

# Highlights from NPS Messaging Policies

JRE/Feb08

Director's Order #52 – *Communicating the National Park Service Mission*  
*Inspiring Places, Inspiring People: An Education Strategy for the Alaska and Pacific West Regions of the National Park Service*

While the public does truly love national parks, there is limited understanding—or even awareness—of the depth and breadth of the National Park System and the mission of the National Park Service. Simply put, too many Americans see national parks as only a handful of Western wilderness vacation destinations.

For many people national parks have little, if any, relevance to America's heritage. To help make that connection, the NPS must develop a proactive communications program that:

- establishes a clear agency identity, or “brand;”
- emphasizes that parks are preserved for people—that people are part of the NPS mission—and builds a public sense of ownership;
- and targets messages especially to people with little interest in or exposure to national parks.

Always make the connection between where you work and what you do and the rest of the National Park Service. Add a second layer of connections that are relevant based on geography or theme.

When talking about your park always mention that it is “one of nearly 400 national parks around the country.” The public is confused by the multiple legal designations assigned to parks. Unless the situation requires the formal name(s) of the park, refer to all as “national parks.” Try not to shorten “National Park Service” to “Park Service.”

- Many rangers begin their talks by asking visitors their hometowns. When they reply, name a national park nearby and ask them if they've visited that close- to- home national park.
- Make thematic and geographical connections to other parks and programs.

*“Plain English” Purpose Statement:* When asked what the National Park Service does, many employees respond with language from the Organic Act or subsequent efforts to precisely capture the complexity of the National Park Service mission. Therefore a single, concise sentence has been crafted that broadly, but clearly and without jargon, states its purpose:

*The National Park Service cares for special places saved by the American people so that all may experience our heritage.*

This sentence succinctly describes:

- What we do—*we care for special places*
- How the public is involved—*the American people saved the places, and*
- Why it matters—*so everyone can experience our heritage.*

Not surprisingly, the public can be repelled — rather than engaged — when it sounds like the National Park Service is protecting places *from* them rather than *for* them. Structuring communications around three key elements, in sequence, can help avoid this perception:

- *Special Places*—establish the fact that the place is special, and why
- *Meaningful Experiences*—explain the kinds of opportunities available for meaningful experiences (which opens the door to talk about limitations; not every experience is possible)
- *Protection*—the National Park Service will help guarantee that these places and these experiences will always be there

Too often, we speak to people's worst instincts in an effort to curb them, rather than appealing to their best instincts in the hope of encouraging them. When we address the public as tourists, we increase the likelihood that is all they will ever be.

While not every management decision is best-seller material, identify those that are teachable moments of stewardship—and use them. Explain not only what you are doing but why, and if it makes sense, how a visitor can help. Send your visitors home with a powerful sense of place, a personal investment in it, and an invitation to come back.

A series of organizational statements has been developed as a tool to help bridge the gap between what we are and what the public thinks we are. The statements were developed through workshops involving more than 300 NPS employees and NPS partners. These statements represent in broad strokes and clear and concise language what we want the public to understand about the parks and the mission of the National Park Service, and should be used to frame communications at every appropriate opportunity.

- *Parks Reflect America*: National parks should be an honest, accurate and comprehensive reflection of the diversity of American culture, history, and landscapes.
- *Parks As Libraries*: The National Park Service should offer a lifelong interactive education by serving as a repository of places, things, and ideas, and making them available to teach children and adults about themselves, their communities, and their surroundings.
- *Parks Are a Legacy*: National parks are a gift from past generations that we should preserve for future generations.
- *Parks Are Real*: National parks are special because they are authentic and irreplaceable, which should make them more valuable, more enjoyable, and more educational than a reproduction.
- *Parks Tell Amazing Stories*: The National Park Service should tell the story of human history and natural sciences that together equal modern day America.
- *Parks Are an American Idea*: The idea of national parks was created in the United States and carried by the National Park Service to nations throughout the world.
- *Preservation Matters*: Preserving what we value improves us as individuals, citizens, and communities, and as a people, and the National Park Service should be a leader in promoting preservation.
- *Parks Belong to All Americans*: National parks belong to all Americans, so all Americans should feel welcome to experience parks.
- *The National Park Service Is a Part of the American Community*: The National Park Service should partner with local communities to promote preservation, recreation, and the ideals embodied in parks.
- *Parks Need Resources*: Like anything else of value, the future of national parks depends on support; they will require resources—in the form of money, time, and effort—from all Americans in order to thrive.
- *Parks are to be Enjoyed and Preserved*: People will always be able to enjoy parks, but in ways that will preserve and protect the parks for the future.
- *Parks Can be Experienced In Many Forms*: People should experience national parks—for enjoyment, education, and enrichment—in many ways, not just by visiting.
- *Parks Are a Historical Link*: National parks should represent a link between our past, our present, and our future.
- *The National Park Service Is Credible*: Employees of the National Park Service should be passionate, credible, dedicated stewards of resource preservation and protection.