

ECOSYSTEM

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

By RON HIEBERT

CRAIG SHAFER DESCRIBED the format of the Tucson Ecosystem Workshop. As he stated, we do not know what the benefits or outcomes of this exercise will be. We hope written products will communicate to scientists what managers need and encourage managers to engage scientists in the decision making process. All National Park Service participants share the responsibility to incorporate what was learned into everyday park operations, planning, environmental education, and training. Following I give my impressions of what the Tucson workshop was all about, the lessons I extracted, and how I feel it applies to the way in which the National Park Service conducts business.

To me, the message of the workshop was change. Not so much change in what we do but change in how and why we do it. Ecosystem management certainly is not a new concept for the National Park Service. We have long professed that we manage for the whole system rather than for individual components. We say we recognize humans as an integral part of the systems we manage and that societal, cultural, and natural resources are interrelated. But, how often do we approach problems on this premise? Treating these parts separately often does not the whole make.

Ecosystem stewardship is about scale, both spatial and temporal. The National Park Service recognizes that parks are not islands and that they must be managed within the context of their regional landscape. It is less routine to strategically consider the role of a group of parks in a regional scale such as the Ozark Highlands or the Great Lakes Basin, the role of the park system in preserving national biodiversity or the role of parks in providing habitat for neo-tropical migratory birds in North America. On a temporal scale, the National Park Service has put

forth a concerted effort through such endeavors as the Vail Agenda to look at our changing role and how we must change to meet new challenges into the future. This kind of thinking needs to be scaled down to the cluster and individual park level more consistently and objectively.

The workshop also forced me to reexamine the meaning of stewardship, what it means to the federal land manager and specifically to us in the National Park Service who have been entrusted with stewardship of the nation's crown jewels for future generations. This is an awesome responsibility. We must, on a routine basis, find and apply the best information available in making management decisions. All of us must continue to hone our skills and keep abreast of new tools and technologies. Finally, we must involve the public in a meaningful way in park management. After all, they are who we serve.

The meeting also reemphasized the need for effective teamwork between managers and scientists and adoption of adaptive management principals. Managers need to engage scientists in the decision making process in ways that do not compromise their objectivity. Scientists need to be open to engaging in decision making to bring the best information to the table. This is a real challenge in our present structure with our former researchers now being transferred to the U.S. Geological Survey.

Further, we must recognize that "nature is dead." That is to say that the concept of systems uninfluenced by humans is now a myth. Therefore, it is up to us to define what we want the future condition of each park to be, develop a plan on how to get there, and apply evaluation criteria to see how we are doing. Simply saying our goal is to manage to protect "natural processes" will not do anymore.

Finally, management of parks will never again be as it was in the past. The public is no longer satisfied with the answer that

we are doing it this way because "that's our policy." If it is perceived that a proposed action may be controversial, we must make the effort to explain to park users the rationale of the policy and why we believe that action should be taken. We must also be armed with solid scientific data to support our decisions. For example, if one wishes to remove feral horses, which park users love, the park must effectively communicate the NPS policy concerning exotic species and have solid scientific data to document the impacts the feral horses are having on park resources. Then, we must be prepared to seek a mutually acceptable solution to the problem (see the cover story on FACA).

The Ecosystem Stewardship Workshop was about change. Not so much change in what we do but in how we do it. As stated by the Director of the U.S. Forest Service in his opening remarks at the conference, we must "change or die."

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