

Voices of the next generation: Perspectives from participants in the 2010 conservation policy Park Break session

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Introduction

THE CONSERVATION AND POLICY CHALLENGES FACING OUR NATIONAL PARKS, protected areas, and cultural sites are complex and daunting. Therefore, it is critical that the agencies responsible for management of these sites provide training to the next generation of leaders. One forum that provides on-the-ground training for graduate students interested in tackling issues related to conservation and policy is the George Wright Society (GWS) Park Break Program. Park Break is a unique program that brings together graduate students from varying academic disciplines and perspectives and provides them with an opportunity to work collaboratively with a number of governmental agencies, non-profits, and members of the community.

Conservation policy Park Break session

In 2010, a group of eight graduate students was invited to participate in the Park Break session focusing on conservation policy, which was held at Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area (DWGNRA). In addition to broadly discussing the conservation and policy issues managers are currently facing, this year's program also provided a new challenge to the student participants through the creation of an interdisciplinary project designed to meet the mandates of managers and policy-makers within Delaware Water Gap. The authors of this paper comprise seven of the eight Park Break participants; the eighth participant has written separately about his experience.

The interdisciplinary project identified for us focused on designating Route 209, the main road through the park, as a "National Scenic Byway." Managers within Delaware Water Gap identified this project as an important opportunity for Park Break participants because the project has direct, applied benefits to this unit of the national park system, but also because it challenges students to work together as a group. To meet the demands of this integrative project, the GWS, National Park Service (NPS), U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) put together an exciting program, which included experts from the local, regional, and national community with whom we could meet and exchange ideas.

Park Break challenges

Part of what made the Park Break Program so remarkable is that it drew together a group of people from a range of backgrounds and asked us to work together as a team. While all of us came from different disciplines, be they the physical or social sciences or natural resources management, each participated in the program for mostly the same reasons and had the same goals in mind. These reasons were not only to learn about the conservation of individual resources, but also to learn how multiple resources are managed simultaneously and how interdisciplinary collaborations are born. Often, in graduate school, it is easy to become narrowly focused on the resources within our individual department and it is easy to forget that there are other resources available. Throughout this program it was clear that each of us brought both passion and commitment to our own field and resources. This Park Break session, however, required us to step out of that individual mindset and examine the bigger picture.

As graduate students thinking of embarking on new and exciting careers, this program tested each of us in a different way. Faced with the challenge of working on the designation of the main park thoroughfare as a scenic byway, we had to work together and create a product that could actually be of use to the National Park Service and that all of us could be proud of. One of the principal goals of the scenic byway project was to uncover and highlight all of the attributes that made Route 209

worthy of such a designation. In order to do this, we had to draw upon the knowledge from our individual fields and pool them together in order to create a cohesive and convincing argument for the byway. The conversations and the compromises that each student had to make along the way in order to achieve this goal were just as important as the final product. Many of the most important lessons that students learned during the session evolved from addressing the complexity of the scenic byway project. Working in an interdisciplinary group is not always an easy task, even if everyone's goals are the same. However, with the support of the extraordinary park staff and speakers, each of us showed dedication not only to our individual fields, but to working cooperatively and communicating effectively with each other as well.

Voices of the next generation

Undoubtedly, the Park Break Program left an indelible mark on each of us and provided us with an experience that will influence the trajectory of our own careers. As such, we decided that it would be most important, as voices of the next generation, to spend the remainder of this article focusing on the narratives of individual students and how this experience has challenged our future mindsets in our collective fields. For these individual narratives, we chose to focus on the four main perspectives from which we approached the Park Break Program: (1) management, (2) interpretation, (3) ecological, and (4) social science. Ultimately, it is our hope that these narratives will help provide insight into how aspiring members of each of these fields approached the interdisciplinary project we worked on, while also outlining some of the important lessons that we learned. Together we believe these four pieces may also help to guide further training efforts and Park Break Programs in the future.

Management perspective

I came to Park Break as a student of ecology with a desire to learn the intricacies of public policy and the efforts made by park professionals to maintain and renew the great goal of conservation. I also brought a predominantly armchair conservationist perspective. This, as you might imagine, was frequently challenged throughout our week of seminars with perspectives from park professionals and conservationists, representatives of public utilities, proponents of infrastructure, and the overlying theme that was our assigned task; to designate a scenic byway within DWGNRA.

Scenic byway project: Management perspective The average park visitor's perception of DWGNRA is defined by Route 209, a two-lane commuter highway that bisects the majority of the recreation area along the western edge of the Delaware River. Park maintenance is charged with plowing and maintaining the road, which is used predominantly by commuters between the surrounding bedroom communities and New York City. As such, park managers and the local communities have a considerable stake in the designation of Route 209 as a scenic byway, as doing so will provide for needed repairs and give managers the opportunity to redefine the dynamics of park usage. Though it is a major thoroughfare, park managers repeatedly expressed a desire to turn Route 209 into a park access and touring road, rerouting commuter traffic along surrounding thoroughfares. To achieve this goal, modifications have been suggested that would regulate the amount and type of traffic that frequents the byway. The improvement of road quality and publicity alone may provide the needed incentive to redirect traffic. As greater numbers of tourists use the scenic byway for its intended purpose, slower traffic may act as a negative incentive for commuters interested in expediency. More stringent alternatives were

suggested, including park entry fees and capping the number of vehicles that can pass through the park each day. There was considerable resistance to these alternatives, as managers seemed reluctant to promote developments that may limit park access.

Talking with park managers about their efforts in addressing Route 209 and the complexities of its designation was highly enlightening. I was, however, surprised at how little emphasis was placed on determining whether the designation of Route 209 was the best decision to protect the resource. Would the scenic byway further the goals of the core management mandate outlined in the Organic Act of 1916: “to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations?”

Conservation policy relevance for management Throughout our week, many seemingly valid scenarios were offered that suggested the scenic byway might be harmful to the natural resources of the recreation area, including higher use by tourists and potentially more pervasive disturbance of the surrounding habitat. By integrating a team with diverse backgrounds and opinions, whose goal was to investigate the fate of a park roadway, park managers could deal with this problem via Park Break.

From the comfort of an academic lifestyle, decisions can be advocated based on mounting evidence. For the manager, however, evidence is often irrelevant as a consequence of the nature of funding and of other practical considerations. Furthermore, the changing nature of public support requires managers to aim for a moving target, not only basing their decisions on the best predictive science for the immediate and foreseeable future, but on predictions of the greatest good—an idea that is subject to variability. It was inspiring to see an infusion of sophisticated techniques (notably the pervasive use of geographic information systems) in the processes guiding decisions in all aspects of management, and to see how committed managers and park researchers were to the overall goals of the recreation area. To paraphrase John Donahue, the park’s superintendent, “The social scientist, the park professional, the conservation advocate, and the developer are all on a mission from God.” Donahue summarized a perspective from which cohesive management and the advocacy of conservation goals might best be accomplished.

In summation, attending Park Break gave me a glimpse of the daily challenges faced by park professionals and an opportunity to work as part of an interdisciplinary team to assess and recommend solutions to a real issue for DWGNRA. Further, spending a week with park professionals and other graduate students interested in park management and policy uncovered for me a much broader understanding of the values placed in natural areas, for which I am truly grateful.

The interpretive perspective

The draw of Park Break for me was the opportunity to participate in the inner workings of a national park unit. As I work to become a professional interpreter, I intend to take advantage of every opportunity that places me in a position to learn more about parks, their operations, and their challenges. When I arrived in the midst of biologists, I was surprised; I had anticipated a far more park-oriented group.

My perspective was unique amongst the group as my undergraduate degree was in conservation biology and my graduate work is centered on interpretation. I had the science background to understand what the biologists were seeing, along with the added insight of how that science affects visitor experiences and behaviors. Considering the mix of backgrounds of the other participants, I decided early on

that my best place amongst the group was to focus on interpretation of the heritage resources and visitor experiences.

However, it was refreshing to be back in the world of ecological thought. The idea of stewardship varies widely between fields, and I found that the visitor management idea of stewardship is less in line with my personal definition, which aligns more closely to ecological stewardship. Biology can be a far more clean and manageable science in terms of reporting what is, and less about how the general public will feel about it. Policy, regulation, and services can be trying to navigate when attempting to analyze those impacts with a hard-science mindset and having to consider the social impact or even resistance. In short, it was fun to put the biologist's hat back on.

Furthermore, I could not resist the pull to introduce the visitor experience into the biology. While maintaining a pristine ecosystem is a wonderful goal, how does this ecosystem enhance the experience of the visitors if they are unable to see and immerse in it? Without constituents and supporters who appreciate the pristine ecosystem, we will lose the ability to protect it. While putting an interpretive sign and trail in the middle of an otherwise natural area may diminish that area to an extent, "interpretation is the most powerful and effective communication process any agency has available to it for communicating any message to its publics" (Veverka 1997), including the necessity of protection to maintain what is precious. Through interpretation, visitors learn to appreciate the uniqueness of that individual park; furthermore, "people respect the things they appreciate" (Pepi 1994). In terms of going beyond persuading visitors to respect the park during their visit, interpretation can encourage them to "take a pro-active role in site/resource protection" (Veverka 1997). My personal mission within my career is to educate visitors so that they might appreciate the park as a resource and turn that appreciation into protection, so that parks are always valued.

Scenic byway project: Interpretive perspective The scenic byway project aligned itself perfectly with my focus on interpretation and visitor experiences. After speaking with park managers, I surmised that the project could also modify visitor behavior, most notably in the current lack of adherence to the speed limit along the main park road. From my personal experience along the Blue Ridge Parkway, drivers on a road that is designated as a "Scenic Byway" will travel at lower speeds than on one intended for commuting. For example, it is not uncommon to be caught behind someone on the Blue Ridge Parkway who is traveling 10 or 15 miles per hour below the speed limit as they appreciate the natural resource from a vehicle.

At the core of the project, for me, was the ability to convey the meanings inherent in the resources to visitors who might not otherwise consider the resource from the road. By enticing the visitor to get off the road to a nice stop and see an interpretive sign, the time the visitor is engaged with the resource is extended. That additional time increases the interpretive opportunity, which leads to a greater possibility for the protection ethic to be developed. I emphasize the possibility and opportunity, not an outcome, certainty, or product.

Conservation policy relevance for interpretation One of the key lessons that I learned during the Park Break session was that it is key to work with townships to help municipalities and local residents feel connected to the overall conservation goals of protected areas. The importance of personalizing the data, presentation, and benefits of conservation to each township was the key to creating buy-in from them. The experience and advice that local and regional experts were able to offer the participants, as young professionals, was invaluable to advancing our understanding and professionalism. Additionally, I learned that the integration of several

different academic perspectives and professions is crucial to effectively implementing conservation policy.

The ecological perspective

As a budding ecologist attending Park Break 2010, I found myself in a strange new world. Suddenly, I was in the minority. I found myself surrounded by park staff, land managers, research technicians, politicians, and a plethora of social scientists. It was an environment wholly different than one I have been immersed in for the past several years. Incredibly, I found that this change of pace was invigorating, as the various disciplines of each of the participants and cultures began to coalesce into a week-long working group focused on learning about compelling issues in conservation policy and completing a future-byway assessment. In short, it was a week spent learning about conservation issues, learning life lessons, and cooperating with an insightful, skilled group of professionals.

The scenic byway project: Ecological perspective Working on the scenic byway project was a very different experience from the teaching and research duties most ecologists encounter on a daily basis. It required a way of looking at the natural landscape to which I was not previously accustomed. Developing a plan for completion of the project was a challenging experience. Having collaborators with diverse backgrounds was an essential element of the project. Each of us was able to draw on unique facets of knowledge to contribute to the task. It was an interesting project since it required us to view the natural world through the eyes of a visitor rather than strictly as a scientist.

Working with social scientists on this project was particularly essential, as they provided the perspectives necessary to foster a broader interest in the natural environment in which we were working. Ecologists tend to view natural areas as a group of interacting organisms, systems, and processes. Social scientists, however, view natural areas from a more human-centered perspective, considering more historical and cultural facets of an area. Driving through DWGNRA, tourists may not only be interested in the scenery but also the history behind features and structures. Social scientists are trained to consider these aspects of an area. Ecologists most likely would consider the area from the perspective of the natural environment: the types of plants and animals inhabiting the area, the condition of the streams and soils, the landforms and current land uses and how they contribute to these properties. While in contrast, many social scientists would consider the indigenous inhabitants and subsequent colonization of the area. Together, I believe these varying perspectives provided a more complete picture for the overall project.

Conservation policy relevance for ecology One of the most beneficial experiences I had during my time at the Park Break Program was interacting with other students who don't work in the field of ecology. Often times, physical scientists tend to become so specialized that they can become isolated from other perspectives and research in other disciplines. As an ecologist, I saw farmland and thought immediately about nutrient runoff, river pollution, alteration of the natural environment, and fragmentation of the landscape. While conversely, other students (who weren't approaching this project from an ecological perspective) saw historical land use and a legacy left by previous human inhabitants of the area.

Overall, the lessons I learned at the program will be of great benefit to my future professional development. Currently, ecological research is becoming increasingly interdisciplinary and this provides me with the opportunity to integrate some of the lessons that I learned during my time in the Park Break Program. For example, in urban environments, many ecological studies are now conducted

with both ecologists and social scientists working together (Collins et al. 2000). Interestingly, these methods of study incorporate human behavioral dynamics into ecological systems since humans are integral components of urban environments. In the future, these types of studies will become increasingly important and further cross-disciplinary research will be undertaken to the benefit of all disciplines involved.

The social science perspective

The concern for biodiversity conservation across the world grew in the latter part of the 20th century. When a model for protected areas was sought, the Yellowstone model seemed to work best. Most countries then established similar protected areas where the focal areas would be sectioned off from local use, except by scientists and tourists. Management of these areas was considered best left to the governments. With time, a discrepancy in the model became clear. In replicating the model, managers had overlooked a major difference between the United States of America and the developing world: the local communities that depended on the ecosystems had been overlooked (Guha 1989, 2003). As the academic community and managers strive to find the appropriate balance between the objectives of biodiversity conservation and local livelihoods, our group at DWGNRA was trying to balance local welfare with larger good. The significance of the setting of our exercise cannot be overemphasized: we were working in the area that was home to one of the founders of the movement of modern preservationism, Gifford Pinchot.

It is also a revelation to see that the issues faced by a majority of the protected areas in the developing world can be replicated in a protected area in the very country where the model was founded. Concerns of the local residents, commuters, and distant stakeholders were evident in planning and managing the protected area. Although direct livelihood was not implicated, as it might be in a developing country, there indeed were native communities that imputed intrinsic values to the area. As in other contexts, there were divergent views of the desired conservation outcomes. The USA has set examples for the world through its system of protected areas set aside for conservation. But areas like DWGNRA demonstrate that when there are people living in the vicinity of a park, their lives will invariably be affected and that they, in turn, affect the policy and management decisions of a park.

The scenic byway project: Social science perspective Theories, such as positivism and constructivism, argue that different realities are created solely by different human perspectives. There are as many realities as there are observers. Protected areas the world over have affirmed these philosophies. While a local farmer might see a woodlot as potential source for water and wood, a forester might see it as valuable timber, and a tourist may regard it as a recreational area. These multiple realities have often resulted in disagreement among the stakeholders of protected areas. The diversity in views also became apparent when our group of eight graduate students met at DWGNRA. The ecologists among us saw a large variety of ecosystems. The interpreters and social scientists would see things from the perspective of the tourist and visitor. While working on the same project (the designation of a road that passes through the park as a “Scenic Byway”) the group delicately came closer together in perspective. There were still multiple realities and multiple perspectives: historical, cultural, ecological, landscape and so on. But now they existed in a coherent whole.

Conservation policy relevance for social science Park Break also offered insights into the practical aspects of conservation policy. During the program, there were sessions where students learned how policies had been conceived, negotiated,

implemented, and contested. This was fascinating because theoretical research suggests that the process of policy-making is rarely completely participatory (Howlett and Ramesh 1995). At DWGNRA we experienced the practical aspects of policy-making, where a policy change (the scenic byway project) had been conceived, and was now being proposed and negotiated. In addition, we were exposed to the practical reality that science is only one of the several factors that influence policy. Although a scientist may believe that a protected area is established for conservation and that science should guide policy decisions, many of the management and policy decision are tactical. For example, the group of students often debated the overall value of the designation of a route as a “Scenic Byway.” To the external observer, the new designation would change little for the park. But park management was pursuing the designation as a part of a larger direction for the protected area. Although an ecological benefit may not be tangible, policy decisions will be based on a complex set of local factors.

Finally, it also became evident that the park manager does not only manage the ecosystem. As part of the job, a park manager may have to deal with protests, the press, and distant superiors. It takes many skills besides ecological training to manage a park. As such, one is left with a few questions through such experiences, most notably how much of our lifestyles are we willing to compromise in an effort for biodiversity protection or land conservation.

Conclusion

As illustrated above, the 2010 George Wright Society Park Break Program at Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area was an especially challenging and rewarding experience for all of the students who participated. By assigning the group a specific project, this Park Break was structured differently than previous ones. Commonly used as a commuter road, Route 209 is a prospect for designation as a “Scenic Byway” and the group was tasked with highlighting all of the intrinsic values that Route 209 possessed. By utilizing all of our backgrounds, we were able to bring to the table our knowledge from our individual fields to create a convincing argument for the designation of Route 209 as a “Scenic Byway.”

The project itself was challenging enough, but the coming together of many different backgrounds proved to be a challenge as well. Each of us had to be willing to “see” the project’s goals through another group member’s eyes and be willing to compromise our beliefs for the sake of the project. The process of working together and compromising were just as important as completing a sound and cohesive project. Many of the lessons taught to us during this Park Break were from the process that we went through to make the scenic byway argument.

This Park Break provided a unique opportunity that brought students from various academic disciplines and resource management views together and showed us a glimpse of what officials in national park units do to manage their resources. The many resource management views presented to us by the group of speakers, as well as the wide array of backgrounds of the students, from social science to interpretation, allowed for a unique group experience that each of us will remember as we continue on our journey to become professionals. The lessons learned from the 2010 Park Break will enrich our careers as we begin to take the first steps toward making resource management decisions ourselves.

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