

Robert G. Brown

The International Seminar

An evaluation of the annual North American training program on administration of National Parks and Equivalent Reserves

In asking me to prepare this article, the Editor suggested that I comment upon what the Seminar attempts to do and how well it succeeds. What follows, therefore, is an attempt to evaluate the Seminar as one method by which the experience, knowledge and skills developed by the host countries can be made available to an international audience, producing some reciprocal flow of ideas and information, to the mutual benefit of all concerned.

I was privileged to participate in the 1973 Seminar, one of a continuing program offered by the School of Natural Resources of the University of Michigan, the U.S. National Park Service, Parks Canada and Mexico's National Commission of Public Works in National Parks.

Objectives

The objectives of the Seminar are described as "to examine policies, administration, planning and other aspects of management in national parks and equivalent reserves. Field operations and facilities are studied and the policies and programs of North American parks are related to those of national parks in other countries."

In practice, the participants are enabled: a. to gain first-hand knowledge of the administration of national parks and equivalent reserves in the host countries, at both national and local levels; b. to examine specific problem areas and the solutions devised or contemplated by the responsible executive agencies; and c. to relate this information, so far as it is relevant, to their own circumstances, and through discussion and debate, to the circumstances of other Seminar participants.

The premise underlying this approach seems to be that there exists a broad similarity in the issues which concern those involved in this field throughout the world. I shall return to this question later under the heading of "Relevance."

The Seminar's performance against the stated objectives is considered in relation to four factors: a. concept, b. method, c. relevance, and d. organization.

Concept

Progression from an overall synoptic view to the examination of specific aspects is calculated to secure maximum benefit from a relatively short time spent on detailed cases or issues. It is essential that participants should have a reasonable grasp of the general origins of problems and the constraints faced by executive agencies. The study must therefore include some description of the political systems, relevant legislation, the powers and resources of the executive agencies, the economic and social factors and, of

course, the geographical circumstances.

The Seminar program in fact reflects this logical approach. It is well conceived, proceeding from orientation and the general introductory sessions to the consideration of specific matters such as the planning and management of national parks adjacent to major urban areas, the management of national forest reserves, the functions of state parks, the techniques of interpretation, the role of concessionaires, conservation of wildlife and archeological and historical resources. Specific problems or topics are illustrated by appropriate site visits and free ranging discussions. The Seminar organizers are inevitably faced with difficult choices in reconciling the desirability of covering as wide a range of relevant topics as possible, and the need to keep within a tight timetable and to relate to the capacity of participants to digest the subject matter.

In my experience the balancing is skillfully done. The course is logical and builds progressively upon knowledge acquired in earlier sessions. Variety of topic is linked to variety of site; and locations and travelling arrangements are well devised to secure the maximum opportunity for fresh experiences.

Success must, however, depend in the final analysis upon the ability of the instructors and discussion leaders and of the participants themselves. I was impressed by the thought and hard work which had been undertaken by the organizers and instructors and the skill with which they created an informal working atmosphere, encouraging participants to involve themselves fully from the outset.

Method

Lectures In devising the scene-setting sessions to provide background for the examination of particular issues, the organizers must find it difficult to know if some basic acquaintance with the North and South American situation can be taken for granted. This difficulty might to some extent be overcome by providing literature as required reading for participants *before* they join the Seminar. In devising this introductory pamphlet it would be necessary merely to sketch the bare bones leaving the flesh to be added rapidly in the preliminary stages. Though the course is conducted in English, the introductory reading might be multi-lingual. Any reduction in the time used for introductory sessions might then enable some extension in the range of specific topics dealt with later in the Seminar.

An additional benefit from basic material to be read in advance would be a reduction in the number of sessions which inevitably involve extensive spoken presentations with little opportunity for dialogue between the speaker and the participants. I would suggest that in the Seminar situation the principal aim should be to secure the maximum of free-flowing discussion. To that extent, the briefer



First hand experience with tools and techniques employed in national park field service is provided for members of the International Seminars. Right, mountain rescue techniques are demonstrated during the 1975 Seminar by experts at Jasper National Park, Alberta, Canada. NPS Photo: Douglas Cuillard. Left, a 1974 group inspects Antelope House at Canyon de Chelly National Monument in the US State of Arizona. A decade ago these fragile ruins were damaged by sonic "booms" from military aircraft on training flights. NPS Photo: Bruce Powell.



the presentation consistent with providing the essential background, the better.

Discussion/Site Visits In the treatment of specific topics involving discussions and site visits, the Seminar successfully stimulates a good level of interchange. Individuals are enabled to contribute on the basis of relevant experience in similar or analogous circumstances and this must be of benefit to participants, Seminar staff and local managers. Additional benefits might be obtained if a greater degree of relatively formalized team-working could be introduced. Specific issues calling for multi-disciplinary or specialist approaches might be presented to the Seminar and student teams selected to prepare analyses or devise solutions. This might be done either before viewing the problem on the ground or after the site visit and should be coupled with critical appraisal and discussion between the Seminar participants and those responsible for implementation of any solutions devised. A useful interchange of views should be achieved and opportunities for individual contributions enhanced.

Literature Inevitably the full benefits of Seminar participation after return to normal duties depend upon the ability to relate the newly acquired perspectives and knowledge to the perennial problems. The very generous scale of supporting literature and notes provided by the Seminar proves an invaluable source of subsequent reference. It represents a commendable understanding by the organizers of the essential role of backup material in enabling participants to build, at leisure, upon their new ideas and concepts.

Relevance

It is in this area that the organizers are presented with their most acute difficulties. The circumstances of the participating countries vary widely. In selecting themes such as interpretation, planning, trends in visitor usage, and staff training, the Seminar correctly

identified a core of material which was of relevance and value to virtually all participants. Other themes, such as wildlife conservation, tribal parks and the management of wilderness areas, are

About the Seminar . . .

Participation The Seminar is designed for administrators, professional personnel and conservation leaders responsible for the establishment and development of park and wildlife conservation systems and associated tourist programs. Since 1965, this Seminar has been attended by 363 park executives and conservation leaders from 82 countries. It has been commended by the United Nations Conference on Human Environment, 1972, and Second World Conference on National Parks, 1972, as a model program.

Location The Seminar usually begins in Canada. Discussions, field demonstrations, site evaluations, and academic instruction take it through various areas of the USA, to concluding sessions in Mexico.

Objectives and Policies This is a technical and professional academic course. The purpose is to examine policies, administration, planning and other aspects of management of national parks and equivalent reserves. Field operations and facilities are studied. Policies and programs of North American parks are related to those of national parks in other countries. Seminar discussions following each major subject presentation.

The participants are selected without regard to race, creed, or nationality. They are considered students of The University of Michigan. Under the policies of the sponsors all participants share classrooms, or other educational facilities and modes of transportation without discrimination. All have equal opportunity for participation in the Seminar and have full freedom of inquiry in matters related to the administration of national parks and equivalent reserves. Political matters unrelated to the technical and professional aspects of the Seminar are not considered.

Full information on the Seminar can be obtained by writing to: International Seminar Director, School of Natural Resources, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109, USA.

clearly of greater or lesser relevance according to the circumstances of each participant.

I consider that the topics are well covered, so that I would expect most participants to benefit from at least 75% of the subject matter chosen. It is difficult to see how this could be bettered within the present concept. The alternative is a series of specialized seminars dealing in greater depth with specific subject areas. This would score high on relevance but less well against such aims as the injection of fresh and novel points of view from outside the conventional wisdom, and the fostering of multi-disciplinary approaches which are so relevant to much of the work in the conservation field. An acceptable compromise might be a generalized Seminar which for some portion of the time was split into specialized groups, each pursuing syllabuses related to particular interests, reconvening subsequently to pursue the general study.

Organization

Last, but by no means least, the participants can secure the maximum benefits only if they are able to concentrate their attentions upon the Seminar subject matter. The work of providing such basic essentials as accommodation, food, transport, and all the other essential details must go smoothly or the Seminar is disrupted. It is axiomatic that the less one is aware of these essential services the better they are working.

When one considers that the Seminar involves transporting 30 or 40 participants of different nationalities over thousands of miles to dozens of locations by coach, plane, boat and car, it speaks volumes for the staff that they haven't lost anybody yet!

In relation to the 1973 Seminar it is worth noting that the staff allocated to this work on a full-time basis numbered only 4, albeit assisted from time to time by others.

Assessment

My conclusion is, therefore, that given the generalized character of the Seminar and the extremely diffused audience to which it is directed, it succeeds in attaining its declared objectives to a major extent. Without radical alteration there is no obvious method whereby the performance could be significantly bettered except in relation to the relatively minor matters to which I have referred above. As a former participant, I consider that a Seminar which succeeds in providing relevant subject matter for 75% of the time is well worthwhile. If, however, this is an untypical experience or opinion, the organizers may wish to consider the alternatives of separate, more specialized seminars either by topic or by type of region, or a seminar combining both generalist and specialist syllabuses. In devising the specialist syllabuses, regard would, of course, have to be given to the very differing circumstances of, for example, the European and African participants.

The essentials of a successful seminar are careful planning, effective implementation, relevance to the needs of participants and sound administrative back-up. All of these are well met. As a result, participants are exposed to new and stimulating views on the concepts and values underlying their work, enabled to see examples of problem solving approaches and techniques of proven efficacy, and offered the opportunity for constructive dialogue in an informal working atmosphere. In short, the Seminar provides participants with a valuable training experience of significant benefit in the context of their jobs and in the promotion of the ideals which form a common bond between those working in the field of conservation.

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