

Amplifying the Voices of all Americans

Ethnography, Interpretation, and Inclusiveness

Ethnographic research—the central methodology used by cultural anthropologists to collect data—generates the information interpreters need to explain the tangible and intangible cultural meanings and significance that park resources hold for diverse cultural groups. Ethnographers uncover this information by listening, observing, talking, and interacting with people.

We attend ceremonies, rituals, rites, performances, political meetings, sports events, religious observances, family reunions, weddings, christenings, funerals, and other rites of passage. We learn about what people revere in their past through their collections of journals, newspapers, letters, personal papers, and other memorabilia they share with us. We look at artifacts they treasure, like photographs and obituaries of long dead relatives, uniforms, quilts, ceremonial regalia, and the like.

We listen to descriptions of sacred places, plants, rocks, trees, and other natural phenomena that have significance for them. With their permission, we visit places where they bury their dead or honor their living. From these and other sources, we learn about a people's genealogy, traditions, myths, and stories; religion and sacred obligations; rules and organization; family and social life; work and play; visual and performing arts; conflict and collaboration; ethics and values. As we uncover this kind of information, we gain understanding of the significance that diverse groups of people may attribute to park sites, structures, objects, and landscapes or to the events and people commemorated by a park. We make this information available to interpretive programs through ethnographic research reports.

Interpretive programs take such information and develop overarching themes that bring coherence to various elements of cultural meaning that park resources may have for diverse public groups. Interpretation highlights the societal

significance of park resources, events, or the lives of people the park commemorates. For example, the George Washington Carver National Monument advances an interpretive theme of interracial harmony that reflects Carver's religious and social philosophy and the cultural meaning attributable to how he shared his life's work with southern farmers without regard to their race. Much of this information and its meaning were uncovered in an ethnographic research project.¹

Building park interpretive themes and programs based on understandings derived from ethnography offers a solid foundation for advancing a more inclusive representation of the heritage of all Americans by the National Park Service. For many years, the National Park Service offered a somewhat mono-cultural view of American heritage and culture frequently from a Euro-American, often male perspective. This was due to the dominance of men in the cultural anthropology discipline, the national park movement, and the governmental organizations that administered parks.

The civil rights and women's rights movements unleashed the winds of change. Since then, people of diverse cultural backgrounds and women have made themselves heard in a cacophony that demanded that their stories not only be told, but told from their own perspectives. Moreover, they have insisted that the sites celebrating our national heritage must be inclusive of all the people who helped build this nation in the past and who continue to be part of the American tapestry of histories, cultures, and heritages.

Over the past 30 years, there has been and continues to be an increase in national parks that commemorate African Americans, other minorities, and women. In 1996, NPS ethnographer Jenny Masur identified 82 national parks associated with African-American history and culture.² Since then, two more such legislated parks were opened. Similarly, the number of park units that were identified with Hispanic

Americans increased from 26 to 44 between 1996 and 1999.³

Authorized in 1992, Manzanar National Historic Site commemorates and tells the story of the internment of Japanese Americans. More importantly, many other parks not specifically associated with diverse sub-cultural groups are telling their formerly silenced stories.⁴ As part of its interpretive program, Golden Spike National Historic Site includes the stories of the contribution of Chinese Americans, working under conditions of extreme prejudicial social attitudes and discrimination, in building the transcontinental railroad. Kalaupapa National Historical Park includes Chinese Americans in the interpretation of its cemeteries.⁵ The majority of National Park Service applied ethnography projects identify and document ethnographic resources that have traditional meanings, continuing relevance, and use by Native Americans.⁶ All of this research serves as a resource for interpretation programs.

Muriel (Miki) Crespi, National Coordinator for the NPS Applied Ethnography Program, has been an innovator in the advancement of system-wide use of ethnographic research methods to uncover and document the perspectives of ethnic/racial minorities associated with national parks. These methodologies emphasize listening and relaying the insider's words, explaining their own cultural point of view. Eighty-three such ethnographic projects have been completed to date and 56 more are currently underway.⁷ These project reports represent a large body of knowledge, much of which identifies stakeholders from diverse populations and gives them a voice to talk about who they are and their use of, value for, and relationships to park sites, structures, and landscapes.

From Alaska to the Mississippi Delta, from Cape Cod to Samoa, ethnographic research uncovers what people value in our national parks and relates that information from the people's perspective. Where ethnographic research has been conducted, interpretive programs have gained much from the research. Looking forward, one might anticipate that development of joint competencies for ethnography and interpretation might be the next logical innovation to strengthen the bonds between the two disciplines.

Ethnographers are giving once-muted peoples a voice to tell of their niche in and contributions to our national heritage. Interpreters are amplifying those voices as they incorporate ethnographic research into park themes and programs. Through the innovative synergy of these two disciplines, ethnography and interpretation, working together, the national park system has become and continues to become more representative of all Americans.

Notes

- 1 Lori Peterson, "A Study of African-American Culture in Southwest Missouri in Relation to the George Washington Carver National Monument," Lincoln, NE: Midwest Archeological Center, National Park Service, and United States Department of the Interior, 1995.
- 2 Jenny Masur, "African American History in National Parks," *CRM* 19:2 (1996): 45-47.
- 3 Audrey L. Brown, "Directory of National Park Sites Associated with African Americans," Unpublished Document, Archeology and Ethnography Program, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, 1999-2000; "Directory of National Park Sites Associated with Hispanic Americans," Unpublished Document, Archeology and Ethnography Program, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, 1999-2000.
- 4 See the National Park Service cultural resources web site <www.cr.nps.gov> for features that identify some of the parks with interpretive themes about African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Women.
- 5 Faculty of the Department of Anthropology and/or staff of the Social Science Research Institute and Fred York, "Contemporary Ethnographic Study of the Kalaupapa Settlement, Kalaupapa National Historical Park, Honolulu, HI," Pacific Islands Support Office, National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior, in progress.
- 6 Applied Ethnography Program, "National Park Service Applied Ethnography Projects Completed and In Progress," *Archeology and Ethnography Program*, National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior, Fall 2000.
- 7 Ibid.

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