National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Interpretation and Education Program

Interpretation and Education Renaissance Action Plan

Standards • Access • Technology • Partnerships • Evaluation

Interpretation and Education Renaissance Action Plan

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Inside Cover Left: Golden Gate National Recreation Area NPS PHOTO by DAN NG
Inside Cover Right: Independence National Historical Park NPS PHOTO by DAVID GUINEY

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Jamaica Bay Unit, Gateway National Recreation Area NPS PHOTO

Action Plan

The care of rivers is not a question of rivers, but of the human heart.

—Tanaka Shozo, Nineteenth-Century Conservationist

The National Park Service stewards more than the places, systems, and objects core to the heritage of the United States. The National Park Service also cares for intangible meanings—beauty, health, wonder, democracy, and struggle inherent in the nation.

Abraham Lincoln knew how the tangible and the intangible linked together. When Lincoln was a U.S. congressman in 1848, he visited Niagara Falls. Lincoln recognized the falls themselves were simply water falling over rock. "There is no mystery about the thing itself. Every effect is just such as intelligent man knowing the causes, would anticipate, without it." Yet Lincoln knew Niagara also contained the intangible. "It calls up the indefinite past . . . Contemporary with the whole race of men, and older than the first man, Niagara is strong, and fresh today as ten thousand years ago . . . In that long—long time, never still for a single moment. Never dried, never froze, never slept, never rested."

So too does the tangible provide access to the intangible in National Parks.

At Gettysburg, in November 1863, Lincoln explained the connection between the national cemetery he was dedicating, and the intangible meanings it would represent. "We can not dedicate —we can not consecrate—we can not hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled, here, have consecrated far above our poor power to add or detract." The meanings of bravery, sacrifice, and freedom transcended the place. Yet the battlefield, Lincoln knew, has tremendous importance as evidence of what happened there and as an icon providing access to those meanings. "That we *here* highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation shall have a new birth of freedom; and that this government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." Lincoln was an interpreter. He knew that the tangible resource had to link to its intangible meanings.

Intangible meanings are the engines that originally created national parks and continue to foster their stewardship. To preserve only the tangible is to abrogate the power of the parks.

- Without *our* access to meanings, the Martin Luther King home is an old house ripe for urban renewal.
- Without *our* access to meanings, wolves in Yellowstone would just be the way things used to be.
- Without *our* access to meanings, the Liberty Bell would be a cracked piece of alloy metal sitting in the wrong place.
- Without *our* access to meanings, invasive plants would be another way to see green.

Interpretation and education are fundamental National Park Service activities designed specifically to help people understand and identify with the intangible meanings inherent in the National Park System.

Caring for the tangible and intangible in the twenty-first century presents new challenges. Since 1950 our population has grown from 152 million to 300 million people and is predicted to double by 2050. In spite of this, recreational visits to national parks have remained almost constant since 1990 and we have severely reduced the workforce assigned to serve park visitors. Approximately 75 percent of the U.S. population lives in urban and suburban areas. People are becoming increasingly separated from the natural landscape and children are often more inclined to play indoors than go outside. Minority groups represent an ever growing place in the population—we are becoming a minority majority nation. However, park visitation and park staff do not reflect the face of America. Advances in technology have changed the way Americans communicate, find community, learn and think—yet NPS interpretive media are outdated by an average of 20 years. The work of conservation has changed as well. It is impossible to build walls around ecosystems and expect them to survive. The very existence of parks depends on an American public who values their collective natural and cultural heritage and wants to preserve it. Yet many fear society is becoming less civically engaged, less committed to community, shared values, and an understanding of the lessons of the past.

*This renaissance in NPS Interpretation and Education will serve millions of additional visitors, helping the American public engage with relevant meanings, and come to **care about** parks so that they might support and **care for** parks.*

Pea Ridge National Military Park NPS PHOTO

Now is the time to take action, laying the groundwork for an ***Interpretation and Education Renaissance*** as we approach the centennial milestone of the National Park Service. This Action Plan recommends a renewed focus and change in the following five areas of Interpretation and Education:

Engage People to Make Enduring Connections to America's Special Places: In order to connect all Americans to the recreational, educational, and inspirational power of national parks, we must equip interpreters and educators with the knowledge, skills, and approaches necessary for community and civic engagement for the whole of America. This must include ethnic, socioeconomic, and disabled groups that have, for a variety of reasons, not been well connected to national parks in the past. Programs must be created in collaboration *with* communities and partners rather than *for* them.

Use New Technologies: Technology offers new and tremendous opportunities—not to replace national park experiences, but to make intangible meanings available in ways never before imagined. To remain relevant to today's visitor, the NPS must be a leader in the use of technology applied to informal learning.

Embrace Interpretation and Education Partners: As many as 70,000 volunteers, concessioners, and other partners provide interpretive services. The NPS ranger must increasingly facilitate partners in the attainment of excellence.

Develop and Implement Professional Standards: In the last decade, the NPS has begun to develop professional standards, but their use has been inconsistent. Now is the time to apply these standards to all who deliver interpretation and education services.

Create a Culture of Evaluation: We have very little scientifically valid information about the direct outcomes and impact of interpretation and education programs. Evaluation must become an integral part of program design and delivery to ensure ongoing program improvement, effectiveness, and efficiency.

Investing in and expanding the NPS Interpretation and Education Program draws on the legacy of Stephen T. Mather and Horace Albright. These early leaders knew the National Park Service could not preserve parks alone. It is only the larger community and society who can preserve that heritage. This renaissance in Interpretation and Education will serve millions of additional visitors, helping Americans engage with relevant meanings, and come to *care about* parks so that they might support and *care for* parks.

Findings and Strategic Recommendations

What will historians write about us? What will they write about interpretation and education in the National Park Service in the years surrounding the Centennial?

—NPS Director Mary A. Bomar

The National Park Service lacks the fundamental tools and resources to fulfill its educational responsibilities. A recently completed business plan found that many of our interpretation and education programs do not meet basic operating standards. At the same time, the plan found significant opportunities to build collaboration, increase effectiveness, and deliver inclusive and meaningful programs.

The following findings and recommendations are offered to lay groundwork for strengthening our interpretation and education programs and build a foundation for celebrating the centennial anniversary of America's greatest idea—the national parks.

1.0 DEVELOP CORE OPERATING STANDARDS AND MEASURES FOR DELIVERING QUALITY INTERPRETATION AND EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Finding: Operating standards for planning and executing interpretation and education programs are not clear and measurable. Moreover, many parks lack Comprehensive Interpretive Plans (CIP) that effectively merge operating standards and park specific stories and resources into a comprehensive management framework. Finally, an improved information inventory and reporting system is needed to better measure, evaluate, and invest in quality interpretive services, and share information across the National Park Service. Accomplishing the following tasks will ensure that national park visitors will consistently receive quality interpretation and education services.

Recommended Tasks:

1.1 Develop measurable operating standards and "core" function statements for a healthy and effective Interpretation and Education Program. Develop a process for implementing standards, measuring attainment, assessing outcomes, and prioritizing investment and activity. Recommend metrics for measuring success of leadership regarding Interpretation and Education operations.

- Convene a working committee of managers and practitioners to develop measurable operating standards and core function statements and a program for implementation.
- Lead Staff: WASO Office of Interpretation, National Education Council, National Interpretive Advisory Council

1.2 Redesign the Servicewide Interpretive Report (SIR) to streamline field reporting requirements and collect information specific to attaining operating standards and benchmarks for core functions. Collected data will be used to measure effectiveness and better target investment of resources. Links to the NPS Scorecard will be developed as appropriate.

- Redesign SIR online data reporting system.
- Lead Staff: WASO Offices of Interpretation and Information Technology

1.3 Establish an Interpretation and Education Employee Certification Policy and System in collaboration with the Office of Personnel Management. The System will use an array of efficient assessment mechanisms to make delivery of visitor experiences consistent, accountable, and dependable.

- OPM Development of Certification Policy and System.
- Create a GS-09 Registrar position—Incumbent will be a subject matter specialist and manage the Certification System.
- Lead Staff: Mather Training Center, Training Manager for Interpretation, Education, Recreation & Conservation, WASO Office of Interpretation, National Interpretive Advisory Council

1.4 Update Comprehensive Interpretive Plan (CIP) guidelines to streamline requirements, offer document templates, and incorporate new asset management and GMP requirements. Prepare a strategy for completing CIPs for 110 parks that currently lack plans and for updating and maintaining existing CIPs Servicewide.

Anyone who provides information, orientation, interpretation, education, and other visitor experience services will have access to competency training and may, as appropriate, be evaluated and credited for mastery of appropriate skills, knowledge, abilities, and behaviors.

- Convene workgroup to update CIP guidelines and prepare strategy for completing and maintaining plans.
- Lead Staff—National Interpretive Advisory Council, WASO Office of Interpretation, Harpers Ferry Center

2.0 PROVIDE STAFFING AND OPERATING RESOURCES NECESSARY TO ACHIEVE PROGRAM STANDARDS

Finding: Maintenance, natural resources management, law enforcement, and even some administrative programs (IT in particular) have received some priority attention in recent budgets. Other programs that rely principally on base funds have struggled as they deal with absorption of pay, inflation, and other fixed costs. At the park level, interpretation and education programs have been particularly affected since they not only rely exclusively on base funds, but also on seasonal hires to conduct programs. As fixed costs have risen, base programs that are not fixed (such as seasonal hiring) have been reduced to cover the absorptions. This has resulted in an 18 percent reduction in base-funded seasonal Interpretation FTEs between FY 2001 and FY 2005. Accomplishing the following task will ensure all national park visitors access to personal interpretation and education services.

Recommended Task:

2.1 Give priority to a multi-year OFS program to restore and sustain interpretation and education seasonal and permanent operations necessary to accomplish operating standards and core functions outlined in findings and recommendations above. Considerations will include support for efforts such as Student Career Experience and Student Temporary Employment Programs (SCEP, STEP) recruitment, living history supplies and equipment, curriculum-based education programs, field trip transportation needs, teacher workshops, and others. Develop a mechanism for accounting for use of allocated funds, including an option to withdraw funds where operating standards are not being achieved.

- Funding request to be determined.
- Lead Staff—Comptroller's Office, National Education Council, WASO Office of Interpretation and Education, National Interpretive Advisory Council

3.0 EXPAND INTERPRETATION AND EDUCATION PARTNER TRAINING AND CREDENTIALING PROGRAM

Finding: Approximately 70,000 practitioners work in partnership with the National Park Service to deliver interpretation and education services to the public. These practitioners include volunteers, concessioners, advocacy organizations, and cooperating associations. However, only 3,000 of this workforce currently participate in interpretation and education training. As a result, the quality of programs is inconsistent and programs often exclude critical stories that connect visitors to the significance of the place, person, or event. Accomplishing the following tasks will ensure that national park visitors consistently receive quality interpretation and education services. These tasks will also result in a clear, achievable process for partners to participate in the delivery of interpretation and education services.

Recommended Task:

3.1 Build and maintain an Interpretation and Education Distance Learning and Credentialing Program in collaboration with Eppley Institute for Parks and Public Lands (Indiana University). Anyone who provides information, orientation, interpretation, education, and other visitor experience services will have access to competency training and may, as appropriate, be evaluated and credited for mastery of appropriate skills, knowledge, abilities, and behaviors.

- Create a GS-12 Curriculum Revision Administrator position.
- Increase to Base for new I&E competencies and corresponding web-based training, as well as review and revise each existing I&E competency every four years.
- Lead Staff: Mather Training Center, Training Manger for Interpretation, Education, Recreation & Conservation

Sitka National Historical Park NPS PHOTO

4.0 ADOPT A PROGRAM OF EVALUATION TO ACHIEVE GREATER ACCOUNTABILITY AND PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT IN INTERPRETATION AND EDUCATION

Finding: The NPS has very little scientifically valid data about the direct outcomes and impact of interpretation and education programs for National Park Service audiences. Evaluation methodologies should become an integral part of interpretive program design and delivery to ensure ongoing program improvement, effectiveness, and efficiency. Accomplishing the following tasks will ensure national park visitors are provided the most relevant and accessible interpretation and education services possible.

Recommended Tasks:

4.1 Convene an "evaluation summit" with the NPS Advisory Board to validate the draft Servicewide Interpretation and Education Evaluation Strategy with outside experts and NPS leaders. (The National Education Council has drafted the strategy.) ✓ **ACCOMPLISHED**

- Funding In Hand—Convened Summit at Denver University.
- Lead Staff—WASO Office of Policy, National Park System Advisory Board, National Education Council

4.2 Hire a National Interpretation and Education Evaluation Coordinator to implement the adopted Servicewide Evaluation Strategy.

- Create a GS-13 Servicewide Interpretation and Education Evaluation Coordinator position.
- Lead Staff—WASO Office of Interpretation and Education

4.3 Conduct Pilot Evaluation Projects/Evaluate Action Plan: Select a variety of "indicator programs" that represent different interpretation and education disciplines (e.g.: media; personal services; curriculum-based programs; interpretive training; informal interpretation; interpretive planning; community engagement; teacher professional development; web-based interpretation; information and orientation) and conduct approximately three pilot evaluations to inform development of standards, training modules, and guide programmatic improvements. Work with Evaluation Coordinator and consultants to evaluate progress on Action Plan.

- Work with universities and evaluation professionals to conduct three pilot studies and evaluate the Action Plan.
- Lead Staff—WASO Office of Interpretation and Education, National Education Council, National Interpretive Advisory Council

5.0 IMPROVE INTERPRETIVE MEDIA TO MEET TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY STANDARDS

Finding: Many parks offer interpretive media (exhibits, wayside exhibits, films, brochures) that are inaccurate, inaccessible, and significantly outdated. In some cases the content and condition of films and exhibits are more than 30 years old and no longer relevant or accessible. In other cases, parks can no longer afford to print even the most basic orientation and safety tool—the Park Map and Guide. The NPS must improve its media to meet twenty-first century standards so that visitors connect with park stories, meanings, and heritage.

Recommended Tasks:

5.1 Print adequate Park Map and Guides for distribution to parks and information outlets. Surveys show that the Park Map and Guide is a critical orientation and safety resource for visitors. Recent reductions in printing have left parks with inadequate supplies to meet demand.

- Ensure all parks receive adequate amounts of Park Map and Guides (1 map for every 9 visitors).
- Lead Staff—Harpers Ferry Center

5.2 Migrate the Media Inventory Database System (MIDS) for interpretive exhibits to the Facility Management Software System (FMSS). Interpretive exhibits are facility assets and should be incorporated into FMSS. The migration process should include an updated inventory and condition assessment of all interpretive exhibits. Deficiencies will be prioritized and linked to the Project Management Information System for future funding consideration.

- Convene a working group to develop a migration strategy; implement pilot migration projects in three parks.
- Lead Staff: WASO Offices of Interpretation, Information Technology, and Facility Management, National Interpretive Advisory Council

Federal Hall National Monument NPS PHOTO by KEVIN DALEY

To help ensure that all Americans feel welcome and find relevance at National Parks, interpreters and educators must be equipped with the skills necessary to foster and maintain wide and diverse community engagement.

6.0 ENCOURAGE AND ADOPT INNOVATION IN INTERPRETIVE AND EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY

Finding: Information technology has become part of every American's life in the twenty-first century. It is influencing how people learn and interact with each other at the most fundamental levels. Currently, some parks are experimenting with technological innovations such as webcams, podcasts, and mobile communications. To remain relevant in the lives of young people and embrace how Americans receive and use knowledge in the Information Age, the National Park Service must use appropriate technologies as they become available, and be a leader in adapting technology to enhance place-based learning in park settings and at a distance.

Recommended Tasks:

6.1 Establish a Technology Innovation Fund that would provide grants for stimulating, evaluating, and sharing the use of new technologies that make parks accessible, fun, and educational. Emphasis will be placed on interactive technology that efficiently and effectively reaches broad and diverse audiences.

- Establish a Technology Innovation Fund.
- Lead Staff: WASO Offices of Interpretation and Education and Information Technology, National Education Council, Harpers Ferry Center, National Interpretive Advisory Council

6.2 Establish a Servicewide Technology Coordinator for Interpretation and Education to manage innovation fund, develop and nurture technology partnerships, evaluate and disseminate best practices to the field.

- Create a GS-13 Interpretation and Education Technology Coordinator position.
- Lead Staff: WASO Offices of Interpretation and Education and Information Technology, National Education Council

6.3 Expand *Exploring the Real Thing* Curriculum-Based Education Program Website to reach teachers in every state.

- Populate database and develop CDs for every state and territory.
- Lead Staff—WASO Office of Interpretation and Education, Northeast Regional Office of Interpretation and Education

6.4 Create an Education Portal for *NPS.gov* that provides information on park education programs and services and conforms to the new content management system. Visitors to the page can search "For Teachers," "For Students," and "For Families." The site will link to all distance learning opportunities, to Junior and *WebRangers* programs, and *Exploring the Real Thing*.

- Create Education Portal.
- Lead Staff—WASO Offices of Information Technology and Interpretation and Education

6.5 Enhance and Expand *WebRangers*—Online Junior Ranger Program. This site engages children and families in exciting park-based Junior Ranger activities relating to the work of the NPS. The site is created and enhanced through a design collaboration with children and the University of Maryland.

- Expand *WebRangers* Online Junior Ranger Program.
- Lead Staff—WASO Office of Interpretation and Education

7.0 DESIGN INTERPRETATION AND EDUCATION PROGRAMS TO SERVE ALL AMERICANS

Findings: Visitor surveys and reports show that NPS audiences do not reflect the demographics of America. To help ensure that all Americans feel welcome and find relevance at national parks, interpreters and educators must be equipped with the skills necessary to foster and maintain wide and diverse community engagement. This represents a significant shift in approach to staffing, program design, and program delivery—interpretive programs must be created *in collaboration with* communities and partners rather than *for* them.

Recommended Tasks:

7.1 Analyze existing research in visitation trends and engaging ethnic minority audiences. Extract best practices and new approaches for engaging new audiences. Disseminate findings to the field through training, guidance, and pilot demonstration projects.

- Engage NPS workgroup, partners, and cultural competence experts in analysis and recommendations for the field; begin testing and evaluating methods.

Grand Canyon National Park NPS PHOTO by Michael Quinn

- Lead Staff—WASO Offices of Social Science Research and Interpretation and Education, National Education Council, National Interpretive Advisory Council

7.2 Create a Twenty-First Century Relevance Fund to engage cultural competence experts and encourage innovation in community engagement.

- Competitive fund source for cultural competence and community engagement projects.
- Lead Staff—WASO Office of Interpretation, Pacific West Regional Office, and National Education Council

8.0 ENABLE INTERPRETATION AND EDUCATION PARTNERS TO EFFECTIVELY SUPPORT THE NPS EDUCATION MISSION

Finding: Currently more than 70,000 partners, concessioners, volunteers, and park staff from other divisions provide interpretive services (the interpretive ranger provides less than 10 percent of direct services). The National Park Service should fully embrace and support these partners in a collaborative effort to provide quality programs that reach broader audiences. To enable greater collaboration, the role of the interpretive park ranger must evolve to include facilitating partnerships and sharing standards and best practices. Accomplishing the following tasks will enable and encourage more Americans to actively participate in the stewardship of the nation's heritage.

Recommended Tasks:

8.1 Fully fund the WASO Servicewide VIP Coordinator. Funding for this position is currently taken from VIP funds. This position is critical to providing overall program leadership and management.

- Fund the GS-13 Servicewide VIP Coordinator position.
- Lead Staff: WASO Office of Interpretation and Education

8.2 Enhance the reach and overall effectiveness of the NPS Volunteers in the Parks Program (VIP) by placing additional VIP Coordinators in parks.

- Fund full-time and part-time volunteer coordinators to reflect the increased reliance on and expansion of the VIP Program. FTE will be allocated to parks on a full-time and part-time basis based on demonstrated need and program scope and complexity.
- Lead Staff: Servicewide VIP Coordinator and WASO Office of Interpretation and Education

8.3 Create an official NPS Interpretation and Education certification and branding program to recognize education partners that have achieved credentials for program delivery. Brand qualified partners as "Education Partner of the National Park Service."

- Develop and evaluate a pilot program, including convene partner workgroups to develop criteria, process, and branding logo.
- Lead Staff: Mather Training Center, WASO Offices of Partnerships and Interpretation and Education, Association of Partnerships for Public Lands; National Education Council, National Interpretive Advisory Council

9.0 CREATE AND SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Finding: The findings of the Business Plan and the strategies and tasks outlined in this Action Plan represent a cultural shift for the National Park Service as it moves into a new era of resource preservation and visitor engagement. The traditional service delivery model of the "flat hat" ranger providing interpretation and education services directly to the public must evolve to address an ever-growing demand and finite resources. Tomorrow's ranger must invest some time serving as a catalyst for delivering appropriate interpretation and education services through other partners. This transition from direct service provider to catalyst must be managed to ensure important organizational values and traditions are not compromised. In addition, services provided by partners must be shaped and evaluated to ensure appropriate benchmarks and quality standards are achieved or exceeded. A comprehensive communication and change management strategy will be necessary to effectively involve NPS staff, partners, and audiences in this process.

Recommended Tasks:

9.1 Develop a Change Management Plan in consultation with communication and organizational development consultants to help implement the Action Plan and support effective organizational change.

A focus will be placed on new technologies, reaching new audiences through community engagement, partner certification, new approaches to training and coaching, as well as program evaluation—methods and results of pilot studies.

Yellowstone National Park NPS PHOTO by David Grimes

- Prepare and Refine Change Management Plan with Consultants.
- Lead Staff: National Education Council, WASO Office of Interpretation and Education, Human Capital Directorate, National Interpretive Advisory Council

9.2 Support the National Education Council. This support is critical to all actions. The National Education Council has played a leadership role in implementing the *Renewing Our Education Mission*, preparing the *NPS Interpretation and Education Business Plan*, and developing the *NPS Interpretation and Education Action Plan*. It serves to unify all components of the NPS that provide interpretation and education services, and represents field, park leadership, national program, regional, and Washington viewpoints.

- Fund one full meeting of Education Council per year, subcommittee meeting, part-time staff, printing, TEL broadcasts and other forms of Servicewide communication.
- Lead Staff: WASO Office of Interpretation and Education, National Education Council.

9.3 Fully Fund the WASO Servicewide Education Coordinator (the position is currently funded with Parks as Classrooms funds). This position is critical to coordinating the overall actions outlined in this plan, as well as communicating implementation progress.

- Fund the GS-13 Servicewide Education Coordinator.
- Lead Staff: WASO Office of Interpretation and Education

9.4 Hold a historic Interpretation and Education Conference for the Twenty-First Century that examines the five areas of renewed focus and changes in the way NPS provides interpretation and education services. The conference will share new lessons learned and foster collaboration and innovation in interpretation and education, including emphasizing and analyzing the concept of shared functions. A focus will be placed on new technologies, reaching new audiences through community engagement, partner certification, new approaches to training and coaching, as well as program evaluation—methods and results of pilot studies.

- Convene a National Interpretation and Education Conference to include NPS staff from all divisions and NPS partner organizations (concessioners, institutes, friends groups, volunteers, and others delivering interpretive and educational services to the public).
- Lead Staff: WASO Office of Interpretation and Education, National Education Council, National Interpretive Advisory Council, APPL

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