

Understanding Diversity in the National Park Service—Point of View

January 13–16, 1999, marked a milestone in the history of the National Park Service. In cooperation with the National Park Service and other partners, the National Parks and Conservation Association (NPCA) held the conference, “America’s Parks—America’s People: A Mosaic in Motion,” at the Golden Gate National Recreation Area in San Francisco. The conference theme was the challenges of race and diversity facing America and the national parks as we approach the 21st century. The goal of the conference was to develop ways in which the National Park Service’s parks and programs can become more relevant to all Americans.

National census projections estimate that America’s minorities will soon become America’s majority. Given this future reality, the NPCA, under the leadership of Cultural Diversity Manager Iantha Gantt-Wright, inaugurated discussions on diversity and how it will affect the National Park Service in its approach to visitor services, park history and interpretation, hiring and retention of employees, and outreach programs with communities. The discussions culminated in the conference.

I attended the Mosaic in Motion conference and was surprised not at how many minorities attended but at the large number of non-minority persons in attendance. The conference attendance totaled over 600 participants of all colors and backgrounds. And, it wasn’t just a conference for National Park Service employees. There were representatives from federal, state, and local agencies; tribal governments and organizations; community groups; colleges and universities; friends’ groups; youth organizations; and environmental groups.

This article focuses not just on the conference but the reasoning, philosophy, and reality of diversity and why this conference was needed. “Diversity” is not and should not be viewed as a negative word, as another form of “affirmative action,” or as a backlash against white people. We

live in a society where unfortunately race matters and discrimination still exists. However, improvements are possible.

I have been with the National Park Service for seven years starting as a co-op student from Hampton University and was later selected for the NPS Intake Training program. In the two-and-a-half years as a trainee, I worked with a variety of NPS employees on different projects and visited many parks. I was struck by the small number of visitors and employees who are minorities. Urban parks are the exception because of highly diverse populations surrounding them. In western parks, where there are large numbers of American Indians, Latinos, and Hispanics, there are few employees representing these groups.

Many bureau employees have perceptions that discourage broader minority participation in national parks. They presume that minorities travel infrequently, the cost of park visitation deters visitors of diverse background, and, most disturbing, that there are few, if any, qualified minority candidates available for employment at the National Park Service. As an agency we have to rethink these misconceptions. Minorities enjoy traveling as much as anyone else. If they can afford entry to an amusement park at a cost of over 50 dollars, I am quite sure they can afford a ten-dollar park entrance fee.

In addressing the perception of a lack of qualified minorities for employment, I have to say that this is the most hurtful. I have on more than one occasion heard firsthand these remarks that attest to this belief. The most frequent excuse given for why parks, regional offices, and the support offices don’t hire many minorities is they can’t find candidates who are capable of doing the required workload, whether they are students or permanent employees. I cannot stress how incorrect and insensitive these statements are. I agree with Professor Dorceta Taylor from the University of Michigan, who drew on the history of the National Park Service and the envi-

ronmental movement and urged all parties to change their attitudes if we together are to reach the goal of inclusion.

Based on the conference discussions, NPCA recently issued a report on issues and potential solutions for improving diversity in national parks. The recommendations included:

- The National Park Service, in cooperation with minority organizations, should conduct a national park education campaign through all forms of media.
- Community task forces should be established that would consist of representatives from the NPS and from diverse national, state, and local organizations.
- The NPS must confront its history and ideological foundations if it is to become more relevant to America's ever-changing population.
- National park-related organizations, such as NPCA and the National Park Foundation, must also come to the table with NPS and diverse communities to encourage the necessary changes.

These recommendations show the importance of establishing strong partnership ties with community groups, states, local agencies, and park groups. Why? Simply put, we cannot reach everyone by ourselves; we need and should ask for help. Many minority groups are eager to work jointly with NPS to establish grassroots cooperation. For example, African-American communities seek help with researching the Underground Railroad. Hispanic and Latino groups seek assistance in restoring their historic neighborhoods. Many conference attendees NPS and outside were surprised at what we as an agency have to offer from our Washington and regional offices. I informed colleagues about the different cultural resources partnership programs, which can be used to enhance the objectives of community revitalization and preservation.

The cultural resources programs of the park service have a new initiative oriented toward reaching minority schools and organizations, while working closely with NPCA and the National Park Foundation. October 1, 1998, Kate Stevenson along with Pat Tiller and Toni Lee established the Cultural Resources Diversity Initiative. Under the guidance of Toni Lee, the Initiative developed a mailing list of diverse schools and groups who previously had no ties to

the National Park Service. Also, we are helping organizations with technical assistance on how they can use cultural resources programs and tools to protect their cultural heritage. The Initiative sponsored three minority interns this summer and will sponsor more next year to undertake projects related to cultural resources in NPS administrative offices, partnership organizations, and national park units. The creation of this Initiative is exactly the kind of approach that people have been talking about at the conference. By including communities, organizations, and schools we can broaden the role of the National Park Service and make its parks and programs more accessible to all people.

We all are aware of the changing demographics in this country and around the world. This agency's mandate is to protect and preserve for future generations, but when the next generation becomes disinterested, where do we stand? The survival of our agency and our mission depends on our willingness to be inclusive of different cultures and their history. The history of this country is as diverse as its populations.

The Mosaic in Motion conference was more successful than expected not just because of sheer number of attendees, but because of the content, debate, and discussion. It helped participants realize that diversity is not a passing fad but a very real reality. Despite this conference, I continue to read and hear how an "affirmative action plan" for minority employees or visitors is neither desirable nor necessary. I am concerned about these statements. I also am aware that the journey toward inclusion will be difficult, yet not impossible. We need more provocative discussions, training workshops, and more people with open minds if we expect to be important players in the future.

The National Park Service should be willing to reach out to diverse groups not because the Director directed us to do so, but because we want to. After all, aren't we the protectors of America's history? If we are, then we do ourselves a grave injustice as advocates for history and preservation by ignoring those who helped shape and continue to shape America.

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