

## INTERPRETATION AND INCLUSION

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The purpose of this column is to address the need for improving our interpretation diversity and developing a broader approach to WHAT we interpret and to WHOM we interpret. This includes changing both our techniques and our subject matter to reflect a more diverse and encompassing education and interpretation program.

### Ø Column Notes

This is the twelfth issue in an occasional column on the In Touch bulletin board. Replies, comments, essays, notes, and news, are welcome. You can address to me by cc:mail "reply to this message" or find my name on the directory. (Remember - do not retain all original addressees!) Please indicate if your item is intended for future printing in this column.

### Ø New Book

Recently published is a new book entitled Discover America: The Smithsonian Book of the National Parks. (Unlike many publications that use the title "National Parks" to mean only units designated as "parks," Smithsonian has gotten it right and includes parks regardless of title designations.)

Differing from most publications on the National Park System, this book is not a travelogue. Rather, it uses the parks to illustrate the natural and cultural history of the United States. The chapters are entitled "History of the Land," "The Story in the American Earth," "First Families and Fellow Immigrants," "Nature's Nation, and Toward a More Perfect Union."

As an example of this approach, the chapter "Toward a More Perfect Union" begins with the American Revolution and uses such parks as Boston, Minute Man, and Independence as illustrations for events and people. Later the chapter delves into the Civil War and highlights parks from that era. Finally, the chapter moves into the twentieth century and civil rights employing parks like Women's Rights, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Manzanar to close out the theme.

The book is one of the best I've seen in demonstrating the diversity of the National Park System and how the parks work as a whole to protect and interpret the essence of America. Not all parks are included, but the parks chosen portray the multiplicity of people and places that define us. It confirms the concept of a National Park System as a unifying element of this country and undermines the notion that these sites of our shared national identity would be of equivalent value as state parks.

Discover America: The Smithsonian Book of the National Parks, Charles Little, Smithsonian Books, Washington D.C., 1995

### Ø Feature Article

Submitted by Sue Fischer, Wupatki National Monument

"Imagine what it feels like when someone important describes the world and you are not in it." Those words were spoken passionately by a member of the Santa Clara Pueblo. I tried to imagine, but it was difficult. My culture is rarely painted out of the picture, as the palette is predominately white. The absence of Pueblo people in this view of the world caused this man disorientation and a loss of equilibrium. Though I think of his words often, I'm no closer to feeling his emotion. We have different life experiences. We are not the same, and there is nothing wrong with that.

In our society, ethnocentric views and unintentional bias are bound to exist. It is wrong, however, to cause a person to feel deleted. Consequently, I am disturbed by National Park Service interpretive messages that are full of omission. In many parks, 30-year-old exhibits grace, or disgrace, visitor center walls. In these "dinosaurs," one-sided stories pervade. Stereotypes are perpetuated. Inaccurate or incomplete accounts are told, the result of nonexistent consultation

with affiliated cultures or communities.

In a park visitor center, an exhibit reads: "Navajos are proud and resourceful. This tribe is developing its natural and human resources and moving forward with great strides." Just above this statement we are informed that the pickup truck is vogue with Navajo. Contrast this with the wording from a tribal publication: "Tenacious...adaptable...enduring...spiritual--words that characterize the largest and most influential Indian tribe in North America...The Navajo Nation." One communicates pride; the other is unintentionally degrading.

Documentation of human history has been dominated by Eurocentric views. Southwest indigenous cultures were linguistic; they had no written language. Written records of their history began with Spanish contact. To reconstruct southwest prehistory, archaeologists relied heavily on physical remains. They viewed these peoples' lives through materials distorted by time, weather, and random preservation. They interpreted findings through personal value and belief systems, and then wrote endorsing conclusions.

Yet, the descendants of these linguistic cultures are still alive and can trace their history through words so important that only certain people are entrusted with their interpretation and retelling. Their words are rarely heard at ancestral pueblo sites within the national park system. These stories are as legitimate as those crafted by archaeologists.

We should work to replace these out-dated and inaccurate images with more accurate multicultural depictions. Meanwhile, do our sites acknowledge the inaccuracy of this tableau? Can we continue to pretend there is only one perspective, one story to tell?

I also struggle with the rationale that certain histories are immaterial because they are not the reason the park was established. Is it right, for example, to ignore the history of the Navajo within Wupatki National Monument because they are absent from the enabling legislation? Their culture accounts for more than 100 historic sites within park boundaries; their occupation spans 150 years. Families gathered, wandered, built homes, and died. They negotiated within legal systems to keep traditional land as they encountered ranchers, cowboys, and the federal government. Yet, today's visitors leave Wupatki National Monument thinking ancestral pueblo people were the only group to have made a living in this challenging environment.

Too often legislators fail to identify the cultural groups to whom the resources within parks are important. For example, the significance of Devil's Tower to American Indian tribes was not mentioned in the proclamation. Legislative intent focuses interpretation in a necessary way. But, it can also lead us to describe park scenes in which certain people are not a part--people whose self-identity, beliefs, or religion may have been determined by a relationship with these resources.

These exclusive acts I describe, though largely inadvertent, are divisive. They make statements. Historian William H. McNeil said, "Our interpretive efforts should work toward balance and fair play... our efforts should not be intended to deny historical events, but instead demonstrate the damaging results of...biased historical interpretations."

In parks there are multiple experiences with a myriad of meanings to a diverse nation. Ethnographic research should identify communities that have ties to sites. Consultation should discover the significance of these ties and help those not of the culture formulate what is culturally appropriate to say. We should seek creative ways for affiliated cultures to tell their own story. Our interpretive endeavors should induce cultures to explore differences and similarities; they should nurture acceptance. This is multicultural interpretation. This is balance and fair play.

National parks are the perfect setting to celebrate the diversity of this planet--biologically and culturally. While we foster environmental stewardship, we must also build respectful relationships between people. Interpreting the natural world that sustains us is vital, but it becomes less important if we fail to understand that we share the future with other cultures.

Maintaining cultural diversity, like biological diversity, gives us more options. A productive, rich, and stable world is

created when everyone contributes. In a diverse biological system there is infinite variety but enough similarity to permit overlapping functions. Species can fit in different places and roles allowing the system to evolve and adapt to change. Cultural diversity is no different. All humans share similar genetic make-up but our ethnicity provides the variety that distinguishes us. We are not all the same. Should we become one homogenous, culture-less society, perhaps we lose, as the Santa Clara man said, our equilibrium.