

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 ninth article in an occasional column on the In Touch bulletin board. Comments, essays, notes, and news, are welcome. You can address to me by cc:mail under my name on the directory. Please indicate if your item is intended for future printing in this column.

Ø REALITY CHECK

In terms of visitor hours, this is how visitation breaks down for the top five agencies administering federally-run recreation areas (1992 figures):

Administering Agency Visitor Hours (millions)

USDA Forest Service 3,452

Army Corps of Engineers 2,306

National Park Service 1,390

Bureau of Land Management 563

Bureau of Reclamation 269

Ø FEATURE ARTICLE

RE-EXAMINING A METAPHOR FOR AMERICA

An argument for work force diversity
in the National Park Service

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A common and recurring metaphor for American society has been the "melting pot." This version of the story of America's ethnic diversity has been retold in history books and other media for decades. The story tells of the massive waves of immigrants from throughout Europe going through the Ellis Island immigration experience, toiling at menial low-paying jobs, contributing to the Industrial Revolution, developing a proud work ethic, providing a livelihood for their families, and providing a foundation for subsequent generations of their people to succeed in the American way of life. Along the way, the story goes, those immigrants went through an acculturation process. Through their common experiences, their "blood, sweat, and tears," they became "Americans."

The story concludes with the idea that even though these "foreigners" may have come from different points geographically and culturally, the commonality of their experiences has produced a somewhat homogeneous society. Therefore, the metaphor of a melting pot makes sense.

America as a melting pot does have some validity, but it also has some problems. The melting pot that is normally envisioned is an industrial type where ores and minerals are added and melted down until they lose their individual qualities, their uniqueness, and result in some alloy. The resulting "sludge" can then be re-formed into some useful shape or design. If we take this metaphor too literally, it can create some real problems. The loss of individual identity, the creation of a uniform product, and the manipulation of the product all have serious manifestations when applied in a societal context.

Possibly, a somewhat better metaphor for America would be a soup or stew kettle. Again, the ingredients start out with their own unique texture and flavor. If it is cooked properly, the taste of the resulting stew will represent the variety of vegetables, spices, meats, and other ingredients that were added. Using this analogy, the saying "variety is the spice of life" could be applied to societal diversity.

A problem with the stew kettle metaphor is that all the components may not be included. All members of society may not be participatory. Also, it is possible for a poor cook to overcook the mixture and have all the ingredients lose their special qualities of flavor and texture.

America as a tapestry. I propose (and it is not a totally original proposal) that a more appropriate metaphor for our society is that of a tapestry. Using this analogy, all elements of society (women, men, people of all socioeconomic levels, the elderly, the young, political groups, cultural groups, special interests groups,...) are represented as threads in the tapestry. Each element contributes a unique color and texture to the whole. The tapestry grows in size, complexity, and richness as society does the same.

The threads are interwoven creating the fabric of the tapestry; stronger as a whole than individually; interdependent, yet still maintaining their own integrity. The beauty of the tapestry is in its complexity and its richness.

Diversity provides richness. A key point in appreciating diversity in the work force is an understanding of the fact that diversity provides richness. In any circumstance that I can think of, this statement is valid. As a biologist, I know that a system which has a great number of species and proper representation at all trophic levels is healthier and more stable than a monoculture. I know that an ecotone, i.e. the boundary between two environments such as where the forest meets the meadow, supports a greater amount of life than does either environment alone. As one who enjoys food, I relish variety in my menu instead of the same fare everyday. A person with a variety of skills, talents, and interests is certainly better company than someone not so endowed.

The same goes for work force diversity. A diversified work force, a mix of people from different backgrounds with different life experiences bringing in a variety of skills and perspectives, provides a rich work environment. Diversity provides richness in any context.

Diversity of the National Park System vs. Diversity of the National Park Service. As the demographics of the country change, as the trend continues towards a global community, and as life becomes faster-paced and more complicated, the National Park Service has allowed itself to become increasingly less relevant to the general population. The paradox is that while visitation increases, general public support has decreased. An understanding of the values of national parks has decreased in Congress, as was evidenced in a Subcommittee Hearing when Director Kennedy had to remind the representatives of the people that a dollar amount cannot be placed on the value of Independence Hall or Ellis Island.

It is acknowledged that the national park system, with over 360 units throughout the United States and its Territories, is the ultimate expression of the richness of the country's cultural and natural heritage. The ideals and values that define America--freedom, democracy, fairness, opportunity, strength, compassion--are embraced within the units of the national park system. Within this system are represented many of the chapters and stories of the American experience. The system represents the natural and scenic wonders of this land, as well as samples of the variety of ecosystems found within its boundaries.

Independence Hall, Ellis Island, Brown v. Board of Education, as well as Acadia, Big Bend, and Yosemite and the hundreds of other sites within the national park system represent the people, places, and events that constitute the fabric of America. Just as the national park system (the sites) embraces the diverseness of the American experience, so to should the National Park Service (the agency) represent the diverseness of the country's population. The service needs to diversify its work force, needs to diversify its audience, needs to diversify its way of thinking, needs to diversify its way of carrying out its mission.

The message that ordinary people (or ordinary natural processes) can do extraordinary things is found throughout the national park system. This message needs to be delivered to those feeling powerless and disenfranchised in the large urban centers and in the remotest rural areas. The National Park Service needs to re-establish its relevance.

The National Park Service should play a larger role in interpreting the fundamental ideals and values that define America. No institution is in a better position to represent these American values than the National Park Service.