

Bridging the Communication Gap: Linking Interpreters, Resource Managers, and Researchers

By Lois Winter

Editor's Note: This is a slightly edited version of an article that appeared in the Fall 1991 issue of Interpretation—an issue that is no longer available.

In the Summer 1989 issue of *Interpretation*, Al Lovaas, Regional Chief Scientist in Alaska, stated: "If research can be thought of as the inquisitive and analytical mind of the National Park Service, interpretation is its heart." Parks desperately need scientists to document what resources we oversee and how we can protect those resources. But while scientific data is essential in courtrooms, and parks are invaluable control areas for researchers, parks are important for more than their scientific values.

I believe that in the minds of many visitors, the greatest value of parks resides in their inspirational qualities. But science is essential to interpretation, and to effectively inspire our sophisticated audience, interpreters need (among other things) current and accurate scientific information. Therefore, if we hope to protect park resources, researchers and resource managers need interpreters, and interpreters need researchers and resource managers.

Only when visitors understand the critical problems that threaten park resources can we expect them to play a role in minimizing those problems. Interpreters must use current research and resource management projects as tools to focus attention on resource issues confronting our parks.

In addition, interpreting research projects allows visitors to explore the value of parks as laboratories for social, cultural, and natural resource studies, an important park value that visitors may not intuitively appreciate. Furthermore, staying in touch with researchers helps interpreters remain current in their thinking and helps assure that information directed to the public is up to date. Finally, research and resource management are FUN to talk about! Effective interpreters are eager to enliven their presentations with new information, and visitors love to hear up to date reports describing what's going on behind the scenes to protect the parks.

Obviously, a communication link between researchers, resource managers, and interpreters benefits us all. But how successful are we at maintaining that link? Based on years

of experience in interpretation, my two years in research, and discussions with tens of researchers and NPS employees, here are my recommendations for bridging the communication gap:

1. Designate a research liaison in the Interpretive Division of each park with the formalized duty of forging an effective link among resource managers, researchers, and interpreters. Many Park Service employees wax eloquent about the need for such communication, but a collective responsibility is one that tends to remain undone. By directing the responsibility to one individual it is far more likely that the job will get the attention it deserves. Duties could include any or all of the following:

a. Maintain good working relations with the park's resource management staff. Understand resource management's objectives, demonstrate familiarity with the Resource Management Plan, stay abreast of current initiatives, attend resource management staff meetings, and suggest new research questions. Read scientific reports and journal articles relevant to park issues and attend science conferences. Occasionally observe and/or participate in field research projects.

b. Review draft research project proposals that define and formalize the NPS involvement with researchers. Carefully limit commitments to the researcher-interpreter communications link.

c. When a new research project begins, attend meetings ordinarily scheduled between the park's resource management staff and the researchers. Cultivate a realistic understanding of the research project's objectives and limitations. Discuss ways that resource managers and researchers can assist interpreters to understand the research and interpret it to visitors... Assure researchers that their efforts to communicate with the research liaison will be evident in the park's interpretive program.

d. Throughout the project, remain in contact with resource managers to monitor progress. Researchers may be encouraged to lead a field trip, present a lecture, or write an update for field interpreters and/or park visitors.

e. At the end of the research project, maintain contact with the resource management specialist to confirm that all require-

ments in the research proposal with regard to the communications link have been met and final questions resolved.

f. Establish a network with nearby universities and state conservation agencies. Timely and important research directly relevant to park interpretation happens outside the parks' boundaries.

g. Digest, compile, and summarize research reports and other information from researchers and resource managers. Summaries can provide field interpreters a maximum amount of information in a minimum of time. Summaries can include a bibliography to direct interpreters to more detailed information sources. Encourage field interpreters to include relevant, accurate information on research in their programs.

h. Make sure a copy of every research report is accessioned in the park library. Deliver appropriate annotated research project slides and photographs to interpretive files.

i. Organize a lecture series on research and resource management projects relevant to the park for NPS staff, local residents, and visitors.

j. Design interpretive activities that highlight research or resource management projects. Invite visitors to participate in actual or simulated nesting surveys, gypsy moth trapping, air quality monitoring, beaver management activities, etc.

2. When drafting research project proposals, Regional Office Science Division employees should incorporate specific requirements to assure that park interpreters have access to important information from researchers. Ways of establishing the link might include:

a. Require that copies of the research proposal, thesis proposals, and final project reports and/or theses be delivered to the Interpretive Division's research liaison.

b. Require researchers to meet with the research liaison and resource managers at scheduled intervals until the project's conclusion.

c. At project conclusion, require the researcher to write a brief report in layman's language, summarizing research methods, results, remaining questions, and concerns that should be relayed to the public.

d. Researchers should be encouraged to make their required final oral report to the park staff at a time when a maximum number of "seasonals" are available to hear the presentation.

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e. Require researchers to provide slides, specimens, or other tangible items that can be used in interpretive programs.

3. Because research may have significance in parks other than the one in which it was carried out, every Regional Chief of Interpretation should stay in touch with the Region's Chief Scientist. By maintaining a basic awareness of ongoing nationwide NPS research, the Interpretation Chief can alert each park's research liaison of potentially relevant research in other parks.

4. To emphasize its importance, incorporate a section in the Statement for Interpretation detailing interesting research

results and describing progress and stumbling blocks in establishing and maintaining the interpreter-researcher connection. Establishment of the communication link among interpreters, researchers, and resource managers, possibly along the lines outlined above, will provide a vital tool for mobilizing public support for long term park protection.

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