

# Program Review for the International Park Managers Roundtable



**A program sponsored by Parks Victoria in Australia,  
the US National Park Service Office of International Affairs,  
and the US National Park Service Stewardship Institute.**

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## Introduction

The US National Park Service (USNPS) Stewardship Institute, the NPS Office of International Affairs, and Parks Victoria in Australia have partnered to pilot an International Park Managers Roundtable (IPMR). Building on the foundation of the Superintendents Leadership Roundtable and the Learning from our Colleagues Abroad program, the IPMR program integrates lessons-learned about virtual roundtables over the past year and the impact of the international learning fostered by the Learning from our Colleagues Abroad program. The Learning from Our Colleagues Abroad program is funded by a donor through the National Park Foundation and was built on a pre-existing history of cooperation between USNPS and Parks Victoria.

The pilot was designed to provide a small cohort of USNPS superintendents and Parks Victoria district managers with a high-level community of practice that supports individual leadership development, peer-to-peer coaching, and opportunities for deep insights, creativity, and inspiration. A total of 12 leaders, six each from Parks Victoria and the US National Park Service, comprised this cohort and met virtually in alternating months starting in the summer of 2021. This report summarizes the learning and outcomes from this two-year pilot and considers how the program might grow and evolve.

# Program Structure and Evolution

The International Park Managers Roundtable (IPMR) is modeled after the US National Park Service (USNPS) Stewardship Institute's successful Superintendents Leadership Roundtable program, currently in its 22nd year of operating. The Superintendents Leadership Roundtable program consists of 11 standing groups, each composed of 16 superintendents, who meet in-person for three consecutive days each year to workshop leadership challenges together. 176 USNPS superintendents (more than half of the entire superintendent corps) are members of a roundtable group. Group composition is maintained for maximum diversity. Groups contain members from small, medium, and large parks; natural and historical parks; short, medium, and long tenure as park managers; and the maximum demographic diversity possible.

After several months of planning between the USNPS and Parks Victoria, the International Park Managers Roundtable program launched during the summer of 2021. After an intensive series of three half-day sessions to build group trust and cohesion, the group met for regular roundtable sessions in alternating months. The group's final official meeting for this phase of the program was held in 2023.

The pilot group for the program included 6 District Managers from Parks Victoria and 6 Superintendents from the US National Park Service. The participants ranged from leaders who were somewhat new to their agencies to leaders with long tenure in their organizations.

Participants worked with a highly skilled facilitator and leadership coach to engage in meaningful dialogue on current issues and opportunities in parks and protected areas management. The agenda for each session was generated by the participants, ensuring that the group's focus was on topics of the highest need and most relevance. The facilitator assisted the groups in framing the leadership challenges, understanding the core issues to be solved and/or addressed, and helped identify blind spots and other impediments to making progress on an issue.

During months in which no roundtable session was scheduled, the group members signed up to lead virtual tours of their parks/protected areas for the group. These video calls typically lasted an hour and included a presentation by that month's host that provided an overview of their park/protected areas, a discussion of some of their management challenges, and a robust question and answer session. These virtual tours provided a means of connecting all members of the group with the types of resources their colleagues were charged with managing and the types of management challenges inherent to their work.

Between facilitated sessions, the participants were paired into a "buddy" system and buddies scheduled regular check-in calls to get to know each other and their resources better. Participants were responsible for scheduling their own buddy check-in calls.

This program was fully virtual. Participants in the program were expected to be flexible in their availability in order to accommodate the 14-hour time zone difference, with roundtables and associated calls taking place outside of normal working hours. Parks Victoria group members typically took their calls in the morning while USNPS group members joined in the afternoons and evenings. Though the program was virtual, one USNPS superintendent was selected to visit Parks Victoria as part of the "Learning from our Colleagues Abroad" program and traveled to Australia to learn directly from their cohort members, with a particular focus on indigenous co-management issues.

## Core Components of Program First Year

### Kick-off Session:

- Day 1: Explore participant hopes and build community
- Day 2: Establish group norms and Roundtable session
- Day 3: Roundtable session and Buddy time

### Buddy Sessions:

- Coordinated by buddies themselves
- Topics of interest identified by buddies

### Roundtable Sessions:

- Co-created by participants and rooted in standard Roundtable sessions
- Possible leadership topic recap from Buddy sessions

## Program Assessment

The International Park Managers Roundtable was conceived of as a pilot program to test proof of concept and adapt to then-extant operational realities. At the program's conception, both Australia and the United States were in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, park operations and international travel were curtailed, and this program was developed as a means of promoting international collaboration in parks/protected areas management during a time in which traditional engagement routes were unavailable. The pilot was initiated to test this model and has provided two years of input and reflections from participants to evaluate the program's value to park managers, assess areas for program refinement and innovation, and evaluate whether the expansion of the model to other park managers (within the Parks Victoria, USNPS, or other park systems) might be worthwhile.



Program participants. From top left to right: Charlotte Bisset (PV), Lyn Carranza (USNPS), Andy Davies (PV), Helen Dixon (PV), Jodi Heath (PV), Rick Kendall (USNPS), Jacque Lavelle (USNPS), Kevin Schneider (USNPS), Jorge Silva-Bañuelos (USNPS), Julia Street (PV), Mike Tranel (USNPS), Michael Treanor (PV).



# Pilot Program Findings

Interviews were conducted with all program participants between January and March 2023 to examine lessons-learned from the pilot program. The following is a summary of findings outlining the program's key characteristics, benefits to participants, and program challenges/recommendations for improvement. Interviews were conducted by program organizers from both the NPS Stewardship Institute, Parks Victoria Office for Strategic Partnerships, and an evaluation consultant. Interviews lasted approximately an hour and used a guided script of set questions (see Appendix B) and were recorded. Participants were guaranteed confidentiality so they would have the opportunity to speak candidly and without attribution about their experiences with the program. The proceeding findings were developed from a review of themes in the interview transcripts.

Direct quotes from participants gleaned from the interview scripts further illustrate the key findings. The source of the quotes is noted by organization: PV=Parks Victoria participant, US=US National Park Service participant.

## Key Program Characteristics

### Skilled Facilitation Supports Peer-to-Peer Learning

The facilitator created a safe environment to explore pressing leadership topics while providing structure to keep the group focused. Through thoughtful questions and leading a skillful dialogue arc, the facilitator helped participants from diverse backgrounds and experiences “discover the knowledge that they each bring and elevate it in the group” to help collectively explore approaches to complex and often sensitive leadership and management challenges. Participants valued the work of the facilitator in allowing them to be full participants, being neutral to allow all perspectives to be heard, creating a safe space for participants to be genuine, helping to identify and prioritize topics, and providing adequate space and encouragement to delve deeply into topics while maintaining balance in keeping the conversations moving.

*Having that strong facilitation that engenders the discussion and manages it but doesn't constrain it is really valuable. We could go in there and someone would just talk on something that was bugging*

*them today, or give a diatribe on the current issues, or whatever. . . [But the facilitator] picks up these discussion points and rephrases the discussion to focus questions on leadership. (PV)*

*The way that she asks questions is really thoughtful and keeps us on track because a whole bunch of park managers in a room can talk about anything for any length of time. So, I think honing down on what we really want to talk about and how do we know we have done that enough? (US)*

*[The program facilitator] is a leadership coach. She knows this material, the sort of the didactic material of leadership coaching and is able to bring that knowledge to the conversation with all of the groups and see when we're talking ourselves in circles or backing ourselves into corners and finding ways to throw us a line to bring a conversation in for a landing. (US)*





### The Right People at the Right Time

Participants appreciated the diversity of the group and ability to connect with fellow park managers dealing with similar issues. In general, the group appreciated the range of different types of parks/park management challenges represented in the group which not only differed geographically but also included a mix of park sizes, resource focus (e.g. nature-base and historical sites), and management challenges. Participants also generally appreciated the diversity of their group members which ranged from professionals with long tenure in the organization to participants who were fairly new to their role or organization. This diversity of experiences from both within the park management field and from external fields enriched the discussions and introduced fresh perspectives and ideas.

In addition to the overall diversity of the group, participant commitment to the program was key to the program's success. Participants had to have a strong natural curiosity and interest in learning from peers and exploring other cultures, and a willingness to navigate and balance other demands (time differences, work-life commitments, etc.) to regularly attend the sessions.

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*Diversity is the big one. Whether it be gender diversity or cultural differences, diversity is a big thing, but it's not just in those human characteristics, it's actually in diversity in the different types of parks and roles that we manage . . . We've got that diversity in the functions, in geographic environments, physical biodiversity environments, so I think that's really important. You've got people that manage really big national parks. You've got people that manage small historic reserves. You've got people who have a relationship with the Indian reservations and co-management in the US and aboriginal First Nations people in Australia. That diversity is really important in bringing together a group of people like us as well. (PV)*

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Screen capture of IPMR virtual meet-up.

*... The learning is coming from members of the group having diversified backgrounds: different experiences, different park resources, different amounts of time [as park leaders], having served as a district manager or park manager. [It] provides some unique perspectives to what is being shared in the group. So, I think the mix of different people in the group is also important including age and sex and economic and racial diversity and all. All of those sorts of things add to the amount of perspective that you get in the group I think is really important as well. (US)*

### **Supportive Learning Environment, Open to Adaptations**

It was essential that participants felt safe sharing challenges they faced in an open, supportive environment. Without those conditions, supported by the facilitator and all participating members, the conversations would not have been able to reach the depth or significance that they achieved.

*I thought that it would take, you know, six months or something, but it happened relatively quickly. People felt really comfortable talking about things that were in the moment. And that was really powerful. (US)*

*It is such a small community that we're working in. There are people in other organizations within Australia. I couldn't talk as openly as I do with the Americans, because we all have people that we know. It's a small community. So, I like the confidentiality that I'm talking to people on the other side of the world who I can talk openly and have those confidential conversations with. I also respect and trust the other 5 Victorian participants to keep it in house and confidential as well. I don't have any concerns saying what I need to in front of them, whether it be about management or a particular emotional issue. (PV)*

The program was initiated during the pandemic and participants repeatedly emphasized how important it was to have an opportunity to connect with colleagues during the difficult times. As the program moved to year 2, the group began to implement small adaptations to the meeting format and styles. The participants generally appreciated these

adaptations and recommended that they be considered earlier on in the program design.

*The second year, we interspersed our meetings with park tours where each individual takes it on to give a tour of a park or parks and presentation. . . Each one of them is fascinating and insightful, you know just to understand either the breadth of what various superintendents have to manage, or the specifics of the structure that they've got, the type of issues, the visitation, the challenges that they have, how they actually manage various issues... And that's where we've been able to then turn some of that into discussion points later on. (PV)*

*[One of the benefits was] getting to know a place, their issues, and be inspired by some of these incredibly special places in conservation. I think there's a lot of value and appreciation to get that deeper understanding of the landscape and the challenges and opportunities that the various park managers are dealing with. (US)*

### **The Buddy System**

The buddy system provided an opportunity for participants to connect one on one with another group member to deepen relationships and continue to explore pressing topics. This element of the program did not provide specific requirements for the frequency or nature of connections and allowed each pair to develop a schedule and format that worked best for them. After the first year of the program, the group rotated to a different buddy to have the opportunity for deeper conversations and connections with another group member. While most of the participants generally thought that the buddy system added great value to the program in terms of both opportunities for learning and deepening professional relationships, there were also several suggestions for how it can be improved.

*There is a lot of value in having different buddies. I've said that from day one. You wouldn't want to have had the same buddy for years on years. I like the fact that we've changed. I don't think we should change too often, because you're starting to develop a relationship. Then, all of a sudden, you're going to stop. But you don't have to stop, and that's the thing. (PV)*

*[The Buddy system] was probably one of my favorite parts of [the program], we've been able to have that detailed conversation. And some of it just goes down to personal*



*lives, meeting a person from another country, and understanding how someone at a certain age and point in their life is working as a manager, you know, with lots of reports and similar issues to what you are. (PV)*

*I feel like there's really good value of having a buddy over multiple months. So, you do get an opportunity to really develop those connections and get into more deep conversations and get a little bit beyond the superficial. At the same time, it doesn't give a lot of opportunity to have many buddies over the year, and I don't know exactly how to square those necessarily, but I see value in that buddy system. (US)*

### **Informal Groups**

Several participants appreciated the opportunity to form impromptu groups on special topics. In particular, the women's group that formed to discuss leadership and innovations in creating more inclusive workplace policies, particularly around menopause, was a highlight for many participants.

*[We formed the group] to brainstorm and talk about women who are at a point in their careers where they're menopausal and not wanting to give up their jobs, but realizing that menopause is an impact in our ability to think, to work, to feel good at work, to feel good about our jobs. And it's not something anybody talks about, and I know that Parks Victoria has done a lot in trying to help their workforce be more understanding of that. . . Having these conversations with Parks Victoria put it in perspective for me. (US)*

## **Program Benefits**

### **Effective Learning Environment**

*A safe space to address difficult topics:* As noted above in the key characteristics, program participants frequently identified the value of having a trusting, supportive environment to discuss difficult management issues as well as professional and personal challenges they face. In addition to serving as sounding boards and sharing professional knowledge, participants often provide each other with support and encouragement.

*. . . A another real benefit you could put down is we know the challenges we face, but sometimes they're not talked about. But this is a safe space where we can talk about these [challenges] and how do we as senior leaders enable change across our organizations. (US)*

*It's helped me to see the benefits of creating that safe space or being a part of a safe space, and how important it is for authentic leadership. And then how that can help change culture within our teams, of inclusive culture and cultural safety, a supportive organization. So, in that respect, that's the intangible (PV)*

*A time and place to reflect and recharge outside of the daily pressures of the job:* While participants in similar peer-to-peer programs as this roundtable frequently identify the space and support for reflection and restoration as a key program benefit, this group particularly benefitted from the launch of the program during the height of a pandemic. The resulting upheaval to work and personal lives created unprecedented management challenges and took a personal toll. The participants frequently expressed appreciation in having this forum and group of trusting peers to both work through those difficulties and find inspiration during challenging times.

*It was fortuitous that we opened it up in the middle of a pandemic realistically. We were all as leaders just in the crisis management of both sides trying to sort through things and it was pretty hectic. And I think there was just that common ground for us to come in and just breathe. . . People were going through some pretty heavy stuff. And there's a couple of sessions where people really showed their emotions and they felt they were in a safe place to do that, and they had so much support. (PV)*

*Reducing sense of isolation in leadership positions:* Managers at this level of an organization often feel isolated in their roles, with few peers at the same leadership level in the immediate workplace. They face difficult, complex situations on a daily basis and cannot fully share their struggles and concerns with their direct reports or immediate supervisor. The organizational isolation is compounded by physical isolation, with managers scattered across large geographic spans and sometimes working in highly remote areas. Participants reported that the program, even offered in its purely online form, provided professional and personal connections that reduced their sense of isolation. They recognized that while the program provided for scheduled meetings, they could reach out to a Roundtable colleague at any time to discuss an issue or just connect personally.

*When you're working in what is essentially isolation on a whole bunch of issues and problems, it can be very hard to stick your head above the parapet and see what's going on, and see if you're failing, or succeeding, or just surviving, and this has been a real eye opener that a superintendent in the US is having problems or challenges and they're in very similar situations in some cases that we are. (PV)*

*Park superintendents don't get together very often. We're very isolated. You're either a supervisor to a team of people or you're being supervised by somebody you're reporting to, and it's very rare that you have the opportunity to engage with your peers in that intimate way to help each other and share the things that are really going to make or break you as an employee. And I think for Parks Victoria district managers, it's the same. (US)*

*One of the biggest benefits of roundtables is just having a team of people around you that are supportive of you, that you can reach out to because being a park manager can be a lonely job at times. You're out in remote areas. You don't really have peers that are close by that are doing the same kind of work and that you work together with every day. (US)*

### **Enhanced leadership skills and capacity**

The program allowed participants to explore and practice different leadership concepts and management styles, particularly those outside their own organizational culture, and gain awareness of their own strengths and areas for growth. Participants reported building greater confidence in themselves as leaders, particularly in times of unprecedented change. That confidence allowed them to be more authentic in their own leadership style which directly enhanced their ability to support their park teams and create more safe and inclusive work environments.

*The conversations have helped me to approach some of my own issues a little bit differently, especially when it comes to things like personnel issues. It's helped me to be more open to trying different things where there is conflict and we're at an impasse and having trouble moving things forward. (US)*

*I'm fairly early in my journey as a district manager, whereas other people around the table... have been on that journey for a long time. So [I gained] positive confidence and reinforcement plus amazing ideas for how to do things differently or better. (PV)*

### **Greater knowledge and understanding of park management models**

The agendas for the group sessions were typically derived from challenges or issues that the various members of the group were struggling to address or looking for new ways to approach. The facilitator typically encouraged the participant who raised the issue to present it as a case study to the group to give the discussion some grounded context. The exploration opened opportunities for the group to analyze different management approaches and models, and share examples, resources, and tools from their previous work with each other. The group delved into a number of pressing topics that they face as park managers from visitor carrying capacity, responding to climate change and natural disasters, and more.

*It allows me to think about trying some different approaches. Different types of problem solving... And that's an important piece of the roundtable, but it's just one piece of what the participants get from the roundtable. (US)*

*Others are dealing with the same challenges; hearing about how they're dealing with it and what the impacts are on their staff or even on themselves is definitely educational. I'm hearing about other park managers dealing with similar issues and coming up with some ingenious solutions. There was always a learning opportunity there, sharing best practices and very beneficial discussion that you don't get to do normally as part of the day-to-day job. (PV)*

### **Example Topics Discussed**

- Co-stewardship and tribal partnerships
- Health and wellness
- Leadership
- Supporting staff in challenging times
- Climate change
- Responding to major natural disasters (wildfires, flooding)
- Wildfire management
- Visitation carrying capacity
- Changing visitor demographics
- Working with surrounding communities
- Organizational management and team building
- Supporting staff development and safety



# Impact Case Study: People Matter Survey

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*It was actually incredibly helpful to have these open discussions and just brainstorm ideas of what people have done to help themselves in [sexual harassment and bullying] situations and to get a better grasp of it. The conversations inspired me so much that we received copies of the People Matters Survey from our colleagues in Parks Victoria and I was so inspired. It was so well done and different than anything that we see here in the United States that I immediately reached out to the head of our sexual harassment structure in the organization [to share it].*

**USNPS Participant**

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*We have a People Matter Survey and it is a really fantastic way of understanding and getting a snapshot of the culture and the workings of your work group, and your larger work group and the organization and public service across Victoria on all different sectors...And I was able to share that with [US participant] who said “wow, this is absolutely fantastic.” I was so proud because in my district I didn’t have any sexual harassment or bullying claims, and she was telling me about the situation in the US, where it’s just more difficult.*

**Parks Victoria Participant**

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**Parks Victoria rangers on coastline (above) and US National Park Service ranger at Valle Caldera National Preserve (left)**

## **New insights into our own assumptions and culture: Same same, but different**

USNPS and Parks Victoria managers frequently remarked about how the challenges facing their protected areas and organizations were in many ways similar and in many ways different from one another. Those differences provided critical points of departure for considering problems and challenges from different perspectives that were uniquely provided by the group's international composition. Sharing examples and challenges with colleagues from another culture required participants to slow down and take the time to explain the larger context in which their work takes place, and sometimes even the very language that is used to name or describe something. Those framings often resulted in more questions from colleagues from the other country, driving the conversation into deeper levels and offering participants the opportunity to reflect on and re-evaluate their own assumptions and cultural norms.

*In this roundtable we are same-same, but different. . . Whether you're in the US or Parks Victoria, and realistically, the differences between the 6 different district managers in Parks Victoria is dramatic enough, without including the 6 superintendents in the US. It's amazing the differences between the 12 people. And so, that was really one of those moments that we're all the same but there are differences as well: same-same, but different. (PV)*

*We were able to share our experiences, our challenges, our issues – really work through a few of them – a fantastic opportunity to be able to actually talk to people about issues that were similar “same-same, but different” as they say, and have that sharing experience. (PV)*

*It's been a really inspiring experience for me and it's great to connect with colleagues from another country. We spend a lot of time within our little universe of the US National Park Service, and so it's just really, really refreshing to meet other colleagues, other professionals from another parks management agency on the other side of the world. It's really interesting to see the issues and how they're similar, where there are differences. And it's also just as interesting from a cultural perspective of just getting to interact with other park managers from another country. (US)*

*We are not alone in this conservation work that we do and having opportunities to learn from partners across the oceans in different countries, thinking about things from different aspects, different perspectives. It not only reaffirms that I still have much to learn, it exposes me to different ways of thinking about issues. But it also reminds me that I have a lot of value to share with others as well and that my experiences can be meaningful to share with colleagues abroad as well. (US)*

## **Exploring innovative approaches in developing relationships with surrounding communities and tribal partners**

The evolving nature of work with communities and tribal partners was a unifying thread that carried through many of the conversation and offered a rich learning forum which benefitted from being able to compare the differences and similarities across the two countries. The topic required the group to delve deeply into cultural assumptions, difficult histories of nation-building and land acquisition, the technicalities of national laws and organizational polices, and the fundamental work of building trusting relationships and healing traumas.

*Considering that Australia essentially adopted a US style park service, different from many other groups where you removed traditional owner people or didn't really have any care or regard for them when it set up national parks. They were places for quiet enjoyment, pleasure grounds, keeping natural features and wilderness where there was [supposedly] no people. . . . Whereas you know we have still, living, breathing, traditional owners that utilize these parks and so being able to do that comparative sort of analysis between the two is really interesting. (PV)*

*I have five joint management parks where I work with traditional owners to help build their capacity and [we're] much further down the track than perhaps what the National Park Service is in the US. So that's been really enlightening on an international scale-- that knowledge sharing and learning about some of the ways that we do things, [is] another really fantastic thing that has come out of the program (PV)*



# Impact Case Study: Joint Tribal Management



US National Park Service ranger receives lesson in wool spinning from Master Weaver at Hubbell Trading Post National Historic Site

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*It opened up a whole new world of places and ways of doing things and different ways to think about things. I'm very focused on joint [tribal] management cause that's my top priority...And that is the area I think I've benefited the most in ways to think about. "How to make it all work?" So, since this experience I have had many more conversations with people in this agency...I now take the time to explain why sometimes things take longer here than other parks. Why things are different here. Why can't you just use the template here? Why things are not traditional park service ways of doing things here and that it's OK and that it does work and there are other ways to do things...After having conversations with people in Australia [I realized] you really need to do that, you need to explain it. You need to explain it for people to get on board, you need to take the time and explain it until it becomes commonplace in the United States. So, I do.*

**USNPS Participant**

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# Impact Case Study: Inspiring Staff

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*I was involved with a couple of others in this program in putting together a district manager forum for Parks Victoria with 17 district managers. I asked [a US Roundtable colleague] to join via video and present on the Resist-Accept-Direct Climate Change Response Decision Framework (RAD) because it was about making decisions and planning in park management and I just thought it was so profound. We actually invited our chief scientist from Parks Victoria [to the meeting]...What ended up happening is Parks Victoria at the executive level has restructured and has included climate action in the title of this chief scientist, and he presented to the whole of the organization at our conference at the end of the year and actually talked about the experience and how he was introduced to the RAD framework. And that's just from a single conversation.*

**Parks Victoria Participant**

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Regional leadership team for Mallee region of Northwest Victoria canoeing on Little Lake Hattah.

### **Building a network of colleagues abroad and within the organization**

Professional networks were built with colleagues working on similar issues for ongoing learning, resources, and tools/technology (e.g. booking systems). The connections that were forged ranged from an array of professional interests to deep personal friendships. Participants noted that they felt completely comfortable reaching out to any member of the group to discuss a challenge. In addition to the relationships created across countries, participants from Parks Victoria also noted that the program offered opportunities for them to form stronger connections with colleagues in their organization since they do not have a program similar to the US National Park Service Superintendents Leadership Roundtable.

*Again, it reminds me that none of these challenges we deal with are unique, but they're shared experiences and we were able to talk a little bit more about our experiences directly and identify some ways we could share how our examples played out and maybe give each other some ideas on how we could approach them to resolve them and that was really beneficial. (US, in reflecting on buddy conversations)*

*We had much deeper connections with our US counterparts and the people from our organization that were involved in this and barely knew some of our Australian counterparts. So it actually led us to reinvigorate the network across the district managers and we now meet on teams more regularly...and again just fantastic support networks and just so many intangibles that come out of having those connections there as well. (PV)*

*Amazing conversations, and the other [benefit] was that the relationship between district managers doing this [program] has been huge. Just like massive, say like we've now come together as a group. We talk regularly and this is because we formed up this relationship. (PV)*

*It [becomes] a bunch of peers that you can get support from so it doesn't have to be in a meeting. But it's a peer support group. (US)*

### **Inspiring staff and other colleagues**

Throughout the interviews, participants provided a multitude of examples about how the learning and connections they made through the program helped to inspire their staff and other colleagues. Those benefits were not only shared with their direct reports and park team members, but also extended to other colleagues and peers, their supervisors and national leadership, and community and tribal partners. The connections had substantial impacts ranging from new management models that transformed an organization to inspiring national leaders to forge connections with the partnering countries to advance their learning and inform strategic national priorities.

*I've talked to [one of my superintendent peers] pretty frequently at length about [things I have learned from this program]; and she ended up going to Washington, DC, to be the tribal liaison for the National Parks Service for the Director. She's there now, and she and I still have conversations. She and the Director made a visit recently to [Australian] parks... And I truly believe it was because of my conversations with her that they ended up going to Australia. (US)*

*My staff has appreciated that broader thinking about these topics and they're recognizing that I'm not just coming up with these ideas on my own, but I'm thinking about it in a much broader context and I think that that helps with their buy-in with some of the things I'm sharing. And I think it keeps us on the forefront of innovation and creativity. (US)*

## **Program Challenges and Recommendations for Enhancement**

*"Limitations, weaknesses, and challenges are all under our control. I strongly believe that we are mature and experienced enough to determine our own destiny. So, if we've got challenges and weaknesses as a group into how we do [our work] or our direction, I think we can influence that."*

### **Sustained Participation**

Many of the participants commented on reduced participation and loss of "spark" in the group discussion in the second year of the program. In the interviews, they identified several



factors that they felt contributed to this sense of reduced energy. However, even when noting this concern, nearly all participants also reaffirmed their desire to continue in the program and commitment to reinvigorating the group dynamic.

*I'm hopeful and I'm excited to see what the next version of this Roundtable is; but I'm very excited to continue going forward and I am hoping to bring a renewed commitment to participation and engagement because I want this to be a success and I feel like we've only touched the surface of what we can learn from each other at this point. (US)*

**Post-pandemic Work/Life Balance:** Early in the program, pandemic restrictions were still in place and many participants were working nearly exclusively from home. During that time, they found it easier to guard their time for participating in the program because there were fewer competing priorities, both at work and in personal lives with travel, meetings and other typical commitments. A number of participants also acknowledged that as a peer-to-peer learning program, success is heavily dependent on level of group participation.

*. . . the fact that we were all in COVID and everything was upside down, everything was in turmoil. And this [program] actually was one of the most stable things in our lives at that time. Whereas now things have returned back [to pre-pandemic operations] and you're in this state of flux where it's very hard to keep this as the stable thing and it's very challenging with all the other demands of returning to the normal workplace, because now we're traveling, we're all getting into our vehicles or getting into our airplanes and keeping those commitments that we're supposed to be doing. . . it makes it much harder to keep those connections through this roundtable. (US)*

*The challenges include where people have not shown up. It's been challenging to form relationships with those individuals. (PV)*

**Fatigue in a Multi-year Program:** Some interviewees attributed the attrition to the fact that the program had no clear end-date and therefore there was less urgency in prioritizing the sessions because if they missed one, they would have the opportunity to attend many more in the future. To paraphrase their words: you can always catch the next bus.

A few others in the group attributed it to a sense of redundancy in some of the topics the group identified and selected for the session conversations, returning too soon to topics covered earlier in the program.

*There are a few people in the group who would just love to continue the way we are and there's others that would love to see it change a bit. I think change is up to us. We determine what the topics are. At each meeting we determine the format of the conversations to get the best value out. (PV)*

**Time Difference:** The international composition of the group with participants across 14 hours of time zone differences required participants to join calls outside of core work hours, either late in the evening or early in the morning. All of the participants agreed that such inconveniences were worth the effort to connect with colleagues in other countries but recognized it required a commitment to balancing participation with other life demands. At most, a couple participants recommended occasionally adjusting the times so that it is not impacting the same participants in the same ways throughout the year.

*In terms of practicalities, time zones are obviously a challenge for some people but that's all right. We deal with that. And we've realized that for some people, it's gonna be an early morning and for others it will be late afternoon. You just accept that if you want to be part of an international group. That's just logistics. (PV)*



## Program Design

**Buddy System:** The majority of participants found great value in the buddy program but for some the overall experience was mixed, largely dependent on how well they aligned with their buddies in terms of time availability and professional or personal interests. An even smaller subset of the group did not find any value in the buddy program as a personal preference in feeling comfortable in connecting and sharing in the larger group setting. Through the interviews the participants offered valuable feedback on how the buddy component could be enhanced in terms of format and frequency of changing buddies. In offering these alternatives, they also acknowledged that each option had both benefits and potential drawbacks.

### *Format*

- Many participants enjoyed starting with a virtual tour of the parks because it helped buddies get to know one another and identify commonalities.
- Some participants wanted more structure or accountability with their buddies and suggested providing specific questions to discuss or assignments. Others preferred the free-flow nature of these connections and found value in allowing their conversations to ebb and flow around both park management and leadership questions and comparing personal journeys and challenges.

### *Pairing*

- Some of the participants advocated to create pairings that matched the same level of experience or park resource types/management issues. Others said it didn't matter and found value in the diversity of both experience and management challenges.
- When there were frustrations, most stemmed from a difference in the level of commitment and availability of buddies.

### *Changing partners*

- Some participants felt a loss when they had to change buddies after a year of developing a relationship together.
- Some participants suggested using the first year to have the opportunity for one-on-one calls with a greater number of participants to get to know more people more deeply (e.g. rotating every three months), and then having a dedicated buddy for the full second year. Other participants suggested just the opposite: having a dedicated buddy for the first year, but then rotating more frequently between buddies for the second year.
- Others simply advocated for opportunities to have one-on-one time with more colleagues regardless of a specific format. In addition, many recognized that if they wanted to connect individually with more group colleagues that it was up to them to simply reach out to make the connection.

*I feel like there's really good value of having a buddy over multiple months. You do get an opportunity to really develop those connections and get into more deep conversations and get a little bit beyond the superficial. At the same time, it doesn't give a lot of opportunity to have many buddies over the over the year. . . I don't know exactly how to square those [observations]. . . but I see value in the buddy system. (US)*

*. . . There's nothing stopping me contacting one of the others and having a catch up on a particular issue or a matter or a follow-up from a previous session, and I think that needs to be reiterated that you don't have to wait for a buddy session. I think we're all experienced and mature enough to know we can do that. But it'd be just good to reiterate it a bit more often. (PV)*



**Pair of Kookaburras in Lysterfield Park, Victoria, Australia**

PARKS VICTORIA/ WAYNE BUTTERWORTH

**Setting the Stage:** Across the board, the participants greatly appreciate the wide diversity of the group and the unique opportunity that cross-cultural conversations offered for learning and inspiration. Leaning into these conversations required time to develop an understanding of the unique management contexts of each participant, and deciphering the organizational and cultural differences of the work in each country. Some participants offered valuable feedback for where they struggled in feeling appropriately grounded to engage deeply in these differences and offered suggestions for program elements that could be considered that would allow these connections to evolve more quickly and deeply.

- **Park/Regional Overviews:** A few participants recommended that each group member take 10 minutes and present or talk about their park in the first sessions in order to provide a sense of place for the management challenges and issues that are discussed in subsequent conversations. The group started to do this as part of their buddy program with in-depth tours and it was exceptionally well received.
- **Taking the time to describe differences:** As noted above, participants found great value in comparing management and leadership challenges that were “same, same but different.” However, in order to fully understand and appreciate those differences, the group needs to take the time to describe their challenges more fully and allow group questions that seek additional context. Several participants recommended the group take more time for this in discussions in order to fully use differences to drive learning. Some noted that some of this exploration occurred in the chats during the group discussion but was insufficient in providing sufficient detail and could be distracting.

### Going Deeper

At the beginning of the program, the facilitator worked with the group to identify a wide array of topics that they were interested in exploring together. At the beginning of each session, the group also provided individual updates on what they were facing and had on their minds. These processes surfaced topics for group discussion and peer learning.

**Meeting emerging needs versus going deeper:** The use of the check-ins at the start of the session generated topics that had immediate urgency to group members. Some participants appreciated this emergent design element of the program, but others thought that it sometimes distracted the group from other pressing topics that they identified at the program’s onset. Others also recognized that it sometimes created a feeling of redundancy in the conversations, especially as the program entered its second year.

*I think in the last 6 months it’s probably been a little bit less structured, and that’s been a bit challenging as some of the conversations have kind of dipped off, or we’re not quite sure where we’re going, or we take the same sort of discussion points and end up talking about similar issues, because they might be of particular relevance to someone that day. There was a bit of a, I don’t know if the word translates, a bit of a general funk in the group [for a couple meetings in the second year]. You know, where it was a bit of lower energy. Even so, [the group understood] the relevance of what we were doing, and the usefulness of it, so we still loved it [connecting as a group]. (PV)*

**Conversation Sparks:** Some participants craved more focus on certain topics and deeper dives into common issues and leadership frameworks and suggested designating a few sessions on a focused topic. A few participants recommended either having a colleague from the group offer to present on the work they are doing or to bring in a guest speaker to catalyze discussion and go more deeply into a topic.

*You [could] have a presentation from somebody like 1/2 hour . . . maybe it’s about PV’s approach to climate change or maybe it’s someone to talk about Healthy Parks, Healthy People. But you have that focus presentation and then there’s opportunity for the group to discuss it. (US)*

*One of the things I would really love to see brought into the roundtable is the opportunity to bring in subject matter experts from either organization. I would absolutely love to hear from [an expert] in the US . . . about a particular topic whether that be engagement with native American tribes, or [some other topic] . . . (PV)*

## A Rich Experience but Not the Same as In-person Learning

The participants recognized that the increased use of virtual meetings that developed during the COVID 19 pandemic allowed for a greater opportunity to connect with colleagues from afar and those connections, even if remote, were beneficial. They also appreciated that the online program offered a cost-effective model that they personally benefitted from and could see it easily extending to others. However, even a well-structured virtual program does not have the same level of impact and learning as in-person dialogues and experiences. The group had several suggestions how an in-person component might be integrated into the program:

- Identify a central location to meet in-person after the first year or at the start of a program. Los Angeles and Hawaii were specifically identified as a half-way point.
- Each organization could send members of the cohort as part of the delegation to international meetings like the World Conservation Congress or similar. This would create opportunities for group members to meet in person while also advancing each organization's participation in these important international meetings.
- Structure organizational park-to-park exchanges for individuals from the group to spend time at one or more sites in another country. Participants who had previously traveled to the other countries either through work-related opportunities or personal trips described having a much more grounded context to engage in the group discussions.
- Should exchanges around the topics of co-stewardship and working with Indigenous communities be pursued, participants advocated for a team approach which would include a manager and Indigenous partner from a park/region to foster shared learning, strengthen relationships, and enhance the likelihood that the learning from the exchange will help inform work in their home communities.

*This is an inexpensive way to connect with people, but it's also not a real connection. And I can say from a Superintendents Leadership Roundtable perspective that 60% of the sharing happens in a group meeting, but the other 40% of sharing and connection that is just as and in some cases even more valuable happens after the meeting when you all go out for dinner and start sharing and getting to know each other. One of the strengths of the program--the video component—is also a weakness of the program. (US)*



Sawmill Geyser at Yellowstone National Park  
NPS/NEIL HERBERT



# Impact Case Study: Superintendent Exchange



**Budj Bim National Park, co-managed by Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation and Parks Victoria (top)**

PARKS VICTORIA

**Frosty ponderosa pine trees at History Grove in Valles Caldera National Preserve (bottom)**

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

IPMR participant Jorge Silva-Bañuelos, the Superintendent of Valles Caldera National Preserve, had the opportunity to visit Victoria in 2023 to learn about how Parks Victoria is working in partnership with Traditional Owners under joint and co-management arrangements of 49 parks and reserves, Managing Country Together. In reflecting on the trip, Jorge noted, “While the US National Park Service and Parks Victoria do work on opposite sides of the planet, we share an enormous range of common issues around everything from restoring legacy land uses to new solutions such as tree thinning, managing fire, and working with the First Peoples.”

While on Gunditjmarra Country visiting Budj Bim National Park, which is co-managed with the Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation, Jorge was taken on a cultural tour starting at the Tae Rak Aquaculture Centre.

*“One of the things that struck me was the draining of Tae Rak (Lake Condah) for agricultural use as essentially an effort to harm the Gunditjmarra people and take away their livelihood and their cultural connection to land.”*

The Budj Bim Cultural Landscape contains one of the world’s most extensive and oldest aquaculture systems. In July 2019, the Budj Bim Cultural Landscape was inscribed on the UNESCO world heritage list, which recognizes the international significance of the landscape and the aquaculture systems. Jorge also visited Gunaikurnai Country where he was welcomed by representatives from the Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (GLaWAC).

“I was impressed with how GLaWAC and the Gunaikurnai people have been building their own capacity to develop higher levels of partnerships with Parks Victoria and the culturally important parks and reserves, where they’re constructing these five pillars and shields to recognise their five clans and convey the cultural importance of these lands to visitors....I’m interested in how Valles Caldera National Preserve can look at our own signage to provide similar recognition and acknowledgement. There are a whole host of Traditional Owners who are connected to that landscape, so it’s something I’m going to reflect on to see how we can translate this concept back home,” Jorge says.



## Expand the Circle

Overall, participants found great value in the program and supported seeing the model expand in a number of different ways, either as a modification to their group or through other pilot programs that may incorporate program refinements.

**Consider Opportunities to Invite New Members in the Future:** Some group members would welcome the opportunity to invite new members into the conversations either by inviting additional participants from their organizations or expanding the circle to include park managers from other countries. There could be an opportunity for new members to join if any of the current members leave or if the group size is expanded.

*Finding opportunities for new participants to join. I don't necessarily want to kick anyone out, but you know, keep that excitement and motivation fresh by adding new participants I think would be a valuable way forward. (US)*

*And then after two years, you maybe graduate some people out. So, you have some stability [of existing group members] then you have some people new come in... Or perhaps we bring in another couple of countries like... New Zealand or Canada or South Africa or you know some other countries into the fold? To me that would/could sort of like reenergize [the group] or maybe you spin off another group that has some other countries. (PV)*



**Expand to New International Roundtables:** Overall, participants found the program model to be highly rewarding and inspirational, and encouraged expanding the program to create new groups so that other managers from their organization and other countries could benefit.

*International programs, at least in the Park Service, have a sort of a sense of exclusivity about them... I think it would be great to see this program expand and become available to a wider array of park managers and district managers and other similarly situated people and other countries. (US)*

**Introduce the Model to Parks Victoria:** Participants from Parks Victoria reflected on how they did not have a program similar to the US version of the Superintendents Leadership Roundtable, which serves superintendents across the National Park Service and served as the model for the International Park Managers Roundtable peer to peer learning format. They saw great value in considering standing up something similar for their cohorts of park managers.

*One of the things that I think we could learn from, particularly here in Australia and Parks Victoria is about the US Superintendents Leadership Roundtable. That's the next logical step for us over here. (PV)*

**Other Levels of Managers Need This Too:** Several participants remarked that this model of learning, whether with an international cohort or within their organization, would benefit their direct reports and other managers. Not only would it offer valuable learning and development for current and future park leaders, it would also provide intangible value in deepening networking relationships across organizations/internationally and providing incentives to employees.

*Provide something similar [to the International Park Managers Roundtable] to managers at the next level down (chief rangers) - ... have it as a bit of a reward for our top talent... Because you know often when you do these sorts of forums, it's when some of the gold comes out that you put these fantastic people together and then you go "wow," this is something that ultimately could change the organizations on both sides. (PV)*

**Winter cross-country skiing at Acadia National Park**  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

# Conclusion

*“I would love to see this continue. I’m not finished [learning from this group of professionals] yet, and I think there’s others that would say the same. I see this as a long-term commitment for me, and not just something that’s you know 2 or 3 years, and we’re done.”*

**Parks Victoria Participant**

Overall, the IPMR program has been an outstanding success in creating a collegial professional leadership group of park managers across borders. Some key highlights resulting from the program include:

- The program provided a valuable professional development opportunity for the participants, offering a peer-to-peer approach to problem-solving to address management issues and share strategies and resources that tapped the learning potential of sharing examples between the US National Park Service and Parks Victoria that are “Same same, but different”
- Through dialogue-based learning and buddy conversations, participants developed deep personal connections that offered support and encouragement during challenging times; and collectively these relationships have strengthened the partnership between the US National Park Service and Parks Victoria.
- The program adapted during the two-year pilot and responded to participant-generated innovations, including virtual park tours during which each participant hosted the group so they could learn about each other’s parks and associated management challenges.
- Participants also used relationships created during the program to continue learning and networking outside the formal meeting sessions. For example, a subgroup called ‘Park Sisters’ was formed to focus on women and the barriers and associated challenges/opportunities to embed learning opportunities across agencies.
- While the virtual connections were rich, the participants recognized that it cannot fully replace the impact of direct in-person experiences.

In contrast to the USNPS Superintendents Leadership Roundtable, the IPMR program was developed in direct response to the 2020 pandemic and the resulting isolation this caused in the workplace. This forum was immensely beneficial to the participants during this time. In returning to ‘normal’ work conditions, participants now recognize continued participation requires a high level of commitment. Yet, most of the participants feel strongly about the value of the program and would like to see it continue and expand.

Lessons-learned from this evaluation will be used to continue to enhance the program model and co-design a second phase of the program with the current cohort of participants that will launch in 2024.





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*I just think that this could grow into something worldwide. And that there could be this huge web of international parks managers that are learning from each other... I just think there's so much potential here, truly. (US)*

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**Whiskey Bay in Wilson's Promontory National Park, Parks Victoria (top)  
Early morning sun over Navajo National Monument, US National Park Service (below)**



# Appendix A

## Program Contributors

### **Parks Victoria Participants**

Charlotte Bisset, District Manager, Northern Region, Northern Rivers

Andy Davies, District Manager, Eastern Region, South Gippsland

Helen Dixon, District Manager, Eastern Region, Central Gippsland

Jodi Heath, District Manager, Western Region, Western Basalt

Julia Street, District Manager, Melbourne Region, South East Melbourne

Michael Treanor, District Manager, Port Phillip, Eastern Region Waterways

### **US National Park Service Participants**

Lyn Carranza, Superintendent, Southern Four Corners Group: Canyon de Chelly National Monument, Hubbell Trading Post National Historic Site, Navajo National Monument, Arizona & New Mexico

Jacque Lavelle, Superintendent, Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site, Montana

Rick Kendall, Superintendent, Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller & Saint-Gaudens National Historical Parks, Vermont & New Hampshire

Kevin Schneider, Superintendent, Acadia National Park, Maine

Jorge Silva-Bañuelos, Superintendent, Valles Caldera National Preserve, New Mexico

Mike Tranel, Deputy Superintendent, Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming, Montana, & Idaho

## **Group Facilitator**

Frances VanHouten, Principal Coach and Facilitator, RainMaker Coaching

## **Program Coordinating Committee**

Angela Gardiner, National and International Engagement Coordinator Strategic Partnerships, Parks Victoria

Jo Hopkins, Senior Manager Strategic Partnerships, Parks Victoria

Christina Marts, Acting Director, Stewardship Institute, US National Park Service

Stephen Morris, Chief, Office of International Affairs, US National Park Service

Rebecca Stanfield McCown, Director, Stewardship Institute, US National Park Service

**\*Locations noted are at time of program start-up. Some participants changed positions partway through the program.**

# Appendix B

## Program Evaluation Interview Guide

### Introduction, Key Points:

- Thank you for participating in this interview.
- I would like to record the conversation for note taking purposes. Only the small evaluation team from the program organizers (Jo, Ange, Rebecca) and our evaluation methods consultant will have access to the recording and the transcript. **Is it ok with you if I record? At any time, you can ask that I stop recording.**
- As you know, the IPMR program is a pilot – and we will be using your perspectives and insights to evaluate the impact so far and understand what changes would create a stronger program.
- Given that there is a small number of participants in the program, it will be hard to ensure anonymity. However, any quotes used in the reporting will not be attributed to you, and we will share the findings with you for review before they are finalized.

If you were talking with a colleague – let’s say, a new park manager who was curious about the IPMR program – how might you give them a brief, introductory **description of IPMR in just a few sentences?**

- We’ll get into further detail a bit later in our conversation, but at the outset, it’s helpful to hear how you might informally describe IPMR in a nutshell.

**Next, I would like to talk about the design and implementation of the program.**

From your perspective, how does the **professional facilitation** of the roundtable sessions contribute to the knowledge and skills that participants gain?

From your perspective, what are the **critical ingredients or key components** of the IPMR program? What is essential for making IPMR work effectively?

*Ask question if they do not specifically address the buddy system:*

To what degree have you benefited from the **buddy system** among IPMR participants? Are there any examples you can share that illustrate the benefits you’ve experienced?

*Ask this question if they do not specifically address informal networking:*

To what degree have you benefited from the **informal network** among the broader group of IPMR participants? Are there any **examples** you can share that illustrate the benefits you’ve experienced?

This program is a pilot and as such, it is important to getting an understanding of its strengths and weaknesses. From your perspective, what are the **limitations or weaknesses of the IPMR program?** In terms of the program design and facilitation? What challenges have you experienced or observed?

**I’m interested in hearing about the role that you feel the international connections of IPMR have played in your leadership and management of your park.**



What new **knowledge or perspectives** regarding park management have you gained from your interactions with international colleagues?

- Given your current level of experience as a park manager, how has the program informed your management practices?
- How would you describe the range of park leadership experience that members of your group bring to the roundtable? From your perspective, how has the range of experience influenced what you've gained from your participation?
- *If needed:* In what ways has your leadership been enhanced from your interactions with international colleagues?

I'm wondering if there are any **examples** you can share that illustrate ways in which you feel you've become a better park leader because of the knowledge, skills, and relationships gained through IPMR. For instance, how have you been able to **better address challenges or seize opportunities** due to your participation in IPMR?

- Within your park?
- In the larger organization?
- In your work with partners and communities?

Based on your perspective, how has your participation in IPMR impacted how you see **your role in conservation** at a national and international level?

I'd be interested in hearing about any communication you've engaged in with regard to the program. How, if at all, have you communicated with your supervisor about the program? How, if at all, have you communicated with your **employees** about the program?

That covers all the specific questions that I have. In closing, is there anything else you'd like to add regarding your perspectives on the IPMR program?

# National Park Service Stewardship INSTITUTE



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