

Civic engagement— What does it mean to us? A perspective from Park Break participants

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THE BEGINNING OF THE 21ST CENTURY HAS BROUGHT A SHIFT in conservation management and in the thinking of the National Park Service (NPS). The shift highlights the idea of parks that engage their local communities and the public, rather than parks that act as conservation islands (McNeely 1994; Phillips 2003). The concept of *civic engagement* entails the interaction between protected areas and civil society in a way that promotes the enhancement of both conservation practices and the quality of life in the community. This is a shift away from the traditional “command and control,” top-down management approaches of land set aside for conservation toward community-based conservation (CBC) (Licht et al. 2008).

In the face of climate change, resource managers are also aware that the delineation of a protected area is not enough to insure ecological conservation, especially when species migrate outside park boundaries (Allen et al. 2008). Many recent case studies have demonstrated that planning for ecological preservation will be most successful if it accommodates citizen concerns, includes discussions with stakeholders, and relies on voluntary cooperation from the start (McNeely 1994; Ramirez 1999; Brown and Harris 2005). Often this requires convincing citizens of the benefits of natural resource management (Morris and McBeth 2003). Thus, perhaps the single largest conservation challenge is to convince policymakers and citizens of the economic importance of biological conservation, which can be accomplished by making tangible links between conservation and economic gain for the local economy (Allen et al. 2008). There is growing agreement among natural resource practitioners that conservation and sustainable development must be simultaneously achieved; otherwise, unsustainable development will prevail (Slattery 1991; Berkes 2004). This reflects the ongoing debate between preservation versus sustainability, especially when the establishment of large protected areas has a negative impact on the livelihood of the rural poor. Although CBC is certainly not a panacea, its failures can often be attributed to improper implementation (Berkes 2004).

NPS has adopted this idea of community-based or “people-based” conservation and has conducted a series of forums and workshops, as well as published reports on the topic. The overwhelming conclusion of these reports is that civic engagement is a key aspect of NPS’s future success (NPS 2002). NPS’s commitment to civic engagement was solidified in 2007 with the release the Director’s Order #75A on civic engagement and public involvement. The order’s purpose was “to articulate our commitment to civic engagement, and to have all NPS units and offices embrace civic engagement as the essential foundation and framework for creating plans and developing programs. Civic engagement is a continuous, dynamic conversation with the public on many levels” (NPS 2007). Linenthal (2008) defines civic engagement for the National Park Service as a “focus on inclusive processes” which requires the identification of critical stakeholders. Participants in the NPS’s civic engagement planning process agreed that partnerships and collaborations are required components of park planning and park management. These partnerships will be essential in promoting environmental stewardship, especially in the face of global climate change, strengthening the parks’ ability to preserve America’s rich history and culture, and to foster civic responsibility by both the park and American citizens (NPS 2002).

Civic engagement: What is it and how is it being addressed in Acadia National Park?

Civic engagement was the theme of the 2008 Park Break session at Acadia National Park, in which the authors of this paper participated. To facilitate the discussion on civic engagement, multiple issues facing the park were presented during the course of the program and personal opinions were allowed to be expressed on those issues as well. We found having topic eclecticism valuable because it gave us a more comprehensive idea of the multitude of partners and people involved in making the park operate effectively. This was an opportunity to get a “behind the scenes” look at how

NPS gets the public involved and where the agency needs to do more work in engaging the public. It provided an opportunity for students to discuss an issue “hands on,” outside of the classroom. Overall, we were able to see how Acadia employed civic engagement in their park management and planning.

During the course of the session, we were presented with a series of case studies that involved current civic engagement practices of Acadia and particular challenges the park faced. Community partners as well as park staff and scientists were brought into the workshop to give their view of how they had interacted and partnered with the Park Service, as well as the challenges that they faced—and continue to face—in the partnership process. We were then given the opportunity to discuss the topic with the partners and provide potential solutions to the park staff on how to further engage the community based on the information we were given. In this way, Park Break took the topic of civic engagement beyond academic “theorizing” to real-world applicability. The session gave us a chance to bounce ideas off of each other in a friendly environment and to become engaged with our future colleagues. From the perspective of partners involved in the process, the Park Break program was a unique opportunity to engage directly with graduate students on important conservation issues and gain an intergenerational perspective. Table 1 lists the partners involved in the Acadia civic engagement Park Break program and the roles we perceived them to play at the park, based on our brief interaction with the agency. “The program had a strong effect in showing the students the challenges and complexities of some of the issues facing Acadia, as well as pointing [Acadia] toward some solutions” (SCA employee).

We will present a brief synopsis of two case studies that were explored during the Park Break forum on civic engagement. Both topics deal with important conservation issues. The first addresses the issue of watershed protection and the specific role of science in both park management and town planning. The second case study addresses the issue of NPS relevancy to the American population, specifically

Table 1. Park Break 2008: Forum partner representative, current role at Acadia National Park, and potential for partnership expansion.

Partner (key contact)	Role at Acadia National Park	Potential added benefits
University representatives		
Texas A&M University (Corliss Outley and Gillian Bowser)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitated Park Break 2008 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Potential to interact with parks, graduate students, and partners, and to facilitate post-program publications
Graduate Student Participants in Park Break 2008	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attended forum on civic engagement and provided informal feedback on issues presented by park 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formal feedback on experience written for publication Potential for recruitment of graduate students to conduct research and work in the park
Universities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruited students for Park Break attendance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Potential for additional university partners in Park Break and additional research opportunities at Acadia National Park
NGO representatives		
Acadia Partners for Science and Learning (Bill Zoellick)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manages Schoodic Education Center and works with educators, students, scientists, and donors to support research at Acadia and engage students and teachers in the research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Will assist in the expansion of the Schoodic Education Center
Friends of Acadia (Marla O’Byrne)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Non-profit established to help preserve and protect the natural beauty, ecological vitality, and cultural distinctiveness of Acadia National Park Provide resources to support research, youth engagement programs, and community engagement in the park 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Will be key in future engagement of the community in the park
George Wright Society (Rebecca Stanfield McCown — student representative)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partnered with Acadia National Park to facilitate Park Break 2008 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity to recruit and engage students
Student Conservation Association (SCA) (Flip Hagood)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Key partner in Park Break 2008 Supplies park with SCA volunteers to fill key positions in summer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Model of 80/20 split between hard work and learning opportunities could be beneficial in the improvement of Youth Conservation Corps
Quebec-Labrador Foundation (Brent Mitchell)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partners with Acadia National Park to bring professionals from other countries to the park 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Potential to help expand international mission of NPS
Government agency representatives		
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration—National Marine Sanctuaries (NMS) (Brad Barr)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acadia National Park lies on the seashore, thus NMS serves as a partner in helping protect coastal resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interested in conducting Park Break forums with NMS

future generations and how this relevancy can be improved through outreach and extension programs. Both case studies highlight the importance of civic engagement in the field of resource management and the necessity to include multiple partners involved in the decision making process.

Case Study 1: Northeast Creek watershed and the town of Bar Harbor

The Northeast Creek watershed case study was presented by NPS staffers John Kelly and David Manski, and Acadia partners Hillary Neckles (USGS), Martha Nielsen (USGS), Anne Krieg (Bar Harbor town planner), and Marla O'Byrne (Friends of Acadia). The park is concerned because it owns the Northeast Creek estuary, but does not own the land upstream of the creek. Current development pressures on Mount Desert Island threaten the pristine status of the Northeast Creek estuary. The park is partnering with the town and critical stakeholders to protect the estuary, since it is threatened by pressures outside the park. One specific tool used to engage the town and the community in the protection of the watershed was a scientific model developed by USGS (Rohweder 2004), that predicts nitrogen export per an acre based on land use type (Nielsen and Kahl 2007), and models the impact of predicted nitrogen loads on the estuary (Kopp et al. 2002). From this information, the scientists could predict how changing land use scenarios would impact the estuary and give recommendations for sustainable growth. These recommendations were then written into the town ordinance, which gave the town some control over development.

This is an example of a partnership generated between science and local communities with the goal of protecting water quality—and it is not an unusual case (Gutrich et al. 2005). Also known as sustainability science, this is an applied science where stakeholders and scientists interact to agree on important questions, study objectives, relevant evidence, and convincing forms of argument (Kates et al. 2001). Town planner Ann Krieg stressed the importance of translating the scientific results to the community in terms that they could understand, and the town hired a consultant to do this. This often required talking with people one-on-one to clarify their specific questions. In this case, science is used as a communicative means by informing stakeholders and articulating their values in an understandable common language (Gutrich 2005).

We saw many advantages and some disadvantages of using science as a decision-making support tool. On the one hand, we recognized science as an important policy decision-making tool to provide scientifically supported evidence for the direct cause-and-effect relationships between nitrogen loads and land use. On the other hand, many of us were concerned that the science behind the model was somewhat difficult to understand and may be difficult to translate to the general public. One value that was made clear during the forum was that decisions are made based on economic, cultural, historic, and moral variables where scientific information in and of itself may not be enough, especially if it seems complicated (Gutrich et al. 2005).

One issue touched upon during the day was the fact that the local community does not use the estuary, which has raised questions about the community's view on the estuary's protection. The suggestion was made that the estuary should be promoted in the town, potentially with the help of Friends of Acadia, to encourage community stewardship and a sense of ownership. Initially, the park may want to survey local residents to determine what they value about their land and water resources, and specifically what they value about Northeast Creek. They may find that people are not even aware that this resource is part of Acadia (Brown and Harris 2004). Currently there is no designated public access to the creek or widespread promotion of the estuary as an important recreational and natural resource in Acadia. We suggested that the development of a trail to the estuary could improve public access

and visibility of the estuary within the town, as long as the uses were low-impact. In addition, environmental education programs could be conducted at the estuary and provide local schoolchildren with an opportunity to learn about estuarine and watershed science.

Another challenge faced by the park and its partners is finding the funding to continue the monitoring of the Northeast Creek watershed. This problem, however, could provide another chance for community engagement if volunteers can be trained to collect the nitrate data at a reduced cost. A recent paper by Barmuta (2003) concluded that relevant science will (1) be more applied and provide accurate descriptions of riverine dynamics and processes, (2) use monitoring and adaptive management strategies to determine appropriate solutions, and (3) provide sufficient time and resources for research, outreach, and extension. The case of the Northeast Creek has successfully applied “relevant” science to describe the processes occurring in the watershed. Hopefully the town, the park, and partners will be able to work collaboratively to find funding and continue using relevant science in the park and town planning process.

Case Study 2: Evaluation of Acadia’s outreach and extension program

A second case study of Acadia’s Outreach and Extension programs was presented to us by Acadia NP employees, David Manski, Cynthia Ocel, and Gary Stellpflug; and Acadia partners, Bill Zoellick (Acadia Partners for Science and Learning), Marla O’Byrne (Friends of Acadia), Brent Mitchell (Quebec-Labrador Foundation), Rebecca Stanfield McCown (George Wright Society), Flip Hagood (SCA), and Corliss Outley (TAMU). Specifically, Acadia is addressing NPS’s larger concern about relevancy in the 21st century. This includes the National Park Service’s relevance to the changing American demographic as well as to younger generations. They are interested in addressing the following two concerns: (1) How can the NPS personalize parks for individuals, and (2) What is the role of resource education in science (NPS 2002)?

Currently Acadia, especially through the aid of their supporting NGOs (i.e., Friends of Acadia, Acadia Partners for Science and Learning), are able to facilitate education programs at all levels. These programs include traditional NPS ranger-led interpretive programs, education programs for both teachers and students at the Schoodic Environmental Education Center, exposure for high school students through the Youth Conservation Corps (YCC), undergraduate and graduate hands-on education through student internships at the park, and graduate research scholarships. Their current environmental education program seemed excellent and comprehensive, yet there still were concerns about current failures in Acadia’s effectiveness in recruiting students to their YCC program, despite the fact that it is fully supported. We saw the opportunity for Acadia staffers to expand their existing education and outreach program by broadening their partnerships within the community and the region. For instance, we suggested that Acadia explore options to recruit high school students from the larger region, especially students from metropolitan areas in the Northeast. Yet we also realized additional challenges in implementing this idea, including targeted recruitment at regional high schools and finding housing for students coming from outside the local area.

A theme commonly stressed during this weeklong forum was that civic engagement implies individual relationships. Although Acadia has done well at building and fostering these relationships, it needs to further expand its scope to reach a larger and more diverse population of individuals. This would include keeping and updating current programs such as traditional waysides, ranger programs, environmental education programs, webpage, and visitor centers. In addition, they can begin to implement new programs that incorporate emerging technologies such as MP3 tours, multimedia presentations, television programs, and cutting-edge technology that would appeal to younger generations and a broader audience than those

people who currently visit the park. The park realizes that it must reach out to a larger audience, and potentially to people who may never visit the park, and the way to do this in the 21st century is through the media and the internet.

As part of our experience, we were asked to visit and assess Acadia’s website. Thus, the members of Park Break were used as a focus group (college students, age 25–30) that could give direct feedback on Acadia’s media program. Although all participants enjoyed the E-cruise, many complained of the cumbersome nature of the site’s design and the datedness of its technology (e.g., the website did not have the ability to be full screen). In addition to improving the website, a campaign for promoting the website, especially to schools and teachers, may be necessary.

One realization that we came to during Park Break was that the success of Acadia’s current outreach programs, as well as future programs, hinges on the partnerships developed between its staff and members of non-profits associated with the park. We felt that Acadia could expand its partnerships to utilize local students and retirees in accomplishing tasks that the park currently does not have the staff or expertise to complete. For instance, Acadia could utilize students at College of the Atlantic, a small private school located in Bar Harbor, all of whom are required to complete an internship as part of their undergraduate curriculum, to accomplish tasks for the park, such as website and media development or nitrate sampling in the Northeast Creek estuary. A memorandum of understanding could be signed between the park and the university to help ensure a steady input of students to the park, especially in those areas that require particular expertise. Local high school students may be interested in getting involved in the park through some type of service learning program, especially if the work they complete gives them credit toward graduation and is relevant to their career goals. Again, these students could be used for website development or scientific data collection. Finally, there may be many unrealized partnerships to be made with residents of the community and the region. These people may be reached through direct engagement and targeted invitations by the park or their friends groups. Specifically, we suggest reaching out to the schools and youth clubs across Maine and in the Boston area.

Recommendations for Acadia National Park

At the conclusion of the week, we developed a list of what we felt the top priorities for Acadia National Park should be (Table 2). Realizing that resources are limited, as a group we then narrowed down our individual recommendations to a collective top three. We defined these priorities to be (1) continued establishment of partnerships, (2) finding new ways to engage youth, and (3) conducting research on public perceptions of the park.

Table 2. Top civic engagement priorities identified for Acadia National Park.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand educational programs throughout the northeast to increase diversity representation at the park
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilize new technology • Engage youth to be excited about the park* • Continue and expand involvement in local, regional, national, and international education programs • Create an identity for Acadia National Park through branding • Have communication and an 'open dialogue' with the local community to help build trust • Push the envelope - find new and creative ways to do things* • Increase public transportation to the park* • Utilize research to explore social and emotional consideration of both visitors and non-visitors* • Increase volunteering and utilize the baby boomer brain drain, community businesses, and youth • Expand existing partnerships and develop new ones*
<p>* Top five priorities identified through group vote</p>

All participants, including ourselves, NPS staff, and NPS partners, agreed that the experience was both engaging and valuable. On a scale of 1–10, with 10 being ranked most favorable, the participants of the Park Break forum on civic engagement ranked the experience between 7 and 10 with a mean ranking of 8.6 (14 respondents). Overall, this suggests a positive Park Break experience by the students, Acadia National Park, university organizers, and the partners. The main complaint of participants was that they did not have enough time in the park (students) or at the forum (partners). We suggest that Park Break was of enormous value to us and would be a beneficial experience to any student interested in

conservation issues and the study of nature-society relationships in general. This conclusion is strengthened by feedback from partners who felt that Park Break “offered a great opportunity to interact with the next generation of natural resource professionals” (USGS employee). One of the most beneficial aspects of Park Break to them was the ability to hear “grad student perspectives on the spectrum of issues that were discussed during the sessions, particularly in informal settings” (NOAA employee), especially “intergenerational differences in perceptions” (NGO employee). They also realized the need to “invite more than one person to represent a ‘broader’ constituency” (friends’ group employee). Many partners voiced their concern about the younger generations’ reliance on technology and their “growing reliance on internet-based social networking as a replacement for rather than an addition to direct contact and engagement” (NGO employee). Finally, the experience was very empowering for not only the students, but also for the organizers, one of whom wrote: “In reality this was the most engaging project I have done with students and I am struck by the intensity of the experience (University employee).”

Conclusions: What have we taken from Park Break

One idea emphasized during Park Break is that individuals do come from different backgrounds, providing them with unique perspectives. We represented a diverse group of students who represent unique perspectives. Even though we all participated in the same workshop, we still left with different, but more refined, individual definitions of “civic engagement.” As a conclusion to our paper, we would like to share how we, as individuals, define the term.

I think of public, non-profit, and/or private entities pooling resources for some kind of program. That’s an institutional definition that resource managers use.

— *Wes Wong*

The forum on civic engagement strengthened my belief that involving the public in the decision-making process within the NPS is essential. I came to realize how often times parks are islands, they do not have any authority outside of their boundaries ... therefore establishing good, working relationships with surrounding communities and businesses is critical to meeting the park’s goals.

— *Ryan Sharp*

We all felt engaged by the experience because it allowed us to interact with fellow students and professionals from different backgrounds (linguistically, academically, geographically, racially, etc.) and share our ideas in a friendly environment. The implementation of the formal reflection process in Park Break was an important component; it required us to critically reflect on the topic of civic engagement while continuing to work together as a team.

— *Michelle Moorman*

I have a strong belief that all environmental problems we currently face in protected areas, including national parks, could be solved through civic engagement efforts such as public participation and involvement. Before the forum, I thought the concept of civic engagement in public lands was quite ambiguous and a complicated concept to achieve. However, now I have a more positive attitude on the concept: identify key players first, and then try to communicate with others. I realized that it is somewhat difficult to apply civic engagement solutions across the board because we cannot

simply formalize human behaviors and attitudes in one way. Therefore, the important thing is a process to understand the uniqueness and specific situation of the target areas.

— *Min Kook Kim*

The Park Break experience dealt with the interactions between protected areas (with particular emphasis on national parks) and civil society and how that relationship can—and should—enhance both conservation practices as well as increase quality of life in the population. I learned more about what the concept of civic engagement entails, what it should aim to accomplish, and what its major benefits are, both to park management as well as to the communities.

— *Edgar Espinoza*

My definition of ‘civic engagement’ was expanded. Initially, I thought of civic engagement as underrepresented populations, specifically racial and ethnic minorities. However, after taking part in the weeklong field-based seminar, I began to think of other groups that lacked ‘voice’ in terms of park decision-making and management. Civic engagement involves going beyond the traditional ‘stakeholders’ and reaching out to the unrepresented public at any and all levels of management, resource protection, community development, etc. It fosters a sense of ‘relevancy’ and ownership—a partnership of sorts.

— *Timia Thompson*

Through our readings, the case studies, and the information presented to us during the course, we were able to formulate these individual opinions on civic engagement. As a group, we define “civic engagement” to be a continuous, adaptive, long-term process that seeks to engage the public. This requires the involvement of key stakeholders as well as underrepresented groups who traditionally have not been given a voice. It also was concluded that there are unique cultural, institutional, geographic, and economic barriers that will have to be crossed. This makes civic engagement an empowering yet challenging and risky process with the potential for both successes and failures. Most importantly, civic engagement requires the ability to adapt as we learn from experiences and receive feedback. We acknowledge that civic engagement is a complicated but certainly not a trivial process, requiring tradeoffs, and is an NPS “must” in the 21st century.

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