

Regional Chief Scientists Heading Back to Research

With scarcely a backward glance — even with a barely audible sigh (could it be relief?), they march back to the field, these scientists who gave up their research to man the administrative bastions of the NPS science program.

It all began in 1978, when Robert Stottlemeyer, research ecologist, said goodbye to the job of Regional Chief Scientist, Mid-Atlantic Region, and went back to research at the Great Lakes Area Research Study Unit, Michigan Tech University, Houghton, Mich. More recently, like the catsup bottle that "when you want a little to come, a lot 'l," the trickle has turned into a trend.

In 1984 Paul Buckley left the Chief Scientist position in the North Atlantic Region to head up the NPS CPSU at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, NJ. In 1983, Don Field bowed out of a similar position with the Pacific Northwest Region to go back to sociological research and writing at the NPS CPSU at Oregon State University in Corvallis.

Now come Gary Larson, Chief Scientist in the Midwest Region, and Denny Fenn, Western Region Chief Scientist, saying farewell to administrative duties and heading back to their first love — research . . . Larson to do work in the cold water lakes and streams of the Pacific Northwest (out of the OSU CPSU) and Fenn to head up the NPS CPSU at Texas A & M. Larson's doctorate is in zoology; Fenn's is in soil science.

All these good soldiers have answered the call of their first love — research: the good news is that the result is nothing but plusses. Administration has benefited, research will gain, and the scientists themselves see their administrative stints as having given them valuable experience and insights into the relationship of the overall science program to NPS management.

In conversations with these men who have opted for two-pronged careers, one recurring idea emerged — the "crossroads" syndrome. As Fenn put it: "I had had six full years of 100 percent administrative duties. I realized that I was at the point where I had to decide whether I was willing to give up my research skills and commit my whole career to administration. I found I just wasn't ready to do that. I'm a soil chemist, and I wanted to get back to being a soil chemist."

In addition, Fenn said he felt that he had "stayed the limit" from both a personal and a job point of view. "You might call it a left-handed and a right-handed motive for the move," he said. "You can grow in a job for three or four years, and then it seems to me that you tend to level out. For personal growth reasons, I felt the need of a change. That was my right-handed reason.

"The left-handed motive had to do with the job. I think new, fresh ideas are needed as the needs of the position change over time. I've tried to get a start on that aspect of it by turning over the acting detail to a whole line-up of Regional scientists. Each of them will take a one- or two-week stint of acting as Regional Chief Scientist, doing actual substantive work in administration. In addition to the practical peek at what I've been dealing with all these years, they should develop a better understanding of why certain details, standards, and procedures are necessary and important."

Larson's story is somewhat different, but the underlying pattern might be more similar than it looks at first glance. "I've enjoyed what I've done here in the Midwest Region," Larson said. "I've seen how con-

tracting and research administration work; I've interacted with 27 superintendents of many different kinds of park areas – parks with different mandates and different kinds of resources . . . from the Great Lakes basin to the Great Plains.

"But I'm a scientist and my field is aquatics, fisheries, limnology. I've always had a desire to work with cold water lakes and streams in the high mountainous regions. I genuinely miss having my hands on the natural resources. I have loved the opportunity to travel and to see the various sites, but that kind of motion doesn't let you really 'feel the pulse' of things the way I need to."

It turns out that the new assignment is the fulfillment of an old and cherished dream for Larson. "Twenty years ago, when I was working on my Master's degree doing research at Mount Rainier, I knew that doing that kind of lake and stream work in the Pacific Northwest was what I most wanted to do with my life. Coming back to that Region, working out of a CPSU where the whole Region is my assignment, is just exactly what I want."

Don Fields echoed much of what Fenn had expressed – particularly the "crossroads" overtones. "If I wanted to expand the contributions of social science research to benefit management," said Field, "it would require fulltime attention. And I couldn't agree more with Fenn," he added, "so far as the Chief Scientist position is concerned. It needs many different points of view. The position itself changes greatly as time and policies change. The person who fills that slot needs to be innovative and creative and imbued with unquenchable enthusiasm for the job. Over time, anyone gets worn down. You lose some of that initial enthusiasm and with it goes the necessary 'edge' that

the job calls for."

The editor's call to Buckley, requesting his personal observations on this trend, elicited a letter so full of interesting observations (and so resistant to cutting) that it is included in the Letters to the Editor section of this issue.

As befits the man whose decision is of longest standing, Stottlemeyer had the longest-range view of the back-to-the-field trend.

"If I were asked to advise a young scientist starting out to create a viable career in both science and management," he said, "I would tell him or her to get three to five years of solid research in first. *Then* do the management stint."

And Stottlemeyer had definite ideas about the length of time a scientist can afford to invest in management today. "Three years is about the limit, in terms of efficient reentry," he maintained. "Technology and training are changing *that fast*." One of the most important factors so far as reentry is concerned, is the rapid advance in instrumentation.

His own area – ecological, multi-discipline research – depends on a wide variety of disciplines, and Stottlemeyer observed that "instrumentation changes the way we manage information." Particularly when you go back to a job that entails managing a lab, "you have to be able to assess the costs and benefits of the new technologies as they come along. When do we go to the University mainframe? What type of desktop computer do we really need?"

All of the above notwithstanding, there are and will continue to be scientifically educated NPS personnel who will elect to go to the management rather than the research route. While this decision remains a personal one, rooted in the individual's own preferences and proclivities, the Service has a stake in maintaining strong rapport between the two areas. That process, which is both individual and institutional, is well served by the kinds of "crossings over" described here.