



Beyond Outreach Handbook

*A Guide to Designing
Effective Programs
to Engage Diverse
Communities*





This handbook is the twenty-first in the Conservation and Stewardship Publication Series produced by the National Park Service Conservation Study Institute. This series provides information on conservation history and current practice for professionals and the public. Nora J. Mitchell, director of the Institute, is series editor. This volume was prepared in cooperation with the University of Vermont, the NPS Northeast Region Office of Interpretation and Education, and Santa Monica Mountains and Boston Harbor Islands national recreation areas.

The Conservation Study Institute was established by the National Park Service (NPS) in 1998 to help the agency and its partners address critical stewardship issues and encourage the best thinking and practice in collaborative conservation. A partnership with academic, government, and nonprofit organizations, the Institute advances innovation for the stewardship of our national system of parks and special places, and assists the NPS and its partners in becoming more creative and effective in meeting twenty-first century challenges. The Institute is based at Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park in the Northeast Region of the National Park Service.

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All photos in this publication courtesy of the National Park Service except for the Boston Harbor Islands photos, which are courtesy of the National Park Service, Thompson Island Outward Bound Education Center, and Captain David Weinstein.

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No. 19
Engaging Young Adults in a Sustainable Future: Strategies for National Parks and Other Special Places, 2009 (pdf)

No. 16
Stronger Together: A Manual on the Principles and Practices of Civic Engagement, 2009 (pdf)

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On the cover:

UPPER LEFT: Thompson Island Outward Bound Education Center, a key partner in youth programs at Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area, helps transport urban youth to program activities in the island park.

UPPER MIDDLE: NPS partners Anahuak Youth Sports Association and Mountain Recreation and Conservation Authority created Anahuak Outdoors, a combination junior ranger program and youth soccer league that offers day trips to Santa Monica Mountains and community service activities. Credit: Mountain Recreation and Conservation Authority.

UPPER RIGHT: The Boston Harbor Island Ambassadors program is a summer jobs program for high school youth that encourages career exploration with the NPS; here, the seasonal park ranger, a former Island Ambassador, is helping junior rangers learn about Civil-War-era Fort Warren on Georges Island.

BOTTOM: Urban high school students learn about NPS careers through summer employment in the SAMO Youth program at Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area. This 2004 summer crew is bound for the Channel Islands to experience a different national park. Credit: Abel Solorio.



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Prepared by the

National Park Service Conservation Study Institute
and the
University of Vermont

In partnership with the

National Park Service Northeast Region Office of Interpretation and Education
Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area
Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area


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A large segment of the American public does not know who we are [or] what we do or see themselves working in the [NPS] ... We need to make the national parks and the work of the National Park Service relevant to all Americans.¹

– Jon Jarvis, Director, National Park Service

A wide-angle photograph of a hiker trail in the Santa Monica Mountains. The foreground is filled with tall, dry, golden-brown grass. A dirt path winds through the landscape. In the middle ground, a group of about a dozen hikers, including children and adults, are walking away from the camera. The background features rolling hills and a prominent, flat-topped mountain peak under a clear sky.

The SHRUB program at Santa Monica Mountains brings fifth-graders to the park to learn about stewardship of park resources; the program uses hiking to help meet the California physical education standard and get students moving.



Beyond Outreach Handbook

A Guide to Designing Effective Programs to Engage Diverse Communities

Engaging the full spectrum of Americans in the stewardship of our parks and special places is now recognized as crucial to the future of our national park system.² This handbook represents an important new tool to assist National Park Service (NPS) managers and practitioners and their partners in developing programs that successfully connect diverse communities with their local national parks. It guides practitioners through an assessment that identifies gaps in readiness and informs the development of an effective engagement strategy.

The handbook is based on a research project that probed what constitutes good practices for engaging diverse communities and enhancing the relevancy of the national park system. The project was conducted by the NPS Conservation Study Institute (Institute) and the University of Vermont (UVM) in cooperation with the NPS Northeast Region Office of Interpretation and Education and Boston Harbor Islands and Santa Monica Mountains national recreation areas.³ The research examined seven youth programs through which the two national parks are successfully engaging diverse neighboring communities.⁴ The Institute and its partners developed the readiness assessment based on a distillation of key lessons learned from these programs.

A. Context

National Park Service Director Jon Jarvis identifies relevancy as one of four priority areas for the NPS to address. Numerous opportunities to enhance relevancy can be found in current societal trends and challenges, including declining historical and cultural literacy, the disconnection of youth from nature, a more urbanized and diverse population, concerns over obesity and health, and the use of increasingly sophisticated technologies. These all provide opportunities to work with partners to diversify visitation, engage new communities, and introduce more of the American population to all that the national park system and its partners have to offer.

The independent National Parks Second Century Commission has also acknowledged the importance of relevancy. Calling national parks “community-builders,” the commission’s 2009 report, *Advancing the National Park Idea*, declared that “the long-term viability of the parks and the quality of life in surrounding communities increasingly depend on the Park Service building strong constituencies across the full spectrum of our population.”⁵

Encouragingly, more and more national parks, NPS programs, and partners across the United States are creatively engaging new and diverse communities and seeking to enhance the relevancy of parks and associated programs to all Americans. This publication seeks to share what has been learned from innovative and successful programs offered by two national parks and their partners. Other managers and practitioners can build on and adapt this knowledge to their own situations, thus leveraging this information across the national park system.

In every system, the solutions we need have already been discovered and are being practiced somewhere in the system. We always need first to look within the organization to see what’s been invented and what’s working.⁶

– Margaret Wheatley, Commissioner
National Parks Second Century Commission



B. Exploring “Deep Engagement”

The NPS and its partners, through parks and programs, successfully offer opportunities for recreation and education that are valued by the public, yet most of these experiences are of relatively short-term duration and are often one-time or infrequent occurrences (e.g., family visits to national parks, school field trips, and interpretive programs). The concept of deep engagement emerged from the research conducted at Santa Monica Mountains and Boston Harbor Islands national recreation areas. At these parks, efforts to engage youth of diverse backgrounds go beyond short-term outreach activities to provide in-depth, hands-on learning and a continuing pathway for deepening park-community relationships (e.g., service learning experiences in parks and communities, summer work opportunities for young adults, or internships). Collaborating closely with community partners, these parks are building strong connections through long-term, carefully crafted initiatives that complement the more common short-term experiences and result in deeper engagement.

The Institute-UVM research has demonstrated that deep engagement holds great promise for connecting with people and communities that the National Park Service has not previously reached. Although the findings are based on engaging youth and communities of color, the two parks’ practices are consistent with the principles of effective collaboration and partnership, and it is reasonable to assume that this work is transferable to communities representing other types of diversity.⁷ Wider application of the practice of deep engagement may enable the NPS and its partners to more effectively fulfill a mandate to serve all Americans and provide benefits to the broadest possible audience.⁸

C. Designing Effective Deep Engagement Programs

This section provides a guide to developing new programs and improving existing ones in order to successfully engage diverse communities. The material that follows will be useful to managers and practitioners within and outside of the NPS who are interested in improving their understanding and practice of civic engagement with diverse communities.

■ 1. Background

The Institute-UVM research identified six essential processes (see box on next page, left column) that are common to the seven programs examined. The findings indicate that effective engagement between parks and diverse communities involves synergistic interactions among the six processes. Working together, the processes accomplish long-term outcomes (box, right column) that in turn support and maintain the park-community relationships that are critical to success.

LEFT: The Harbor Connections program at Boston Harbor Islands provides middle-school students with hands-on learning as they plot charts and prepare logs.

Essential Processes and Long-Term Outcomes of Deep Engagement

Essential Processes

- Develop awareness and knowledge of local culture
- Build a skilled staff
- Create a supportive leadership environment
- Work with schools and community groups
- Provide benefits to communities and the NPS
- Recruit new park and community stewards

Long-Term Outcomes

- Staff involvement with local communities
- Inclusive interpretation and stories
- Effective communication and use of media
- Supportive NPS climate
- Diverse workforce
- Program sustainability through community service

The complex and dynamic nature of deep engagement requires a strategic approach that is thoughtful, comprehensive, integrated, and tailored to the unique characteristics and needs of specific parks, local communities, and other partners. The research indicates that attention to any one process alone does not necessarily result in successful engagement. While all processes do not need to be addressed at once, it is important to consider all of them within a long-term strategy and, over time, integrate them into the program design.

■ 2. Assessment of Park and Program Readiness

Organized around the six essential processes discussed above, the material that follows guides managers and practitioners through an assessment of park and program readiness to implement a deep engagement initiative. Each section includes an overarching readiness question. This is followed by a detailed guide to help identify gaps that need to be addressed (e.g., additional skills training, the need to secure buy-in from key members of the management team, or further engagement of community partners), which in turn can inform development of a strategic approach to deep engagement.

Each section also contains a table developed from the research at Boston Harbor Islands and Santa Monica Mountains national recreation areas that illustrates the evolution of each process. The tables include initial components that existed or were put in place at the two parks, how these affected the programs over time, and the long-term outcomes toward which the parks were aiming. The tables are intended as examples to stimulate thinking; users of this assessment will need to tailor approaches to their own situations.

Develop Awareness and Knowledge of Local Culture

How well do program staff understand local community culture and context?

- I. Assess the extent to which park and partner staff:
 - a. understand the importance of having knowledge of local culture
 - b. are able to communicate with the local community (including speaking the language)
 - c. reflect local community culture
 - d. are involved in the community
 - e. understand community demographics and how they are changing
 - f. use media outlets and technologies that appeal to the community
 - g. are aware of how the park and the federal government are perceived by the community
 - h. have the training and skills to handle difficult community situations (e.g., polarization or anger that may stem from poor relationship-building in the past)

2. Assess opportunities for:
 - a. programs to be structured to meet multilingual needs
 - b. interpretive materials to include perspectives from the local culture
 - c. someone on the program staff to be an “ambassador” to the community

The following table shows how having program staff who are knowledgeable about local community culture fosters better communication and strengthens the relationship between the park and communities.

Initial Components	Early Impacts	Later Impacts	Long-Term Outcomes
Staff who are well versed in the local culture Diverse staff who can speak the same language as the community	Participants feel comfortable with staff and welcome in the park or program setting Local community feels comfortable with program staff	Participants are more willing to interact with staff beyond the ones they know Program staff are better able to communicate with local communities Park-community relationships are strengthened Programs are better able to meet community needs and address barriers to participation	Staff involvement with local communities Effective communication and use of media Program sustainability Supportive NPS climate Inclusive interpretation and stories

Build a Skilled Staff

Do program staff—park and partners—collectively have the right competencies and skill sets to ensure programmatic success?

- I. Assess the extent to which park and partner staff collectively have or are capable of developing:
 - a. an understanding of the importance of relevancy and of engaging communities of color
 - b. the ability to mentor
 - c. the ability to work collaboratively
 - d. an understanding of youth development and leadership
 - e. an understanding of the issues youth are facing in their communities and families
 - f. knowledge about ways to access “wraparound” services (i.e., social services that help youth with issues in their personal lives)
 - g. a willingness to experiment
 - h. the ability to negotiate
 - i. the ability to facilitate

2. Assess the extent to which park and partner staff:
 - a. need and can access appropriate and adequate cultural competency training
 - b. have management support and resources to implement this type of engagement

The following table shows how skilled staff can create a welcoming environment and develop lasting relationships with program participants.

Initial Components	Early Impacts	Later Impacts	Long-Term Outcomes
Staff and partners skilled in youth and leadership development Diverse staff that reflect the local community and work directly with participants	Participants feel comfortable and connected with staff Staff mentor participants during the program and their daily lives	Welcoming environment is created Deep relationships develop between participants, staff, and organizations	Program sustainability Supportive NPS climate Staff involvement with local communities Effective communication and use of media

Create a Supportive Leadership Environment

How supportive is the program’s leadership environment?

- i. Assess how and the extent to which:
 - a. the superintendent and management team “buy into” and advocate for the program
 - b. the organizational culture exhibits and encourages collaborative leadership
 - c. park management and program partners encourage experimentation and adaptation in program design and delivery, and consider challenges to be learning opportunities
 - d. there is clear and open communication between park divisions and between the park and its program partners
 - e. there is a “critical mass” of park staff who support program goals
 - f. the superintendent and management team will make this program a funding priority

The following table shows how supportive leadership encourages adaptive programs that better serve communities.

Youth employed in the Island Ambassadors program learn about the Boston Harbor Islands, receive leadership training, and help educate their communities about the park area.

Initial Components	Early Impacts	Later Impacts	Long-Term Outcomes
Authorizing environment that supports diversity and engagement efforts	Program staff are able to experiment with program design and delivery Program staff have flexibility when implementing program	Programs are adapted to serve communities Staff are able to adapt programs in response to opportunities and challenges	Supportive NPS climate Program sustainability



Work with Schools and Community Groups

How well-positioned are program staff—at all levels—to develop and deliver programs in partnership with community and school groups?

1. Assess the level of understanding among staff, including park and partner leaders and program managers, about park-community interactions and the following park-community dynamics:
 - a. partnership opportunities between the park and key community groups
 - b. general history and context of park-community relationships
 - c. current community and school needs
 - d. potential barriers to access or participation in an intended program

2. Assess how and the extent to which:
 - a. program staff interact with community groups *in* the community
 - b. staff consider community needs in developing programs
 - c. opportunities exist within the context of the program to establish partnerships that support and reflect diversity
 - d. organizational culture supports and values shared program development and delivery in a partnership context
 - e. all partners, including the park, understand each others' organizations in order to build on strengths, avoid overlap, and work together most effectively
 - f. park management and staff are willing to recognize prior “mistakes” or difficulties as learning opportunities and use them to improve program design and delivery
 - g. park and partner leaders recognize and reward success

The following table shows how collaborative programs with schools and communities lead to stronger community relationships and are better able to meet community needs.

Initial Components	Early Impacts	Later Impacts	Long-Term Outcomes
Partnerships with school and community organizations Programs that are collaboratively developed	Park and partners together identify community needs and how best to deliver services	Programs directly meet community needs Relationships with community are strengthened	Staff involvement with local communities Program sustainability Effective communication and use of media

Provide Benefits to Communities and the NPS through Community Service

How well-positioned is the program to provide service and “give back” to the community?

- I. Assess how and the extent to which:
 - a. the program is designed around authentic and tangible work objectives that benefit the community as well as the park
 - b. participants help select service projects
 - c. park management and staff understand community needs and community culture relative to park objectives, and how these can be integrated into the program
 - d. the community service opportunities address the park and NPS missions, and these are communicated to program participants
 - e. park management is prepared to make a long-term (5–10 years) program investment to meet these needs

The following table shows how including community service in a program can foster lasting relationships with local communities and program sustainability.

Initial Components	Early Impacts	Later Impacts	Long-Term Outcomes
Programs with a community-wide service aspect and which benefit both the community and the NPS	Participants receive hands-on experience Participants gain a sense of pride and accomplishment in meeting park and community needs	Programs foster a sense of stewardship Park-community relationships are strengthened	Staff involvement with local communities Supportive NPS climate Program sustainability

Employees in the SAMO Youth program at Santa Monica Mountains work in various park disciplines; here, the 2011 summer crew is carrying out a plant restoration project.

Credit: Antonio Solorio



Recruit New Park and Community Stewards

How well-positioned is the program to effectively engage and recruit new park and community stewards?

- i. Assess how and the extent to which:
 - a. the program demonstrates and communicates the NPS mission and its benefits to community members and organizations
 - b. the program is designed to introduce participants to the range of volunteer and career opportunities
 - c. program staff identify potential mentors from various divisions
 - d. park and program partners market volunteer and employment opportunities (e.g., using media that appeal to diverse communities, using terminology that connects with target audiences, and providing information that fills gaps in knowledge)
 - e. mentoring and related support are provided for new employees
 - f. the park has the human and financial resources to sustain these programs
 - g. opportunities or potential pathways to NPS employment are identified for program participants
 - h. opportunities are identified for program participants to stay involved with the park after the program concludes

The following table shows how providing hands-on experience and information about career opportunities can influence participants' knowledge of and desire to work for the NPS.

Initial Components	Early Impacts	Later Impacts	Long-Term Outcomes
Career programs that expose participants to various aspects of park management and potential jobs Opportunities for hands-on experience and mentorship across park divisions	Program staff mentoring helps participants identify their interests and talents Program has the capacity to place participants in positions of interest or assist with placement at other sites	Participants are knowledgeable about career options and pathways to full-time employment Participants have a desire to work for the NPS	Diverse workforce Supportive NPS climate Effective communication and use of media

D. Provide Feedback on This Model

The deep engagement approach presented here will always be a working model because the readiness assessment can serve as a vehicle for incorporating new learning. As deep engagement initiatives mature and expand to include different park-community settings, the model can evolve to reflect new understandings. For this reason, the Conservation Study Institute welcomes and requests your feedback. Please email comments, suggestions, and requests for more information to stewardship@nps.gov.

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Notes

- 1 From remarks at the Northeast Region/National Capital Region Superintendents Conference, October 28, 2010.
- 2 In this publication, the term “national park” refers to any unit of the national park system or related area for which the NPS has management responsibility, regardless of specific nomenclature. The term “national park system” refers collectively to national parks and the programs of the National Park Service.
- 3 For a more detailed discussion of the research project, see Rebecca Stanfield McCown, et al., *Beyond Outreach: Sharing Innovative Approaches for Engaging Youth from Diverse Communities*; and Rebecca Stanfield McCown, *Evaluation of National Park Service 21st-Century Relevancy Initiatives: Case Studies Addressing Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the National Park Service*. Both publications are available from the Conservation Study Institute at stewardship@nps.gov.
- 4 At Boston Harbor Islands, the programs are Harbor Connections, Island Ambassadors, and Native American Youth Media Institute; for more information, go to www.nps.gov/boha and search by program name. At Santa Monica Mountains, the programs are SHRUB, EcoHelpers, SAMO Youth, and Anahuak Outdoors; for more information, email samo_education@nps.gov.
- 5 *Advancing the National Park Idea*, available at www.npca.org/commission/pdf/Commission_Report.PDF.
- 6 From “Some of My Core Assumptions about Leadership,” prepared by Margaret Wheatley for the National Park System Advisory Board leadership retreat, September 2010.
- 7 For example, see the NPS webpage on partnerships (<http://www.nps.gov/partnerships>), especially the page on success factors (http://www.nps.gov/partnerships/top_ten.htm); see also the civic engagement principles on pages 29–32 in *Stronger Together: A Manual on the Principles and Practices of Civic Engagement* (<http://www.nps.gov/csi/pdf/CE%20Manual.pdf>).
- 8 For a more in-depth discussion of deep engagement, see Rebecca Stanfield McCown, et. al., *Beyond Outreach: Sharing Innovative Approaches for Engaging Youth from Diverse Communities*, available from the Conservation Study Institute at stewardship@nps.gov.



Boston Harbor Island Ambassadors assist scientists in research and restoration projects, such as this eel grass restoration in Boston Harbor.



The SHRUB program at Santa Monica Mountains is interdisciplinary to better meet the needs of different student learning styles; here, fifth-graders are learning about NPS sites through art.

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