Overview of Program and Initiatives

National Park Service Research Learning Centers combine the elements of field stations, partnerships, active support of research, and information transfer to fulfill a 1998 science mandate known as the Natural Resource Challenge. Congress has funded thirteen centers. Each has two full-time employees to coordinate projects and learning opportunities. The Continental Divide Research Learning Center manages McGraw Ranch, a year-round residential campus for researchers.

Bunks for Researchers - More bunk beds may seem like an odd way to instigate government reform, but beds for visiting researchers are one of the keys to ensuring that researchers are willing and able to come to parks to do research. Most visiting researchers cannot afford the high temporary housing costs found near premier parks. And camping in a tent for several weeks may sound romantic but has limitations when field work involves long hours, bad weather, and strenuous physical activity. A room with shared kitchen facilities allows a researcher to have a dry place in which to write up notes, eat, and get a good night's sleep before going out and doing it all over again. The "field station" environment at McGraw Ranch also fosters information exchange with other scientists and park staff.

Partnerships to Enhance Learning and Stretch Research Dollars - Partnerships are another ingredient of the NPS science revolution. The type of science needed to address park issues is often sophisticated and multi-disciplinary. Fifty years ago a study of bighorn sheep might have involved a ranger on horseback. Today's wildlife study teams include veterinarians, population modelers, GIS specialists, and geneticists. It would be financially impractical for a park to try to assemble this type of professional expertise. Partnerships with universities, other government agencies, and non-governmental organizations give parks access to a broad array of researchers. In addition, partnerships often lead to greater efficiency as mutual needs and interests are addressed through cooperative action.

Volunteers assist with park research. (NPS-RMNP photo)

Science Education - Partnerships with schools and universities allow for project-based learning, using real-life situations as the basis of classroom activities. Educational research has shown that this type of learning is especially effective for students who may not excel in normal course work. Science comes alive when students interact with researchers and, in some cases, assist with data collection.

Citizen Science - Park volunteers supervised by qualified researchers can often accomplish projects that parks cannot otherwise afford. These efforts have given rise to the term "citizen science." This national movement allows volunteers to gain first-hand understanding of the complexities of park science issues, provides added field safety, and extends research dollars. Sometimes the volunteers are themselves scientists donating their time and expertise. In 2005, volunteers donated more than 9000 hours ($135,000 value) to research projects. Utilizing volunteers has dual benefits of increasing the amount of work accomplished and affording excellent adult education opportunities.

Information Transfer - The congressional mandate for the Continental Divide Research Learning Center incorporates sharing scientific information with a variety of audiences including the research community, park staff, and the general public. Research conferences, daylong workshops, and media contacts are being used to meet this mandate. In addition, research learning center staff have played a leading role in redesigning and maintaining the park's web site with in-depth pages covering science in the park.

For more information on the research learning center, see http://www.nps.gov/romo/education/CDRLC/index.html or contact Judy Visty at Judy_Visty@nps.gov or (970) 586-1302.