

Improving the NPS Natural Resource Management Process

By Philip E. Nibali

During June and July 1986, an analysis of Regional Annual Natural Resource Reports and Park Resource Management Plans (RMP) was undertaken in the National Park Service Washington Office. The purpose of this informal study was to look for ways to increase the consistency and the utility of the Reports and Plans, and to identify approaches to improving the natural resource management process in general. A variety of related documents, including the guidelines for Report/Plan preparation, copies of pertinent

memos, and budget formulation guides, were reviewed.

The study yielded several findings. One was that significant variance exists with regard to many elements of the basic mechanics of these Reports and Plans, making the documents difficult and confusing to use. Page numbering systems were inconsistent, and many project statements were not clearly marked with Regional and park priority numbers; abbreviations and acronyms varied and/or were not explained; and, formats used for the charts that list priorities, and for the reports as a whole, differed considerably.

A second finding was that, overall, Regional Offices were dissatisfied with the numerical method employed by most of them in prioritizing projects. They complained that the numerical method was cumbersome, that it consumed an inordinate amount of time, and that the results were not more accurate or reflective of Regional needs than those obtained from the prioritization process previously used. Another finding was that significant differences have evolved in park RMPs since the issuance of the December 1980 guidelines for Plan preparation.

Based on the review and analysis of the park RMPs, Regional Annual Natural Resource Reports, and other documents, the following conclusions were reached:

One, that if a more standard format for the Plans and Reports were adopted, user confusion and frustration would be reduced – the desired information would be easier to locate and understand. It should be noted here that taking such action would facilitate computerization of the natural resource management process. While development of a comprehensive plan for computerization may result in reduction of the individuality and flexibility parks and Regions have enjoyed, it should aid in timely production of all documents related to the process, as well as more timely appropriation of funds.

Priority Standards Needed

Two, that there is a need for a standard set of general project prioritization guidelines, to be imparted to all field personnel. On the park level, it would probably be best to leave things as they stand: in the hands of resource management staff, with guidance, assistance and approval by superintendents and the Regional Office. Thus, the first-line decision-making authority on natural resource/research matters would be retained at the park level, where lies the most familiarity with local problems, issues and needs. On the Regional level, it was concluded that the numerical method employed by most Regions in 1986 for prioritizing projects should be discontinued. A non-numerical process would lessen the burden in that park staff no longer would be required to assign "precise" numerical values for projects or do the resultant calculations. More reliance would be placed on the experience, judgment, and integrity of the Regional staff. Finally, a goal should be to standardize a reasonable balance of influence on prioritizing between the parks, the Regional Offices, and the Washington Of-

fice and other Servicewide decision makers.

Three, that there is a need for uniform guidelines and procedures from the Washington Office on park RMP review and update.

Four, that the various innovations and approaches taken by the Regions with regard to cooperative programs should be collected, categorized, analyzed, and presented in a coherent fashion to each of the Regional Offices and parks by the Washington Office. Even though the Regional Offices have all received and supposedly reviewed each others' Reports, an effort of the kind proposed would serve to highlight, emphasize, and potentially improve and expand cooperative activities . . . a particularly appropriate exercise in these times of shrinking funds.

Five, that the Director's emphasis on resource management within his 12-point plan provides an excellent opportunity to develop a comprehensive and accountable natural resource management process. There is need for an overall plan, and a proposed schedule of accomplishments. One approach to year-by-year budget requests and initiatives might be to have a particular focus for the year. For example, there appears to be a need for a period of increased emphasis on baseline data collection. This activity serves as the foundation for many other important activities, including determining management direction, developing park plans, identifying resource problems and research needs, and developing and assessing alternatives for management actions. In other years, areas such as exotic species, water resources, or visitor studies might be stressed.

Something is Being Done

Regions and parks have remarked/complained/lamented that they are seeing relatively little return on the time and effort they invest in Report/Plan preparation, in terms of funding and staffing received. Some are skeptical about the value of the Reports and Plans. Even though the funds and staff allocated in these times of extremely tight budgets may be far less than what might seem even minimally necessary to properly manage park resources, it should be reassuring to Regional and park personnel to know that something is being done with the documents they have labored to produce.

One such "something" is a fiscal year 1988 natural resource budget initiative, which was put together by the Washington Office using data contained in the Reports and Plans. The initiative lists the "backlog" of identified, unfunded projects that must be completed to bring the natural resources up to, or to maintain them in, the condition their National Park status demands. Specific objectives of the initiative include: 1) bringing park base programs up to a level where parks are able to conduct the routine, day to day activities required to ensure effective preservation of park resources and any specific short term projects for which they receive regional or Servicewide funding; 2) increasing Regional Office programs to where they can provide the basic cyclic support to park programs identified in their regional natural resource plans plus begin to conduct park natural resource program reviews as part of the Service's Operations Evaluation program; and, 3) expanding Servicewide support capabilities to ensure that all critical project needs are met and that longer term research and natural resource planning efforts are initiated.

Nibali was a student in the Recreation Resource Management program at the University of Maryland when this article was written. He served as a Program Analyst on the Science Support Staff, Washington Office, under a Volunteer in Parks agreement.