

Vital Signs conference focuses NPS sights on "perpetuity"

By JEAN MATTHEWS

A STEREOSCOPIC VISION OF "IN PERPETUITY" (part of the NPS organic mission) began to emerge at the April 1998 Vital Signs conference in Portland, Oregon, attended by more than 150 Pacific-West Region National Park Service people from all walks of the Service. The conference subtitle, "Assessing natural and cultural park resources," encouraged the crossing of discipline and job description boundaries and invited melding of a fragmented mission.

The week-long conference (April 6-10) aimed at a synergistic stewardship to match the awesome synergy of the ecosystems at risk. The presentations, posters, and workshops produced an ecology of effort from experienced workers in the fields of research, maintenance, museums, law enforcement, and superintendency, who discovered a deeper appreciation for the totality of the job that, together, they are doing.

Evaluation of the conference, as revealed in participant ratings, focused heavily on information-sharing and networking as the highest values received. While time overruns came in for the usual share of gripes, the consensus was overwhelmingly positive. Typical comments included:

- "Organized well—especially [good] integration of disciplines;"
- "The best speakers overall for any conference I've attended;"
- "A great experience and a chance to show others what I do;"
- "Networking is always excellent;"

- "It was a great information sharing session;" and
- "A wonderful opportunity to network and share information. Please keep these up."

plenary session addresses, notably those by Mike Soukup (Associate Director, Natural Resource Stewardship and Science) and John Reynolds (Pacific-West Regional Director).



Figure 1. Vital Signs can mean many things in many different places. Here at Fort Vancouver National Historic Site in Vancouver, Washington, (destination of one of the conference field trips), being alert to vital signs that signal overall condition of a cultural treasure includes a periodic check for decay at the base of the fort's palisades wall. The palisades are cultural, but the decay agents are natural, so vital signs can overlap and bring together the cultural and natural elements of park management.

Field trips (to Mt. St. Helens and to Fort Vancouver National Historic Site [figures 1, 2, and 3]) received rave reviews. So did Richard Sellars' conference keynote (based on his recent book, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History*, reviewed by Gary Davis in the last issue of *Park Science*, 17(2):1,8). Numerous other sessions were also very popular and included: Kathy Jope's grant writing workshop; the non-NPS speakers on relevant topics; information on related projects such as the Northwest Forest Plan; the poster sessions; the integrated approaches to NPS land management problems; and several of the

The natural resources stewardship mission was described by Gary Davis (Senior Scientist at Channel Islands National Park, California) as conservation of healthy, unimpaired parks, and fixing the fragmented parks that are no longer parts of the larger ecosystems from which they were carved. The objective of the stewardship structure (field operations, applied science, and research) consists of knowing, restoring, maintaining, and protecting, Davis said. "Vital signs," he said, "are reliable early warning signals by which we can measure and detect changes that will impair the structure and functions of ecosystems. Networking with others who are similarly engaged can help us pinpoint and sharpen our predictions."

Stephanie Toothman, Cultural Resources Team Leader for the Columbia-Cascades Support Office, observed that management of cultural resources—a record of human interaction with the environment—parallels that of natural resources. Its disciplines—ethnology, archeology, museum curation, architecture, cultural landscapes, and history—likewise involve research, inventory, and management.

Richard Sellars, conference keynoter, identified the culture of the National Park Service itself as the largest impediment to a scientific natural resources program. As in his book, Sellars made a strong plea for

recognition at the NPS director level that "resources preservation is our Service's primary mission and thus should be the primary profession in the Service."

Landscape architecture was the key to the management strategy in the beginning, he said. Preservation was aimed at aesthetics rather than system structure and function. Thus, fire suppression, fish stocking, tourist infrastructure, removal of predators, and road building, all were well established as the primary park mission by the turn of the last century; development and recreation were the early objectives.

Interior Secretary Franklin Lane's decision to borrow science from other agencies rather than installing it as a part of the Park Service contributed to the perception of biologists by the NPS hierarchy as threats to the NPS power structure.

Pacific-West Regional Director Reynolds told the assembled conferees, "I am a strong advocate of full funding and of strengthening the ties between resource stewardship and superintendency. We must implement our full professional grades to protect our functioning resource bases."

He acknowledged the current "atmosphere of need" for better resource protection, and added, "We're the ones who can, and should, be doing that job." And he is committed to getting the money to do it,

he said. Parks are threatened by insularity and habitat fragmentation. "We still don't know what we have, but we know enough to know where we need to go. We need natural and cultural resources integration, and we would do well to begin simply by obeying the laws already in existence."

One "small beginning," Reynolds said, "will be to change the standards for superintendent performance. There is no single standard today for resource preservation. I promise you that will change," he told the applauding conferees.

He advised the assemblage to "read every page of Sellars' book. We need to think about it," he said. "It will help us understand why we are the way we are, and that will help us to see what we should be and how to get there."

"One of the main funding difficulties," he said, "is that we've trained Congress to believe that we are something that we don't really want to be." He sees a need for a better science delivery system, and tie-ins with countless other potential allies. "A river running through a park gives us access to people along the river all the way to the ocean," he said. There are opportunities for



partnerships with business, with other governmental agencies, and with nongovernmental organizations.

"Sell them, educate them, and incorporate them," he said. "Our ranks need to be as diverse as our nation. Diversity is not just about race and profession, it's about ideas, and our highest idea is excellence. We are protecting the excellence that is our country.... We represent the ideal of this nation."

NPS Director Bob Stanton's plan is excellent and complete," Reynolds said; "now how do we sell it to Congress?" This was the question he left with the conference.

He made it clear that his own plan for achieving it rests on excellent research, improved science delivery systems, incorporation of resource management into NPS career ladders that go clear to the top, the education of public and private entities as to their stake in excellence, and the echoing of this developing sentiment in the halls of Congress.

A full conference report, complete with specific recommendations from all five break-out sessions (geographic information systems; fire management and planning; cultural inventory and monitoring; natural inventory and monitoring; research: history, natural and otherwise: and resource treatment and protection), was planned for distribution throughout Pacific-West Region in June. Copies may be had

from conference chair Jonathan Bayless at 600 Harrison St., Suite 600, San Francisco, California 94107; (415) 427-1427; FAX (415) 744-4043; e-mail: jonathan_bayless@nps.gov. **PS**

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Figure 2 (above). Apple trees are another cultural resource at Fort Vancouver whose upkeep requires intervention by natural resource managers. To reduce spoilage of the fruit by apple maggots, resource managers place traps resembling apples (figure 3, above right) in the trees to control the insect. The look of the trap attracts the insect; no chemical attractant is needed. In this cultural park, fruit from the apple trees is used in interpretive demonstrations of the fort's historic period and enjoyed by the public.