

A sustainable future for the national parks

By Karen Wade



Karen Wade addresses staff at the Intermountain Region General Management Conference, an annual gathering of park superintendents and partners intended to foster collaboration and the development of park management strategies.



looking ahead

Editor's Note: Karen Wade retired in August as director of the Intermountain Region, ending a career with the National Park Service that began in 1960 as a radio dispatcher in Mesa Verde National Park and eventually led to assignments as superintendent of Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine, Guadalupe Mountains National Park, Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve, and Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Throughout her career Karen emphasized the importance of developing and nurturing professional relationships and involving local communities in park management dialogue. A visionary, Karen's recognition of the value of inventory and monitoring during the last decade anticipated a time (now upon us) when parks would begin to be understood as places of tremendous biological diversity and not just as scenic destinations. Sustaining these resources, as she suggests in the following essay, goes hand in hand with better integration of the national parks in society, a challenge she understands and expresses as well as anyone.

IN AN ORGANIZATION that at times seems self-deprecating, it is appropriate occasionally to remind ourselves and others of the many things we do right in the National Park Service. Arguably, our most remarkable achievement of the past five years is the successful emergence of solid natural resource programs in parks across the Service. As a consequence, we are seeing the quality of dialogue about how to accomplish resource protection become increasingly sophisticated at a time when such sophistication is necessary to make difficult social and political choices not only in parks but across the landscape.

I think this achievement (the Natural Resource Challenge) is so noteworthy that it should be accompanied by a call for designation of a national holiday each year in celebration of the collective efforts required to preserve our nation's heritage. Few nations in the world have proclaimed such a commitment, sustained it, and made such a sizable, recurring investment. If Americans don't stop occasionally to

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remind themselves of that fact, how else will our leaders continue to be challenged to dedicate themselves to the task that never ends ... in perpetuity for future generations?

Why do you think the nation would even consider such an annual occasion? Our founders envisioned stewardship of nationally significant resources *in perpetuity*. The magnitude of that challenge was probably only partially understood at the time and is only just now being evaluated for its meaning within the context of today's society. Yellowstone, we now know, is not sustainable in perpetuity in isolation from the social, political, and ecological considerations sur-

rounding it. Society will ensure protection of Yellowstone or Yellowstone will not be preserved. How powerful is that as a challenge for today and for all time?

With the investment made possible by the Natural Resource Challenge, park staffs now have a better level of understanding not only of resources and their value from an ecological standpoint but also of their value to their gateway communities and to the nation at large. Information collected by us within Inventory and Monitoring

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networks helps transcend artificial boundaries of political and management jurisdictions and creates new collective meaning for all those who are seeking to sustain social, economic, and ecological systems across the landscape. I can see a time when a common database will be accessed to analyze any contemplated land-use change within a given ecosystem. And the appropriateness of the proposal will be judged by its predicted consequence to the sustainability of the whole.

My recent experience has led me to believe that the National Park Service can set the pace, provide the leadership, and use our experience as an example of what can be achieved by employing sustainable practices in all that we do. In collaboration with Dr. Bruce Hutton of the Daniels College of Business at the University of Denver, the NPS Intermountain Region has collaborated to create a National Parks Center for Sustainable Conservation Ethics. The center is developing educational programming based on sustainability themes, researching methodologies for park and program managers to determine which functions are integral to the sustainability of parks, and establishing collaborative partnerships by convening meetings of stakeholder groups to address specific issues. The intent is to help parks solve problems using the principles of sustainability and to ultimately help communities apply these principles as well.

The National Parks Center for Sustainable Conservation Ethics is seeking to understand the fundamental character of the interaction between nature and society as a system. These interactions occur at two levels: (1) interdependency of economic, environmental, and social dimensions; and (2) the impact of this interdependency by the actions of private, public, and nonprofit sectors of society. This is a complex system in which the level of sustainability depends on the decision processes that simultaneously consider all these factors. Balance (and sustainability) depends upon the nature of the relationships among business, government, and the community. Success requires adequate levels of trust, cooperation, and integrated action.

So as we move beyond the fundamentals, we must challenge ourselves to understand heritage resources—both natural and cultural—in

a broader context and see them as factors for consideration by a society of stewards. In such a society, we will all know the value of everything and the consequences of our choices.

Our mission is the right mission. Our vision of the role of parks in society is the right vision. To focus on that, celebrate it, and embrace our responsibilities each new day will help us adapt successfully to the changes that surround us. It will also help us see change from different perspectives so that we do not lose the internal compass that must guide us to do what is “right” each day. When we truly believe we can make a difference, we will make a difference.

And as much as it scares us, we must be willing to trust being on the edge. Being on the edge is where the wind catches us and carries us higher. Being on the edge is where young birds learn to fly, and future generations must learn to fly higher than ever before. With the strength of our convictions, we can be the teachers who help others soar. (The very idea of “national parks” was cutting-edge, and continues to be as that idea has matured. Of the few things that America has “created” of universal appeal, a National Park System is certainly one of the most important.)

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I have watched the employees of the National Park Service continue their own self-mastery as they move from being good leaders to significant leaders. I have seen many of them move from the subtle edge of being the best *in* the Service to being the best *for* the Service. They are thermal riders learning to soar with balance and focus. They are putting it all out there and wonderful things are happening. If they continue to look within, they will see more clearly than any of us have seen before. (Author and leadership expert Jim Collins presented the “Level 5 Leadership Theory” in a *Harvard Business Review* article in January 2003. In that article he identifies the characteristics common to Level 5 leaders: humility, will, ferocious resolve, and the tendency to give credit to others while assigning blame to themselves. In my opinion, Level 5 Leadership is exactly what NPS leaders are all about. They have humility combined with an iron will to get the job done.)

As I leave the Service, I’m struck by the fact that one never knows for sure what is an appropriate final destination. Have no doubt that I have learned the journey is well worth the effort and I am still moving on. I am grateful for all the wonderful memories and will always be proud of the men and women of the National Park Service if what they do, they do with a good heart. ■