



## SISTER CULTURAL PARKS CONFERENCE SUMMARY



The President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities and the National Park Service Office of International Affairs in cooperation with Mesa Verde National Park brought together more than 50 leaders from culture, parks, tourism, philanthropy, preservation and businesses, as well as representatives from Mexico to develop a new international approach to collaboration, Sister Cultural Parks. To date, National Park Service Sister Park agreements have typically addressed specific management issues shared by U.S. national parks and counterparts abroad. Building on this framework, the conference sought to expand on these international relationships by exploring how to enhance the cultural connections between these sites. This includes addressing issues of sustainability, documentation, interpretation, civic engagement and other aspects that would help define a sister cultural park relationship. The two and a half day meeting culminated in the signing of a Sister Cultural Park agreement between three World Heritage sites in the U.S. and Mexico and a world-class-site in Belize.

Keynote Speaker Tomas Ybarra-Frausto, a scholar, writer, teacher and former foundation executive, opened the meeting by making the following observations:

- Nature and culture are non-renewable resources
- There are rights and responsibilities of living in an international global community, particularly in terms of World Heritage sites
- Borrowing and exchange is the basis of international relationships
- Creating communities of knowledge and sentiment across borders is key to international cooperation
- We must understand what kind of assets we have here in the communities and the parks
- Civic engagement between parks and citizens, and between parks and the community, draws on the arts to tell the stories of these places

Each of these ideas raised questions and connected to other issues that were addressed in sessions throughout the meeting. For example, how do parks and communities renew or keep alive culture and heritage; how do you foster the emotional connections to these places (sentiment) and the necessary knowledge to sustain those connections; or how can these sites spur local economies by drawing on and helping to grow the human, cultural and business capital of their communities.



Signing the Sister Parks Declaration are from left to right: Stephen Morris, Chief, Office of International Affairs, National Park Service; Adair Margo, PCAH Chairman; Larry Wiese, Superintendent, Mesa Verde National Park; Laura Pescador Canton, National Coordinator, Mexico's Institute of Archaeology and History; and Nelly Robles, Director, Monte Alban.

### **Session Highlights**

Sessions were designed to address issues, components and potential partners in a Sister Cultural Park relationship and among the highlights were the following.

- Sister Parks provide a means for developing international tourism, creating cooperative approaches to interpretation and preservation and a mechanism for working across borders.
- Integrating arts and humanities into Sister Cultural park relationships creates a broader base of stakeholders, by using the arts to engage local communities and by creating common cultural threads that join different World Heritage sites.
- Sister Cultural Parks also offer opportunities to commission new work specific to parks; new partners to help develop interpretive programs; and a means to highlight the traditions and cultures of first peoples. The latter is key to national parks that remain living sites for Native Americans like Mesa Verde.
- Sister Cultural Parks reflect the fact that the National Park Service is one of the U.S.'s largest cultural agencies, something which often goes unnoticed. Yosemite National Park, for example, developed two sister park arrangements with Chinese parks, which although focused on management issues, were based in part on the cultural connections between both parks.
- Critical Challenges for Sister Cultural Parks:
  - Identifying committed staff in the respective parks interested in international cooperation
  - Identifying the dedicated staff needed to manage such partnerships
  - Securing housing for exchanges of personnel
  - Securing funding and resources to support travel
  - Creating an institutional backbone to implement international relationships

- Sister Cultural Park relationships empower communities to drive tourism spending and development
  - Models: Geotourism mapping projects. Heritage tourism-“Share Your Heritage” workshops and principles. Each provides criteria and a template for parks to assist in developing community-centric sustainable development and tourism approaches.
  - Sister Cultural Park relationships can help visitors understand the cultural behavior of a place by drawing on the knowledge of local people and turning that knowledge into an economic asset.
- Junior Ranger Programs provide a vital component to Sister Cultural Park relationships.
  - Parks become points of contact for students from different countries to engage in international learning.
  - Use of the Web (such as through “Electronic Field Trips”) provides common ground for students to meet and learn about other countries and cultures through a curriculum focusing on the World Heritage sites involved.
  - Challenges: Helping other cultures understand U.S. icons such as Park Ranger and other concepts that they might be unfamiliar with.
- Technology developments can further protection of fragile cultural, natural and heritage resources. High definition scanning equipment and photography can offer accurate representation and documentation of World Heritage sites. Model: Mesa Verde and CyArk partnership
- Private sector funders have an important role to play in supporting sister cultural park relationships. Each funder has its own particular mission and parameters governing any funding that it can offer, but activities taking place under the umbrella of a sister-park relationship are appealing to funders.
- Critical challenges
  - Demonstrating tangible outcomes needed for private sector support in the short-term is not always feasible given the often long-term nature of outcomes that develop from the relationship.
  - Lack of a cross-sector—public/private, cultural/environment—approach to funding international sister park relationships.

- A combined effort to seek funding for several sister-park relationships to establish a general sister park support fund should be explored.

The closing morning of the conference was devoted to developing recommendations and the potential next steps for the Sister Cultural Parks, culminating with the signing of a Sister Park Declaration.

The next steps will address the general goals of the conference:

- Take steps to help meet the goals of the Joint Communiqués on Cultural Cooperation on preservation of cultural heritage, exchange of artists, sustainable tourism and the broader issues related to this, in particular the relationship between the parks and their local communities.
- Identify some best practice components and a larger network for learning that could be used by other interested U.S. parks to develop similar international cultural relationships.
- Enhance the cultural connections between these World Heritage and world-class sites by expanding exchange of artists, scholars, performers and engaging cultural partners in community outreach efforts and interpretation.