

Profile

Jack Potter: Glacier National Park's veteran of resource management

By the editor and associate editor

Editor's note: Resource managers who stay in one national park for their entire career, building and refining their knowledge of the place, exercising judgment, sharing insights, and defending park values are a rare thing in the National Park Service. Thus, we explore the long-tenured career of Jack Potter in Glacier National Park, Montana, as a way to learn from his experience, help preserve institutional memory, and celebrate his special contribution to the National Park Service.

Park Science: You have gone from busboy to chief of Science and Resource Management. Tell us about your 40-year “ride” at Glacier.

Jack Potter: During my first year in Glacier I distinctly remember people listing their home as “Woodstock Nation” at our self-registration trailhead boxes and thinking, “Now where was that?” and “What was that supposed to mean?” During those early years, I really hadn’t considered a career in the National Park Service. It was more place driven—I wanted to work in Glacier. After seven years as a

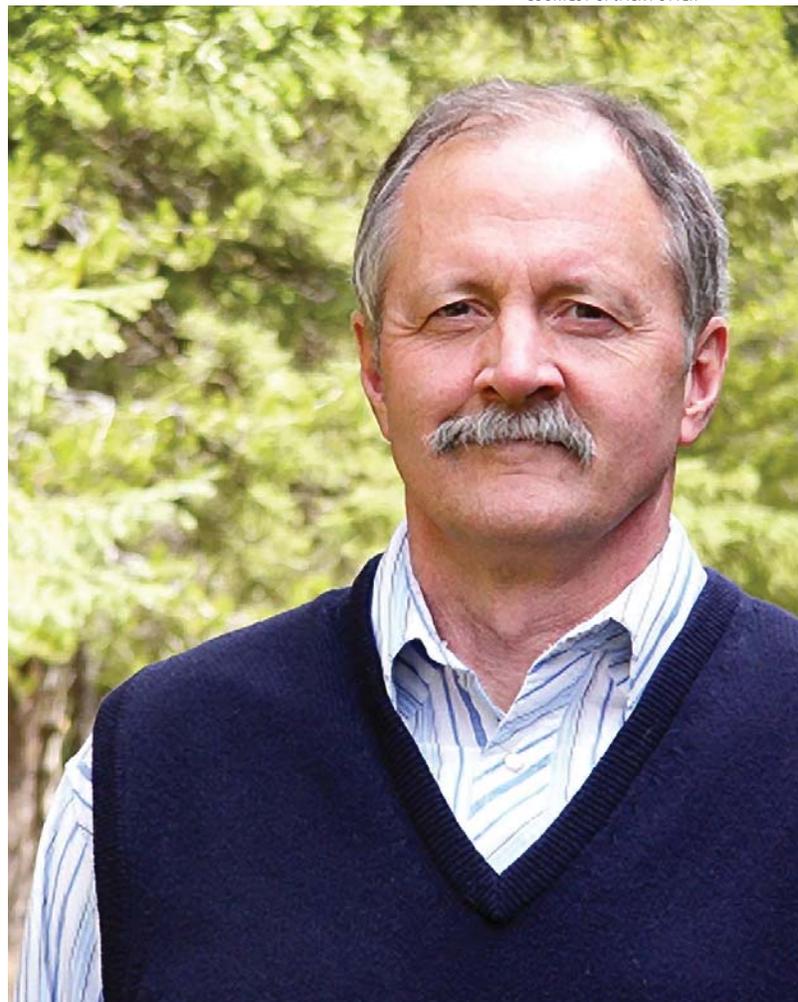
seasonal maintenance worker and work leader, I wanted a more permanent job and I was able to get a subject-to-furlough position as district trails supervisor at St. Mary for the Hudson Bay District on the east side of Glacier. I have been very fortunate to be able to broaden my working experience and move upward in the ranks, especially in Glacier.

What is your college background?

JP: I was a political science graduate from Colgate University, but I decided to switch directions and got a forestry degree from the University of Montana. I have taken additional coursework from Colorado State University and attended a University of Washington continuing education field camp. I was not part of any particular intake program—I guess just working here in Glacier was my intake.

What is your most memorable “natural resource” experience?

JP: Seeing a huge, black-colored grizzly bear chase a smaller grizzly from the



Jack Potter, chief of Science and Resource Management, Glacier National Park, Montana.

partially buried carcass of a large bull elk, and excavate and feed on it. Somewhere in those 25,000+ miles of hiking, climbing, riding, skiing, and snowshoeing and many days of camping are numerous diamonds, and the wonder has not diminished for me.

What is your most memorable “cultural resource” experience?

JP: I couldn’t pinpoint one thing, but I have been very fortunate to have worked with the local Indian nations. I can’t

say everything has always gone smoothly, but cultural diversity in northwestern Montana is largely defined by American Indians/First Nations, and working in this setting has been very rewarding. I will say that holding an exquisite spear point, formed from a black and green rock that a visitor found, was really amazing. We returned the point to the area from which it was taken at the request of the Salish and Kootenai elders.

COURTESY OF JACK POTTER

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Potter is the winner of numerous awards, including the 2003 Intermountain Regional Director's Award for Resource Management and the 2007 Department of the Interior Superior Service Award. He is credited with strengthening the park's management team with his "in-depth knowledge" of Glacier and the National Park Service mission and objectives, and is recognized as being committed to the "highest principles of leadership and integrity."

What issues have you been tracking over your entire 40-year career?

JP: I have been most intimately involved with trying to balance recreational use with resource protection. I have tried to incorporate my scientifically informed perspective into several planning efforts, such as our Backcountry and Wilderness Management Plan, Commercial Services Management Plan, and the General Management Plan. These plans address everything from trail maintenance and campground locations to management of wildlife-human conflicts and restoration of degraded areas.

What projects, programs, and practices will be your legacy?

JP: Resource protection has been a constant effort, with some problems that came and went and others that persist. I would say at least for the relatively short term, the General Management Plan, the Commercial Services Plan, and the Backcountry and Wilderness Plan and wilderness proposal have put some ideas into policy. There are many other efforts relating to fire and other issues that may also add up. Our Resource Management Plan was good for the time [i.e., 1994, updated in 1998], but it needs to be updated into a Resource Stewardship Plan.

What are some examples of how science has informed or changed park practices?

JP: This is a huge list ranging from recreation ecology to individual species manage-

ment—grizzly bears, bighorn sheep, native fish, and more. U.S. Geological Survey [USGS] researcher Kate Kendall's monumental grizzly bear baseline research gave us valuable information about population numbers and distribution. Also from USGS, Kim Keating's research on bighorn sheep gave us a wealth of new information about the population, habitat use, and external issues.

Several researchers have contributed important and alarming information about native bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout that is moving us toward adaptive management to protect these species. The climate change information, particularly the revelations about glacial mass, hydrologic changes, and possibly landscape effects by Dan Fagre and his colleagues, has caused the greatest challenge for management as we try to downscale effects, understand vulnerabilities, identify stressors, and adapt management.

Tell us more about the state of the glaciers and when you first noticed them getting smaller.

JP: Dr. Dan Fagre of the USGS has been documenting the change in glacier coverage since 1991, utilizing his effective comparative photography, among other methods. Having been close to or on many of those glaciers, I began observing this retreat more than a decade ago, influenced by Dan's work. The most graphic evidence for me was Grinnell

Glacier, which I have visited numerous times and watched as the ice retreated from familiar landmarks. The emergence of a new meltwater lake, where there was formerly a lobe of the glacier, was particularly graphic.

We are still catching up on how to talk to the public about this and other climate change-induced phenomena and need to formulate an adaptive management strategy. There is really nothing we can do for the glaciers, although we have had suggestions for insulating tarps and other materials. I was also fortunate to have Dr. Leigh Welling as the first director of the Crown of the Continent Research Learning Center, who really pushed awareness of this issue in Glacier before she became the Natural Resource Program Center lead for climate change.

What other changes in natural resources have you observed?

JP: When I first came to Glacier the common phrase was "the asbestos forest," which referred to our forests that did not burn very often. People warned, "Don't count on firefighting to make any money here." That reality changed with the Red Bench Fire of 1988, which ushered in a new wave of fires influenced by large fuel buildups and severe fire weather. This culminated for me in 2003 when numerous large fires raged, forcing evacuation of park headquarters. Four Type 1 teams [used

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE/DOUG MCMAINS



The four tribes that make up the Blackfoot Confederacy hold an annual conference and encampment in Glacier National Park to discuss tribal relations and contemporary issues facing the tribes. The eastern part of the park near St. Mary is on ancestral Blackfoot lands. Little Chief Mountain is in the background.

to suppress large fires] were operating in or near the park, and smoke and haze lingered for months. The Red Eagle Fire of 2006 probably marked the shift to a parkwide change in fire behavior, where fire previously had generally been limited to areas west of the Continental Divide but now burned throughout the park.

Another sad thing for me has been the devastation of our whitebark pine forests by white pine blister rust. Whole drainages now are full of skeleton trees and Clark's nutcrackers are getting very scarce. Unlike the regeneration after fires or the mountain pine beetle epidemic in the 1970s, some of these forested areas remain barren. The current run of at least five different insect infestations, along with several other pathogens, has transformed large areas of the park. What the forest compo-

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sition will be in the future is unknown.

Lastly, the hydrologic cycle has been altered so greatly that it is hard to predict what will come next. Late fall rains and floods, early runoff, reduced snowfall, drastically reduced late-season streamflows are a real challenge to our native fisheries.

Glacier is designated an international peace park and world heritage site. How has working with Waterton staff influenced your perspective on the U.S. National Park Service?

JP: It has been extremely rewarding both for the personal contacts and friendships and for the wonderful reality check from another point of view on everything from management of wildlife and resource monitoring to interpretation. While Parks Canada and the U.S. National Park Service are alike in many ways, we look at many issues from different perspectives that reflect agency culture, individual training, and societal values. We can learn from each other and the result will be better for both.

Spending your entire career in the same park is a rare NPS experience. Will current or future resource managers have more or less of an opportunity to stay in their "park of choice"?

JP: I know of a few managers who have spent or are spending a significant amount of time in a particular place. The advantages are a relatively longer frame of reference for park resources and issues balanced with the need for new ideas and solutions to problems.

I'm not sure what the future will hold, but I feel strongly that our intake/career ladder system discourages many good people because it is not a consistent, merit-based, predictable system. Budgetary realities and time-sensitive needs for expertise make it difficult to sustain an intern program or create intake positions. For example, if I only have two wildlife biologists and a host of pressing issues, I will opt for a full performance-level position if one becomes open.

What changes have you seen in your day-to-day job as a resource manager?

JP: Partly because of my long history here and partly because of the nature of the issues, a significant portion of my time is spent on larger, often political issues rather than just those that may just affect our natural and cultural resources.

What advice can you provide to future resource managers based on your experience?

JP: You will need to constantly adapt to changing knowledge and challenges. You cannot escape politics at all levels—local, regional, and for Glacier even national—so you must know how to work in that reality. You cannot escape making unpopular choices and compromises but you have to keep the big picture in mind. For example, you may have to eliminate a problem grizzly bear, as we had to do this year, because it may be best for managing the population as a whole.

What issues will Glacier face in the next 5 to 10 years?

JP: We have probably only reached a temporary lull in the rapid growth of Flathead County. As area population grows and park visitation from all sources potentially increases, conversion of wildlife habitat and disruption of connectivity corridors and increased noise, light, and traffic will continue to affect park-related resources. Since we did not address a carrying capacity or system of limits of acceptable change for increased park visitation scenarios in our General Management Plan, we are left with limitations generally dictated by facilities. Also, the impacts of noise will continue to draw visitor complaints primarily directed toward scenic helicopter overflights and motorcycles with after market exhaust modifi-

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cations. Other issues include land use change on all boundaries, fisheries, unexplained disappearance of fisher and porcupine, and increases in exotic species or diseases projected against the background of climate change.

The ongoing issue with mineral development in the British Columbia headwaters of the Flathead River continues to be a concern. I think the recent IUCN/World Heritage review mission went very well. This was in response to a petition to have Waterton-Glacier designated a “world heritage site in danger” because of several mining initiatives in the Flathead River Basin in British Columbia. We were able to demonstrate the incompatibility of mining in this area with the world heritage site. How this will affect the long-range plans of the British Columbian government remains to be seen; however, the mission’s report to the World Heritage Committee, due next June, will certainly make a strong case for additional protection even if the site is not listed as in danger.

What do you see as the most important issues facing the National Park Service over the next several decades?

JP: Certainly climate change and the implications for hydrology, habitats, and individual species will be with us for a long time. I hope we will put into place some adaptive strategies that will mitigate those effects somewhat. Grizzly bear conservation will also continue to be a challenge as the local human population increases, habitat disappears, connectivity is disrupted, and climate change potentially influences food availability and the species’ earlier emergence from hibernation.

How did the Natural Resource Challenge initiative earlier this decade change the ways you do business at Glacier?

JP: We filled our benchmark professional resource management positions and were able to host the Crown of the Continent Research Learning Center, which has been a great benefit to us. The biggest disappointment was having the base budget increases indicated by RMAP [Resource Management Assessment Program] stop the year before Glacier was to receive a substantial funding increase. The benefits we have received from the Cooperative Ecosystem

Studies Unit [CESU] hosted by the University of Montana, and particularly the outstanding director Dr. Kathy Tonnessen, totally changed our ability to attract and carry out research. Also, establishment of the Rocky Mountain Inventory and Monitoring Network has enabled us to break out of reactionary mode and work toward long-term ecological monitoring. For Glacier, sharing the expertise of the CESU and network staffs has been extremely important. I see them as part-time members and partners of our staff, and I hope they feel that way also.

What are your plans for retirement?

JP: My wife and I are planning to retire in the Flathead Valley, probably within the next two years. I would love to travel and take longer trips to Alaska, Canada—particularly the Nahanni River—other national parks, Australia and New Zealand, and the Southwest, and spend more time hiking, floating, and camping. I am also very interested in the recently announced NPS emeritus program and have many other volunteer projects in mind.