

Interpretation, Management, Science Ties Promoted Through Interregional Workshops

By Jean Matthews

More than 75 research scientists, resource managers, and interpreters, mostly from the National Park Service but also representing the Forest Service and the California Department of Fish and Game, gathered in mid-September at a lodge just outside Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks for the third in a series of interregional workshops designed to bridge the gaps between scientific research, resource management, and interpretation in National Parks. NPS Director Mott has strongly endorsed the workshops.

Pacific Mountain Parks was the title of this latest interregional gathering; it followed a May 1986 workshop on Southwest desert parks and a February 1985 workshop on coastal parks. Dick Cunningham, Chief of Interpretation in the NPS Western Region, conceived and has led all three workshops, and a 1987 session on island parks is tentatively slated for Hawaii.

Three superintendents – John Davis of Sequoia and Kings Canyon, Gil Blinn of Lassen Volcanic, and John Reynolds of North Cascades – opened the 5-day sessions with descriptions of their parks' problems and opportunities and the interpretive steps being taken to bring the public into an understanding of, and support for, park management.

Blinn, for instance, spoke of a "walk on water" interpretive program, dramatizing the role of water in an ecosystem. He described field seminars held in conjunction with the Loomis Museum Association, bringing in outstanding speakers to help the park staff and seasonals better understand their own park, and spoke of computer tie-ins with other National Parks for comparison of wildlife, eruption area recovery rates, and other matters of an interpark nature. Overnight facilities for visiting researchers, provided by the park, have made possible exchanges with scientists from Mount St. Helens and have enriched the Lassen Park staff's store of knowledge about their own park, Blinn said.

Science and Politics

Reynolds stressed the relationship between science and politics in National Parks and dwelt at some length on the need to conduct and interpret research within the context of an overall "sense of fitness and pride in the resource we manage." He urged the workshop participants to "think this week in terms of the future and holism. What is in one's mind can become a reality. We don't have the luxury," he said, "of simply taking hold of the past and shoving it into the future."

A fourth superintendent, not actually present, also was heard from when Reynolds quoted Bob Barbee of Yellowstone NP: "Harnessing an elk, a moose, and a bison and trying to get them all to pull one cart is pretty much like trying to get science, resource management, and interpretation to work together to run a park."

Davis spoke of the enormous responsibility on NPS personnel to "preserve, protect, and perpetuate your trusts." He suggested that those present make a real effort to "mix up and listen to one another, and share your thoughts for better understanding. We must communicate," he told the gathering, "not just with one another but in the political and public sense."

Throughout the week, the problems peculiar to

mountain parks were explored. Theme management, human ecology of parks, fire management, air quality and acid rain, biological diversity, wildlife/human interactions, endangered, relict, and alien species, and impacts on mountain ecosystems – these were the chief topics, each introduced from the scientific viewpoint, then studied from the management standpoint, and finally explored for its interpretive possibilities.

Interpreters were credited generally by both science and management, for instance, with having generated "great understanding and almost 100 percent acceptance" on the part of the public for the evolving fire management policies within the National Park System. This was a deliberate educational effort on the part of park science, park management, and park interpreters. Superintendent Davis emphasized the need to extend these interpretive efforts beyond the park boundaries – especially into the immediate park environs. "The people who live around the parks have tremendous proprietary interests and they must be included and dealt with," he said.

The Public Press

With regard to the public press, Davis pointed out that when newpeople were invited into the park to watch a prescribed burn their attitude was that it was dull. "That was good," he said. "It defused what might have been a touchy issue."

What emerged at the workshop was a sense of the need for a team approach. Ranger and maintenance staff involvement in communication were stressed by Blinn, and Reynolds added that "personalities are so important – more so than job descriptions. Symbiosis depends on people chemistry." If interpretation is to continue to function with less staff and fewer dollars, Blinn suggested the use of VIPs (Volunteers in

Parks), outside organizations and agencies, universities, and the press. Reynolds added his belief that better interpretive uses could be made of the Ranger cadre in parks.

Gary Machlis of the University of Idaho's NPS Cooperative Park Studies Unit, who led a session on the human ecology of parks, maintained that better understanding of visitors and their roles in the park system will make for better and more effective interpretation.

Al Denniston of Lassen Volcanic NP, moderator of

Among the immediate results of the September 1986 workshop, Cunningham reports that several parks have indicated closer coordination of the three areas (science, management, and interpretation). At Hawaii Volcanoes NP, for instance, bi-weekly meetings now are held by the Superintendent and his three chiefs – of science, resource management, and interpretation. In the Western Region, miniworkshops modeled on the larger workshops are planned for next year to explore specific problem areas.

the Fire Management session, told the workshop that Jan van Wagtenonk (Yosemite NP research scientist) would tell them why we should burn, Tom Nichols (Sequoia/Kings Canyon NP air quality resource manager) would tell them why you shouldn't burn, and then Bill Tweed and Cindy Nielsen (interpreters from Sequoia/Kings Canyon and Channel Islands, respectively) "will tell you what they said."

This was the format for all subject areas: an

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Touching the resource while they explore ways of coordinating science, resource management, and interpretation, these workshop participants enjoy the sunshine and balmy September temperature on the deck of Montecito-Sequoia Lodge just outside Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Parks. Photo by Larry L. Norris.

objective scientific look at all sides of a subject, followed by the practical applications and interpretation that flow out of research findings.

Knowledge vs. Certainty

The final day's session, on natural resource communication, was titled "Knowledge versus Certainty." This intriguing idea was explored by a panel that represented research, management, and interpretation at several levels, including *Park Science*, followed by lively group discussion. The consensus was that science should provide valid, reproducible research results that would undergird the formulation of agency policy and management action. All of the above, should be fodder for creative, tuned-in interpreters.

Cunningham, in a wrap-up to the workshop, restated the overall objective of all the workshops: "To minimize the bureaucratic and geographical barriers that separate us as Regions, and to concentrate on the mutual concerns and opportunities that can bring us together as National Park System stewards."