

The Park Science Interview with Mike Soukup

By the editor and associate editor

**Note:* The following interview is an excerpt. Read the full-length conversation online at <http://www.nature.nps.gov/ParkScience> for more of Mike's reflections on his career, climate change, building the Natural Resource Challenge, determining research priorities, successes and disappointments, and sharing life with his family.

Park Science: What has the transition to private life been like?

Mike Soukup: The transition has been harder than I had thought. It was difficult to change gears and let go of all the loose ends that an associate director deals with. The worst part is abruptly losing daily contact with key colleagues, your management team, good friends, and in some cases issues in [the Department of the] Interior, like water rights in Black Canyon, that need close attention. The key thing a retiree must grapple with is that you become irrelevant in the daily press of responsibilities and potential opportunities of your former job. One day you're leading the troop, the next day you're just another baboon! At retirement someone reminded me that Charles de Gaulle said something like "The graveyards are filled with indispensable men." You hope that others will continue on what you perceive as the right path. In natural resources there's a great assemblage of folks who can do that, or better.

The other part of transition is having so many possibilities

for your time. Luckily, but with some forethought, I have a wife I love to spend time with, eight-year-old twins to home-school, a new house to outfit, a 38-foot Finnish ketch to maintain, and a modest book contract. I had a lot of thank-yous to write for the kind words, deeds, and gifts at retirement. So the time has flown.

Tell us about the "Washington perspective" of the day-to-day workings of the National Park Service and what it takes to succeed as a high-level NPS manager.

MS: First of all, I wouldn't trade my Washington experience for anything. [The Department of the] Interior is a concentrated feast of opportunity, drama, theater—and a cram course in human nature. The political arena attracts and brings out the best and the worst in people.

The worst part of being in Washington is missing so many opportunities. National Park Service leadership spends so much of its time fending off damaging agendas that can come from political parties, vested interests, and sometimes even supporters. Each new administration comes in to make its mark on the bureaucracy, often with simplistic remedies. Revisiting many of these could be eliminated if there were a system in place that fosters and taps institutional memory. Most of your time is spent in damage control rather than constantly improving and building a stronger

agency. That is frustrating, and at times wrenching. But there are ways to contribute that can't be matched elsewhere. You certainly get a front-row seat. You can't possibly understand what's happening (or not) in your park or NPS job without spending a fair amount of time in Washington. It's a trip!

I think to be successful you simply have to have a sense of where your program ought to go. Then you have to be patient and persevere. If you have a vision of where the National Park Service should go that rings true, there are many good people who will want to help [you take it] there. I remain in awe of the talent and motivation available within and outside the Service that are interested in stepping up for national parks.

Finally, if you believe in what you're doing and tell it straight, people will listen. Over time, that will give you credibility and staying power. Staying there for a decade or so is a real advantage. Real traction on tough issues takes time. But it is truly worthy of anyone's time who wants to make a difference.

Preserving institutional memory is a concern of yours. What are the best ways to capitalize on institutional knowledge from people like you who retire?

MS: Just before I left, I worked with Jerry Simpson and Susan Woods in Human Resources

to set up an emeritus program aimed especially at scientists and technicians. It should be modeled after academe, providing modest travel, office space, and administrative support for those who would like to remain engaged at a slower pace, or without supervisory burden. I hope this happens—it's a shame to lose hard-won perspective when some recognition and minimal investment might capitalize on the massive investment represented in a 30-plus-year career.

Understanding complex systems is the key to managing them for long-term preservation. Knowledge must be valued, cultivated, accumulated, and assimilated assiduously so that it can be applied with ever greater certainty. When long-term knowledge disappears, in some cases abruptly, it's not only a great shame, it's really poor investment management. In the landscape of the 21st century we won't have leeway for guesswork. The sum of the curve under "seat-of-the-pants management" will not be unimpaired resources.

What will your generation of park managers pass on to future generations?

MS: The superintendents of my generation made a quantum leap in understanding the context of successful park management! Perhaps it was hurried along by the [1980] "State of the Parks" report [to the Congress] by Ro Wauer, [then head of the natural resource management office in

Washington]. Professionalization of the air and water quality programs initiated by [former associate director] Dick Briceland laid some important groundwork for being successful in technical arenas outside park boundaries. These were important steps. Realization of the importance of extra-boundary processes in the long-term health of parks set in motion long-term changes in management perspective that had to occur.

South Florida Research Center made it possible to prescribe what it takes to save the Everglades. [The park and regional office originally opposed establishment of the science center.] I'm afraid, as documented in Michael Grunwald's *The Swamp* (the paperback version has an important update), the opportunity is being lost.

Overall, I am amazed at how good the new generation of superintendents is at working

able to convince NPS leaders that we had to broaden our organizational culture to include scientific excellence in order to be as successful in the future [in preserving parks] as we had been in the past [in providing visitor services and accommodations]. That was made easier because of the lack of success we were having in environmental compliance, which requires we explain the environmental consequences of an action. We had been losing in the courts where the "intuitive" management actions of the Service were being successfully challenged, and we had constant pressure from other agencies to show why we had opposed some of their actions along park boundaries (Bureau of Land Management, USDA Forest Service), upstream (Bureau of Reclamation), overhead (i.e., overflights, Federal Aviation Administration), and on barrier islands (armoring roads, Department of Transportation).

I came to Washington with a lot of respect for park operations and the elegance of successfully managing park use in harmony with long-term protection. While resource health must be the touchstone, a superintendent must cover all the bases, so the proper orchestration of all divisions is necessary. Yet we can't lose sight of the fact that the National Park Service is primarily a—and perhaps the premier—resource management agency. It's essential to never lose sight of that. When I was a regional chief scientist, a park

superintendent once looked accusingly at me and said, "If it weren't for these natural resource issues, I'd have time to manage my park." The Service must integrate resource management and science as a priority in park operations, not just as something that's nice to have when an issue blows up.

What was your greatest personal career success?

MS: It was probably shepherding the Natural Resource Challenge from concept to "boots on the ground," though this was a widely shared accomplishment. The Challenge was a distillation of the kind of commitment that the National Park Service has to make to be an authoritative force for unimpaired resources. Dick Sellars's documentation of NPS ambivalence toward science throughout its history set the stage for the National Leadership Council's willingness to adopt a strategy to integrate science into national park management. Every NLC member signed on to a sizable commitment of funding priorities over seven years. It was a bold response aimed at broadening NPS culture so that the Service could be successful in the 21st century when challenges will be much more intense, the arenas more technical, and the stakes higher.

If politics dictates the answer to a resource issue initially, natural phenomena will still have the last say. Putting Galileo in prison isn't going to make the sun revolve around the Earth.

When I arrived at Everglades National Park, I was told of one past Everglades superintendent who had put a sign on his wall saying, "If it's outside the park, I don't want to hear about it!" That certainly changed when [Superintendent] Mike Finley dramatically championed the coupling of the Everglades with the extra-boundary processes that are determining its future. The Everglades faces the loss of the very resources the park was created to preserve, but not because of anything that was done internally. The imposition of a serious science effort for the Everglades by Nat Reed [former assistant secretary of the Interior] in the form of the

with science and local communities to build a strong consensus on the future quality of life everyone wants. A united, local constituency can counter the tremendous pressure the National Park Service and parks face every day from vested interests and agendas that are usually focused on short-term benefits.

What part did you play in this transformative thinking?

MS: Time will tell. I had an advantage of working at park, regional, and Washington levels, so I got to see how things worked and learned what didn't work. I think I was



What was your greatest contribution as associate director?

MS: I hope it was demonstrating the importance, utility, and wisdom of using science as the compass for determining NPS actions and directions. Everyone talks about science-based decisions, but many secretly believe that politics will always determine the answer. When the National Academy of Sciences was asked to review the Comprehensive Environmental Restoration Plan for the Everglades, I asked them to determine “whether science was driving decision making, or whether it was tied up in the trunk.” If you settle for a politically derived solution, you probably haven’t settled anything. If politics dictates the answer to a resource issue initially, natural phenomena will still have the last say. Putting Galileo in prison isn’t going to make the sun revolve around the Earth.

Rather than assume the parks’ vast resources are too difficult to understand, the National Park Service can prudently invest in an increasing understanding of complicated sys-

tems and become more certain every year. Soon the scientists and managers of the Service can be the most credible determinant on any park resource issue. If the Service harnesses its education potential, it might even determine the “politics” of these issues. I hope I made headway in laying a foundation for the National Park Service becoming the technical authority on the resources it manages.

How successful was the Inventory and Monitoring Program during your tenure? Has it been embraced wholeheartedly by NPS managers?

MS: That’s one of the pieces that had been shaped by [my predecessor] Gene Hester’s prototype monitoring program that started in the early nineties. With the assistance of Abby Miller, whom I had the wisdom to make my first deputy [associate director], and the pioneering work especially of [marine biologist] Gary Davis at Channel Islands [National Park], it was an obvious cornerstone for the Natural Resource Challenge. I don’t think it would have gotten off

the ground without [ecologist] Steve Fancy, who is a virtual wizard at making things happen—one of the most valuable people in the Service. Because of the direct involvement of park superintendents and the growing awareness and utility of databases for planning and compliance, the program will, I think, become a priority for managers. It is the key to knowing if and when the Service is truly achieving what the mission asks. How can you seriously manage a park without knowing its resources and its health? Now the National Park Service is positioned to talk about performance management directly related to the agency’s mission. It will be a truly ominous signal if the program doesn’t prosper.

What steps can the National Park Service take to keep national parks “unimpaired for future generations”?

MS: First, managers must have a credible understanding of what will be required to protect the natural systems, their parts and processes. Once they speak authorita-

Mike Soukup (1) enjoys an informal retirement party held in his honor on 25 October 2007. Pictured with Mike are (2) Pat Parker, chief of the NPS American Indian Liaison Office; (3) Cliff McCreedy, NPS marine protection specialist; (4) Karen Taylor-Goodrich, NPS associate director for Visitor Services; (5) Josefa O’Malley, attorney advisor with the DOI Solicitor’s Office; (6) Giselle Mora-Bourgeois, Diane Pavek, and Dan Sealy of the NPS National Capital Region, and Stephanie Bagozzi, Mike’s former staff assistant; and (7) Sue Haseltine, USGS associate director for Biology.

NPS

The role of education has been sorely neglected of late and needs to be propelled forward in new and powerful ways.

Interview with Mike Soukup

Continued from page 13

tively, those who value their nation's heritage will decide whether to protect it or not. The intermediate step is to get credible messages to park visitors, park neighbors, and national constituencies. The role of education has been sorely neglected of late and needs to be propelled forward in new and powerful ways. I was always amazed at the range of people willing to step in and help national parks. I think a fully functioning NPS can shape the future of the nation, and by example, the world.

What will be the biggest challenge to face park managers over the next 10 to 100 years?

MS: My candidate would be developing the capability to transform information into understanding. The mission requires that the men and women of the National Park Service understand complex resources—that is, that they master systems ecology. This is achieved by constantly improving information and reducing uncertainty. The big challenge is in not only collecting lots of the right information but in integrating and assimilating it into usable knowledge. The Service needs to develop and retain the staff to do this. I truly hope the host of new technical folks who came into the National Park Service through the Natural Resource Challenge will be able to spend their professional careers in the Service, with their full value to the NPS mission understood.

What are the priorities and goals for scientific research in parks for the future?

MS: You can't always predict them—and you shouldn't need to. I would argue that making parks hospitable places for researchers (e.g., with a robust array of Research Learning Centers) will pay off over time if the National Park Service constantly integrates new information into working models of park resources. Managers can always detect missing data and relationships that can be targeted as new research priorities. Before long, as in the Everglades, the Service will approach a functional understanding of how to protect the resources.

What should park managers fight for and what is best compromised, regardless of political climate?

MS: I think most park managers know what is important and worth jeopardizing their careers for. Certainly in practical terms, one must choose one's battles, but any issue that threatens impairment or irreversible impacts should be cause for drawing battle lines. Time spent in the career doghouse goes with the territory, but can build character.

One way to manage those situations is exposure. A process that allows wide exposure and a thoughtful weighing of options is the best way to navigate among the agendas stemming from widely different philosophies. This happened during

the revision of Management Policies in 2006. I hope the Centennial Initiative will result in a wider comprehension that national parks are a direct reflection of the nation's heritage and are both symbolically important and valuable assets that warrant the most cautious management. I think the national heritage aspect of the National Park System ought to be given much more deference by other agencies who often think of national parks as annoying roadblocks for their agendas.

vigilant for invasives. It fights hard for natural quiet, clean air and water, dark night sky, "leave no trace," sustainable uses, energy efficiency, and so on. The same thought processes and actions, if practiced by everyone, would begin to change behavior and lessen the impact [that more than] 6 billion humans are having on the planet. Conspicuous consumption is a dubious cultural icon for America to continue to export. If the National Park Service could teach these lessons by example to 100 million park

A national system of parks, all acting with credibility in word and deed and providing powerful experiences and educational programs, could catalyze real change in the modern landscape.

You mention "practical environmentalism" in your introduction to *Natural Resource Year in Review—2006*. What is this?

MS: I think the skills we learn and practice in managing parks unimpaired for present and future generations establish a mind-set that would also be important for the public at large to adopt in their daily relationship with the planet. For example, as an organization the National Park Service is acutely aware of its impacts and the need to minimize its footprint within parks. It is

visitors a year, it would not be insignificant. I've seen communities that increasingly realize that there is something very special about having a national park in the neighborhood and that maybe some things are going on there that need emulating. A national system of parks, all acting with credibility in word and deed and providing powerful experiences and educational programs, could catalyze real change in the modern landscape.