose significant risks to workers.
- Other less obvious hazards are involved in laboratory work—specimens, chemicals, and adequacy of lab and safety equipment.
- Visitor engagement with wildlife often puts natural resource managers in hazardous positions.
- Resource management programs (e.g., hydrology, exotics, fisheries, wildlife) rely on short-term employees (seasonals, interns, emergency hires, etc.). For many skills requirements (e.g., chainsaw, MOCC, ATV, first aid, CPR, helicopter), training is not offered frequently enough or timed correctly for these employees.
- Without time to train inexperienced or seasonal employees, permanent employees are on standby for whole seasons, which is a strain on permanents.
- Travel caps are a hindrance to sending staff to training or bringing experienced individuals to parks to train natural resource staff.
- Natural resource managers use just about every equipment type hazards.
- Equipment itself often poses inherent hazards (e.g., electroshock fishing equipment). Lack of appropriate equipment (e.g., bear boxes at backcountry sites) and lack of knowledge about safe handling of equipment (e.g., ATVs, chainsaws) are also sources of risk.

- Natural resource employees use firearms in animal capture work with much less guidance and oversight than highly trained law enforcement personnel.
- Suggested actions from the field addressed the mitigation of these risks:
  - Balance formal and informal safety training requirements (i.e., certified trainers vs. local experts who are not yet certified to train).
  - Informal, uncertified training can be a concern, we can’t provide formal training for every contingency and therefore need to allow some informal training.
  - Create a culture of positive reinforcement; don’t just react to things that have gone wrong.
  - Share safety information across organizational boundaries through activities such as occupational interdivisional tailgate sessions.
  - Help employees know their physical limitations and emphasize the role fitness plays in safety.
  - Encourage managers to support safe work practices. Doing resource management work in remote areas is dangerous. Staff need adequate safety equipment, support from other divisions, managers who seriously consider suggestions for improving safety, and possibly park policy changes.

Safety work practices and use of PPE

As part of the webinar, NPS Wildlife Health Program Manager Dr. Margaret Wild addressed the Safe Wildlife Handling Guidelines developed in response to Eric York’s death.

Dr. Wild also summarized a recent publication (Anderson et al., 2010) that was based on focus group discussions with NPS employees regarding disease reception and use of personal protective measures. In that study, five common themes emerged as barriers to safe work practices:

1. Organizational culture at some parks does not promote safe practices.
2. Challenges are encountered in field environments.
3. Safety practices are seen as an inconvenience or job impediment.
4. Zoonotic disease risk is not at the forefront of employees’ concerns.
5. Personal protective equipment (PPE) is viewed as unnecessary if other safe actions are followed.

Three factors may be critically important in encouraging employees to use PPE:

1. PPE readily available for use.
2. Supervisors who value safety and serve as good role models and mentors.
3. Appropriate training, including familiarity with guidance documents and the importance of completing job hazard analyses.

The bottom line is that if you don’t use PPE, it can’t protect you. Always use your PPE!

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References


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About the authors

Jerry M. Mitchell
Chief (Retired)
Natural Resource Program Center
Biological Resource Management Division
12795 W. Alameda Parkway
Denver Service Center
BO: 25287
Denver, CO 80225
ph 303-969-2825
fax 303-987-5022
samantha.richardson@nps.gov

Samantha Richardson
Public Affairs Specialist
Denver Service Center
SLC Representative
12795 W. Alameda Parkway
PO Box 25287
Denver, CO 80225
ph 303-969-2825
fax 303-987-5022
samantha.richardson@nps.gov