



Learning Together: Proceedings, Evaluation, and Applying Lessons Learned

National Park Service
Interpretation and Education
Evaluation Summit
Denver, Colorado
October, 2006





“Creating a culture of evaluation will be a key piece of taking the NPS from good to great.”

—DAN RITCHIE, CHAIR
NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM ADVISORY BOARD EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Summit panelists present experience and research about the benefits and challenges of evaluation.

Opposite: Members of the NPS National Education Council and National Interpretive Advisory Council

Cover: Podcasts enhance interpretation at Richmond National Battlefield Park.



Executive Summary

The overarching goal of the Summit was to generate useful dialogue about “creating a culture of evaluation” within Interpretation and Education characterized by continuous learning and decision-making based on audience analysis and outcome data.

THE SUMMIT

The National Park System Advisory Board, the National Park Foundation, and the National Park Service (NPS) convened an “Interpretation and Education Evaluation Summit” at the University of Denver, Colorado, on October 25 and 26, 2006. This event brought together education, evaluation, and organizational development experts from across the country with a wide range of NPS stakeholders. Participants included members of the National Park System Advisory Board, the NPS National Leadership Council (NLC), NPS deputy regional directors, the current and three former NPS directors, several NPS partners, NPS regional chiefs of interpretation and education, and other NPS field staff from across the country. Collectively, more than 130 people worked together to better understand how to use evaluation to create a vital and relevant future for the Interpretation and Education Program in achieving the mission of the National Park Service.



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HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Evaluation Summit was one link in a series of actions that the National Park Service is taking to reinvigorate itself as it heads into its second century of service. During a historic general conference seven years ago (*Discovery 2000*, held in St. Louis, Missouri), the NPS reaffirmed the critical role of interpretation and education in conservation, particularly in the context of globalization and America’s changing demographics. Shortly thereafter, the National Park System Advisory Board issued its defining report: *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century*, urging the NPS to embrace its role as a national education institution. The NPS National Leadership Council responded by conducting a series of six education seminars, resulting in publication of *Renewing Our Education Mission*. This led to the formation of the NPS National Education Council (NEC) and a call to establish a comprehensive

Interpretation and Education Program Business Plan, which was released in early 2007. Additionally, a *Scholar’s Forum on Civic Engagement* was held in January 2006.

The critical role of education was reinforced at each step along the way. Standards, goals, and priorities were clarified, and evaluation increasingly became viewed as an essential component of the overall effort. In October 2006 the National Leadership Council unanimously endorsed the *Interpretation and Education*

Renaissance Action Plan that was developed by the National Education Council to realize the tactics described in the evolving business plan. This true “Renaissance” has five important pillars: Standards, Access, Technology, Partnerships, and Evaluation. In concert with the action plan, a subcommittee of the NEC has drafted a *Servicewide Interpretation and Education Evaluation Strategy*. The Evaluation Summit was a first step in implementing this evaluation strategy.

Collectively, these steps aim to move the NPS from good to great in its ability to engage the public with their national parks in new, dynamic, and relevant ways.

SUMMARY OF PART I: PROCEEDINGS OF THE SUMMIT

This part of the report provides a historical record of what happened at the Evaluation Summit and gives readers a vicarious sense of how the event unfolded. It is also written as an invitation to readers beginning to contemplate what evaluation might mean for them in their NPS context.

Dan Ritchie, Chairman of the National Park System Advisory Board Education Committee, hosted the event. Mr. Ritchie claimed that: “The survival of the National Park System in the twenty-first century depends on how it interacts with society and how much society values it.” Further: “Creating a culture of evaluation will be a key piece of taking the NPS from good to great.”

Newly appointed NPS Director, Mary Bomar, delivered her support in the keynote address, stating that “this Evaluation



“Too often [evaluation] work is at least perceived and received as standing in judgment of rather than working in deliberative collaboration with . . .”

—HAZEL SYMONETTE, SUMMIT PANELIST



“We need to care about the ‘invisible’ people.”

—POLLY NORDSTRAND, SUMMIT PANELIST



“Why should we do [evaluation]? It’s good business. In very practical terms, it prepares you for opportunity.”

—FLIP HAGOOD, SUMMIT PANELIST



“Ranger-led programs far surpassed any other type of programs as the . . . number one most meaningful program [in our study].”

—THERESA COBLE, SUMMIT PANELIST



“The most exciting thing for me is that evaluation means continual learning.”

—LYN CARRANZA, SUMMIT PARTICIPANT



“We need a culture of evaluative thinking as a way of doing business, not only in interpretation, but throughout the . . . National Park Service.”

—MARY BOMAR, NPS DIRECTOR

Summit is the beginning of our Interpretation and Education Renaissance . . . and an important first step in looking ahead to our Centennial.” Additionally, she claimed, “We also need a culture of evaluative thinking as a way of doing business, not only in interpretation, but throughout the disciplines within the National Park Service.”

Renowned evaluation expert, Dr. Michael Quinn Patton, facilitated the Summit. He noted that “evaluation findings and processes are more likely to be useful when there is strong leadership support for evaluation, when the organizational culture supports inquiry, reality-testing, and learning, and when people throughout the organization value and demonstrate evaluative thinking.”

Day One of the Summit was organized around two panels, during which 14 guest experts presented experience and research about the benefits and challenges of evaluation. Most of the agenda was reserved for dialogue among and between panelists and participants in response to panelist presentations. Topics emerging from these discussions included the following:

- Holding people accountable for learning rather than results
- Practical concerns about implementing evaluation (e.g., flexible planning; involving field staff, partners, and other stakeholders; risk and innovation)
- The role of technology in place-based learning
- Cultural competence
- Evaluating visitor experiences

Day Two of the Summit targeted more tactical discussions. This included introduction of the draft *Servicewide Interpretation and Education Evaluation Strategy*, and beginning to define the selection criteria for the evaluation pilot projects called for in the *I&E Renaissance Action Plan*. The most common sentiment in reports from small group discussions was the importance of including diverse parks and audiences in pilot evaluations.

Immediately after the formal close of the Summit, NPS leaders and partners conducted an interactive teleconference. One hundred twenty individual NPS staff from around the country logged in to view this Tel, making it the second most watched interpretation and education Tel in FY 07.

SUMMARY OF PART II: EVALUATION OF THE SUMMIT

A participatory and highly collaborative approach was used for evaluating the Summit in order to model organizational learning and a user-focused approach. The evaluation was accomplished through a public-private partnership that combined knowledge of NPS interpretation and education programs with professional evaluation expertise. Data were obtained from a Summit reaction form, small group notes, participant question cards, lunchtime “scribbles” of questions and ideas, a previous survey of NPS evaluation practices, field notes, transcripts, and observations.

Themes

The following themes emerged from analysis of Summit evaluation data:

Major Theme 1 - Participants seemed enthusiastically engaged in the concept of creating a culture of evaluation.

Major Theme 2 - Participants voiced concern about how such a change will be implemented.

Additional sub-themes included discussions about terminology and language and the importance of building a culture of evaluation around existing NPS values of inclusion.

Intended Short-Term Outcomes

Before the Summit, the planning team prioritized five short-term outcomes to guide the design of both the event agenda and evaluation of the Summit itself. All five short-term outcomes were accomplished, though to varying degrees. These outcomes include (paraphrased, and presented in rank order from strongest to weakest levels of evidence):

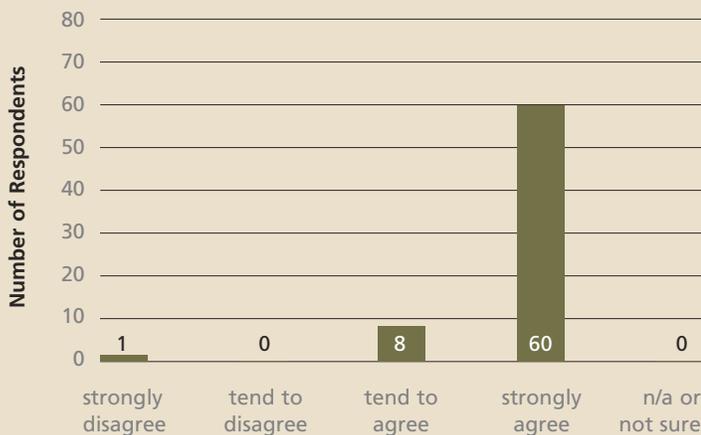
1. Enhance leadership support for evaluation.
2. Increase confidence in cost-benefit of evaluation.
3. Commence work on pilot evaluation projects.
4. Promote making decisions based on outcome data.
5. Develop action steps.

Tracking a Culture of Evaluation Over Time

This report provides a rough, concise snapshot of the current culture of evaluation within the interpretation and education community as a baseline for future comparison. Three relatively replicable metrics are used: average responses to several survey items; documentation of some behaviors of a few key groups of stakeholders; and application of two theoretical frameworks from the research literature.

This evaluation concludes that, as of the end of 2006, the interpretation and education function within the NPS is poised at a threshold of potential cultural change, but has not yet demonstrated systemic changes.

Endorsements for Increased I&E Program Support



Responses to item from Summit Reaction Form: "I enthusiastically endorse increased support for evaluation-related activities within I&E."

SUMMARY OF PART III: APPLYING LESSONS LEARNED

Evaluation findings from the Summit generally reinforce both the *I&E Renaissance Action Plan* and the draft *Servicewide Interpretation and Education Evaluation Strategy*, while also adding some new insights. An overall implication for practice emerging from evaluation of the Summit is that next steps for cultivating a culture of evaluation within the NPS should NOT assume a "one size fits all" approach. Evaluation activities and strategies should be segmented and designed specifically to meet the needs of stakeholders in different stages of change and innovation adopter categories.

In an effort to demonstrate the kind of learning that can emerge from a culture of evaluation, and to meet the needs of personnel who are responsible for authorizing and implementing the evaluation strategy, this section of the report provides 13 specific recommended actions:

Immediate Actions (next three months):

- A. Solicit feedback on recommended next steps from the National Leadership Council;
- B. Complete, distribute to the field, and solicit feedback on proceedings (including evaluation) and DVD of Summit; and
- C. Solicit feedback from partners on Summit proceedings (including evaluation), the DVD of the Summit, and on the evaluation strategy.

Short-term Actions (up to twelve months):

- D. Build a Web portal/evaluation resources library with *practical* tools for parks and partners;
- E. Enhance communication about evaluation within NPS and with partners;
- F. Establish selection criteria and the process to identify pilot evaluation projects to be considered as funds become available; and
- G. Fill vacant GS-13 Evaluation and Visitor Studies Coordinator position.

Long-term, More Comprehensive Actions (one to five years):

- H. *Systematically* share lessons learned from existing evaluation projects;
- I. Incorporate evaluation more tangibly into existing professional development opportunities, training programs, and reward systems;
- J. Require an evaluation component for all funding sources in the Servicewide Consolidated Call (SCC) (selection criteria to include low-cost options);
- K. Create a mini-grants program to promote small scale evaluation into questions of local interest;
- L. Provide resources to systematically involve historically underserved audiences and communities in evaluation work; and
- M. Make available individualized technical assistance and support for evaluation "champions" in the field and at the national level.



“We need a ‘toolbox’ . . . and training and information about how to do evaluation.”

—SUMMIT PARTICIPANT

Participants shared innovative ideas in breakout sessions.

**LEARNING TOGETHER:
PROCEEDINGS, EVALUATION, AND
APPLYING LESSONS LEARNED**
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This group includes the following individuals: Deanne Adams, Neil DeJong, Michael Duffin, Lakita Edwards, Sheri Forbes, Elizabeth Hoermann, Cynthia MacLeod, Megan McBride, Nora Mitchell, Anne O’Neill, Amy Powers, Patti Reilly, Sam Vaughn, and Julia Washburn.

Nowhere does it become clearer, however, that this event was the result of the work of an extensive team of talented specialists, than in reviewing the following list of additional friends who provided invaluable content and technical support:

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ONLINE: www.nps.gov/interp/evaluation