National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Arts Afire!

Creative Engagement through the Arts

“It is in our works of art that we reveal to ourselves and to others the inner vision which guides us as a nation.”

— President Lyndon B. Johnson

Cover: Watercolor painting en plein air (in the open air) at Weir Farm National Historic Site — NPS Photo

Inside Cover and Page 1: Girl Scouts participating in Take Part in Art at Weir Farm National Historic Site—NPS Photos

Creative Engagement Through the Arts

As the National Park Service approaches its centennial in 2016, we have been challenged anew to respond to the needs of 21st century park visitors. How can parks continue to serve as places of sanctuary while providing spaces for reflecting on the stories that hold relevance to Americans? One response is Arts Afire!, a strategy identified in the recent NPS Call to Action to engage diverse audiences, especially young people, through the arts. The arts offer a means for self-expression and a way to reflect on ideas and experiences that matter to them. As President Lyndon B. Johnson said, when establishing the National Endowment for the Arts, "Art is a nation's most precious heritage. For it is in our works of art that we reveal to ourselves and to others the inner vision which guides us as a nation." Self-discovery and cultural reflection are essential to people's physical, mental and spiritual well-being, and need to be nurtured as our nation continues to evolve.

The five programs featured here reflect some of the best examples of how parks and park partners are creatively engaging young people and audiences of all ages through the arts. Grand Canyon National Park, in collaboration with the Grand Canyon School, is connecting local students to this expansive national park through interaction with a breadth of national artists. New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park invites local young people to interpret park themes and stories in ways that are meaningful and culturally relevant to them. The Udall Foundation's *Parks in Focus* brings underserved youth into national parks through an innovative photography program that uses technology as a gateway to the natural world. Another program, *Desire Trails,* presented by Golden Gate National Recreation Area's arts partner, Headlands Center for the Arts, guides visitors of all ages on artist-created cultural sojourns where the park's sites and stories are creatively interpreted. Weir Farm National Historic Site's *Take Part in Art* is led by professional artists who invite visitors to step into the shoes of American Impressionist J. Alden Weir and create art en plein air on park grounds.

These five programs exemplify innovative, replicable models that may be adapted to any park setting. To help parks interested in creating their own programs, a series of "sparks"—practical suggestions for getting started and links to additional resources are included. We believe this is only the beginning. We hope that Arts Afire! spurs new approaches to creating lasting and memorable experiences for park visitors across the nation.

Page 2: Frank Barrows, Chief of Interpretation and Education, with young people from the *Youth Ambassadors Program* — NPS Photo by Mitchell Garner

Page 3: Young people in the *Youth Ambassadors Program* working on a musical production — NPS Photo by Nick Francis

Bridges to the Community

YOUTH AMBASSADOR PROGRAM: NEW BEDFORD WHALING NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

How to connect the ideas of a national park to younger audiences is a primary question for the National Park Service. New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park, an urban, partnership-driven park in New Bedford, Massachusetts, has been engaging a diverse population of young people in the community for nearly fifteen years in a broad range of projects from murals to youth magazines and recently to music and video creation. Superintendent Jen Nersesian wonders "if the community in which we are embedded is not connected to our park, how can we expect anyone else to be?" Working with youth has been one way that the park has built bridges to the local community.

The "Youth Ambassador Program" (YAP) engages underserved youth, ages 15 – 21, in the creation of park-themed music videos that are shared broadly via social media. Working with Chief of Interpretation and Education, Frank Barrows, and artists from 3rd Eye Unlimited, a local nonprofit organization, the youth write and compose hip-hop songs in which they connect park themes to the issues in their own lives. Nersesian knows that when the "message is crafted by them, it naturally resonates with what is relevant to them and to their peers. They can do this in a way we never could." She sees the benefits on multiple fronts. First, the youth are engaged in creative, meaningful activity which yields positive results and are connecting with the park in deep and lasting ways. Second, they are truly ambassadors. Working in a medium of their choosing and sharing through social media, they are empowered to spread their messages to their peers, their families and to local and national park visitors.

In a community where almost 50% of all students do not complete high school, the YAP is an especially valuable bridge. If these youth can find their voice and be recognized for their achievements, they stand a better chance to succeed. If their positive messages can be felt by their peers, the potential exists for far-reaching impact. Nersesian feels that the park has to be cognizant of the realities young people face and she believes that "National Parks can be a part of the solution."

Sparks!

Listen to the needs of the youth and try to involve them in each stage of the art making process. Then listen more. Guide, but don't dictate. You will get better results with their buy-in. Recruit park staff who understand and identify with the issues of young people in your community.

Be clear about the participants' responsibilities. In addition to learning about the art form, these programs can be an excellent opportunity to develop life skills that are critical to bringing the art to a larger audience.

Small is not only beautiful, with funding tight everywhere, it is often more sustainable. It is also more effective to work with a small group and provide a stipend. By making this a paid position, young people take it seriously and gain valuable work experience.

Explore the possibility of cooperative agreements with local community art partners.

"YAP changes the way kids look at their park and their city. There is transformation and hope when they share their positive views with others."

— Frank Barrows

Gateway to the Arts

GRAND CANYON SCHOOL AND
GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK

"Artists-in-residence bring new ways of seeing and feeling into the classroom. They expand students' awareness of the richness of the arts that happen here."

— Sharyl Allen

As the only K-12 school located in a national park, Grand Canyon School's 300 students reflect the multi-cultural heritage surrounding the Grand Canyon. The school serves the children of park staff and the gateway communities, some coming from over 20 miles away. Despite the millions of visitors to Grand Canyon National Park each year, living in and around the park can be isolating. Second grade teacher Jennifer Marshall observes, "our students live in an area with few cultural opportunities outside their own family culture. As educators, we want to help students appreciate the Grand Canyon and the truly unique learning environment it provides." A multi-layered arts partnership between the school and the national park has evolved as a counterbalance to the isolation. Sharyl Allen, Superintendent of Grand Canyon Unified School District, believes that arts collaboration with the park plays a major role in activating student learning. Arts-in-the-Parks programs encourage students to exhibit their art to park visitors while the Grand Canyon Music Festival brings musicians into the school, exposing them to a breadth of musical possibilities. In the three years since the park's artist-in-residence program was initiated at the South Rim, nearly 30 artists, from poets to painters, cellists to dancers, have visited Grand Canyon School to conduct workshops, perform, and provide professional development for teachers. In Allen's view, "the artists-in-residence put our students in touch with a wide and vast field of arts."

Artist-in-residence Rachel Wilson worked with Marshall's second-graders to connect imagery from the Grand Canyon with their personal lives. The goal was to relate their daily experience to the layers of the Canyon from the oldest rocks to the youngest. The students made torn paper collages using a layering effect to integrate the two concepts. Wilson calls the process, "combining geological stratification with the students' views of themselves."

Judy Hellmich-Bryan, Chief of Interpretation, observes that although the park provides a wide range of educational programs—from science to math to reading with multiple contexts for youth to experience the park—learning through the arts is special. She feels that, "art invites students and visitors to see the Canyon differently and to find new meaning in their park experience." In turn, Allen appreciates the park's enduring commitment to education and the arts which enables rural students to experience many cultural opportunities.

Page 4: Students from Grand Canyon School show off their artwork — NPS Photo by Rene Westbrook

Page 5: Artist-in-Residence Rachel Wilson working with a second grade class at Grand Canyon School — NPS Photo by Rene Westbrook

Sparks!

Grand Canyon National Park established its in-school collaboration by drawing from the park's artist-in-residence (AIR) program. The park's AIR coordinator works with artists with teaching experience or who are comfortable working with youth. Remember that artists need funding; typically, schools cannot cover this cost, although many teachers are able to help with materials.

Begin exploring an arts partnership with the school administrators. If possible, start with the superintendent of schools and brainstorm how an arts program will meet their curriculum and learning standards. Then meet with a principal and interested teachers to brainstorm and collaborate.

At Grand Canyon School, artists have also done professional development workshops for educators. Other approaches include artist workshops with art or music classes, inviting artists to perform at assemblies, or partnering with a teacher on an interdisciplinary project.

For more information on initiating a school arts partnership you can contact your state arts agency or the Association of Teaching Artists.

Transitioning to Nature

UDALL FOUNDATION: *PARKS IN FOCUS*

A green lily pad glistening with water droplets. A butterfly. The inside of a red flower. Scenic vistas. These are subjects that emerge through remarkable photography by middle school students from Boys and Girls Clubs and other youth organizations in Arizona, California, Montana and Michigan. A high-impact program, *Parks in Focus*, supported by the Udall Foundation, connects young people to nature through a series of photographic expeditions that culminate in a weeklong camping trip in a national park – including Grand Canyon, Pictured Rocks and Yosemite. The trips are organized and supported by the Udall Foundation in partnership with parks which provide access to campgrounds, equipment, naturalists, artists and more to support the trips.

At the heart of the program is the use of photography as a creative tool for sharpening and expressing young people's perceptions of the environment. Bret Muter, *Parks in Focus* Michigan Coordinator, has been bringing youth into parks for six years and has witnessed how photography influences the outdoor experience. "The digital camera is like a security blanket and a doorway. It provides participants a safe entry to a new and often unusual environment through a familiar technology." On a recent trip to Pictured Rocks, not only did one group hike 12 miles, they took over 11,000 images! "Cameras help participants to slow down and notice things they might have missed. It's always fun for me to look at their photos at the end of the trip and see things through their perspective."

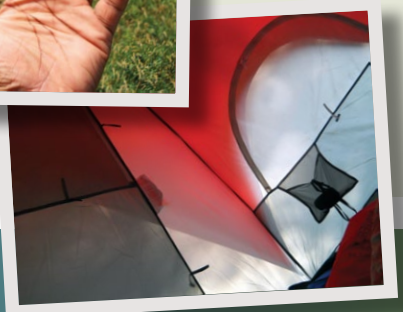
Parks in Focus is a carefully tiered program. Through preliminary workshops in photography and environmental education, followed by active exploration of parks, the students gain comfort and confidence. These experiences form part of an integrated curriculum. One participant reflected, "I felt like I didn't want to leave, but then how would I share this experience with my family? *Parks in Focus* will be a name I remember for a long time." Melissa Millage, Senior Program Manager of *Parks in Focus* believes that the images speak for themselves in demonstrating the program's effectiveness, "young people begin to see what's possible. They begin to see themselves and can imagine their future."

"I have seen very real positive changes in the confidence and interpersonal skills of several of our more challenging participants as a result of this experience. I have also seen a new and intense interest in science and nature emerge from than one unlikely participant."

— Boys & Girls Club staff member

Page 6 : Iain and Reanna, Michigan participants, during the Isle Royale trip — Photo by *Parks in Focus*

Page 7:
(Red Tent) Chelsea, age 12
(Lily) Jacara, age 12,
(Hand) Antrell, age 14



Sparks!

Seek out partnerships with organizations like Boys & Girls Club and Big Brothers Big Sisters who are seasoned at working with young people on a daily basis. They can guide you in understanding the needs of youth and help design practical programs.

The Udall Foundation's *Parks in Focus* can provide consultation on best practices and designing programs that are scalable and flexible, responsive to funding and participants.

Observe how your program unfolds and look for ways to build upon your success and strengthen areas for improvement.

Walking as Art Making Art

GOLDEN GATE NATIONAL RECREATION AREA
WEIR FARM NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

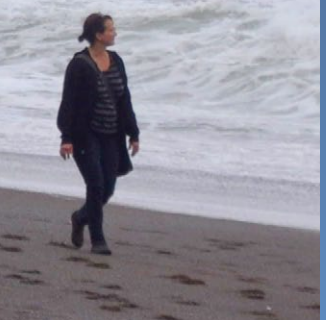
Some artist-led programs are geared primarily to young people and children, others are designed to appeal to visitors of all ages. The two park-based programs highlighted here provide models for engaging visitors through the making and experiencing of art and through interaction with artists.

DESIRE TRAILS

At Golden Gate National Recreation Area, nonprofit arts partner, Headlands Center for the Arts has created their own spin on the traditional interpretive guided tour. In their new program, *Desire Trails,* artists, scholars and other creative thinkers design walking tours which encourage visitors to experience new and surprising aspects of the park. Brian Karl, Program Director at Headlands, describes the walks as "a band of people who walk and talk together as they traverse the landscape." The walks are open to all ages but groups are limited to 15 visitors.

One artist group, DEMILIT, leads a walk called "A Voice That Lingers Forever in the Bowels of Missile Silos" which features a soundtrack of audio recordings that "reveal some of the least noticed ways in which the military past in the Marin Headlands infiltrates the present, particularly in the repair and reproduction of nature." Celebrating the ever-present fog that colors the landscape in the Marin Headlands, artist and historian Jeannene Przyblyski has created "A Walk in the Fog." Przyblyski leads visitors to explore the cultural, historical and natural histories of the fog that is such a distinctive feature of the Marin Headlands landscape. The artist is equipped with a fog machine; if no fog is present in the landscape, she will make some. Through her artistic lens, visitors learn about the natural and cultural landscape while enjoying a zany, cultural encounter.

> "Artists and scholars can facilitate different experiences of what coming to the park might be like. Artists can point to different experiences, different viewpoints that may be poetic or practical, metaphorical or literal."
>
> — Brian Karl



Page 8: Participants in *Desire Trails* program—Photo by Brian Karl

Page 9:
(Above) Girl Scout participating in Take Part in Art at Weir Farm National Historic Site—NPS Photo
(Below) Tree sketch by Take Part in Art participant—NPS Photo

Sparks!

Art can be one of the most effective ways of interpreting and conveying the values of the park to the public, and especially to new and nontraditional audiences. Start by involving local artists and creative thinkers in brainstorming and prepare to be surprised by their innovative approaches.

Identify activities in which visitors can be "immersed" in the park—through imagining, experiencing and creatively responding to the park's stories, places and significant resources. The goal is to invite visitors to make deeper connections and to create meaningful and lasting memories.

Professional artists lead activities for both *Take Part in Art* and the *Desire Trails.* Working with local artists to initiate and lead activities is a great way to build relationships with the arts community. Always provide stipends for artists and send the message that the park values what artists bring to the table. Like you, they are professionals, not volunteers.

Some visitors are self-conscious about their artistic abilities and prefer a light touch. In response, *Take Part in Art* has two options: visitors can interact with a professional artist or work solo. Both options are free, supplies are available in the visitor center, and participation is explained by signage and through NPS volunteers and artists. The solo option is effective for both visitors and parks: it requires minimal staff time and offers the self-directed experience sought by many 21st century visitors.

TAKE PART IN ART

Bridging the disconnect between the stresses of modernized life and the healing qualities of nature has long been a goal of the National Park Service. Weir Farm National Historic Site, a site which served as a rural retreat for three generations of artists for over 120 years, is tied to both an appreciation of nature as well as the arts. For the artists who lived at Weir Farm, nature and art were inextricably linked. From the very beginning, the Connecticut farm served as a refuge from the industrialized city, a place to get away and reconnect with nature. For the residents of the farm, the best way to do this was through the creation of art. Today the park still serves as a sanctuary, dedicated to helping visitors rediscover their creative and natural roots.

The park's *Take Part in Art* program invites visitors to follow in the footsteps of J. Alden Weir by creating works of art en plein air under the guidance of professional artists. Participants are loaned arts supplies – watercolor paints, colored pencils and pastels, paper and pencils. The multi-hued materials spark the imagination, but the program's goal is not simply to inspire creativity, but also to "improve visitors' emotional, mental, and physical health as well as foster a deeper and more meaningful connection to the resource that leads to the development of stewardship values, attitudes, and behaviors."

Over 6,000 visitors since 2008 have participated in the program. Cassie Werne, Management Assistant, has recorded visitor thoughts over the years.

"Words used by visitors to describe their experience include: 'inspiring, peaceful, beautiful, tranquil, lovely, quiet, serene, enriching, sanctuary, relaxing, and calm'. Other visitor comments that suggest the healing power of experiencing nature through art: 'natural beauty, fauna, and stillness truly feed your soul here'." The experience of immersing oneself in nature through art transports visitors from the modern world into a place and time of reflection.

Participants in Desire Trails at Golden Gate National Recreation Area—Photo by Brian Karl

Gilbert on the Colorado River at Grand Canyon National Park—Photo by *Parks in Focus*

SPARKING ARTS AFIRE

Parks and their art partners were eager to share their experience. Here are some of their "getting started" ideas for sparking an Arts Afire! program.

- Invite artists, young people, and visitors to brainstorm ideas with you. Collaborative thinking will invariably generate ideas that you have never thought about.
- Before starting, consider your community and the population you wish to engage. What are the needs in the community and how can your program help address them? Are there **partnerships** that can be formed that can help you reach your program goals?
- Start with existing resources like state and local arts agencies, art schools and museums, local art associations and youth organizations. Each can provide valuable perspectives on the community and guidance on finding potential resources.

RESOURCES:

www.3rdeyeunlimited.com
www.flickr.com/photos/parksinfocus/collections
www.headlands.org
www.nefa.org
www.nps.gov/grca/supportyourpark/air.htm
www.nps.gov/nebe/forkids/yap.htm
www.nps.gov/wefa/planyourvisit/tpia.htm
www.nps.gov/wefa/supportyourpark/upload/NPS_AIR%20Final.pdf
www.parksinfocus.wordpress.com
www.teachingartists.com

Publication Credits:
Researched and written by Kerrie Bellisario
Designed by Miho Nishimaniwa

For More Information, Please contact:
Linda Cook, Superintendent, Weir Farm NHS
linda_cook@nps.gov
Charles Tracy, Arts Partnership Specialist
charles_tracy@nps.gov