

An interview with Superintendent Alan O'Neill

BY THE EDITOR

IN ELEVEN YEARS AS SUPERINTENDENT of Lake Mead National Recreation Area (Nevada and Arizona), Alan O'Neill has helped build one of the leading resource management programs in the Pacific-West Region. A brilliant manager with a human style, O'Neill listens, offers support, and invites participation, building trust with his staff and park partners. In recent years his leadership skills have landed him collateral assignments as the chair of the Pacific-West Region's resource management taskforce and as a partner in the initial planning phases of the California Desert Ecosystem Management Initiative, a complex interagency framework for managing over 25 million acres of public land. Twice during the last fifteen months, our featured guest talked with me about the remarkable transformations in the resource management program at Lake Mead, the benefits of collaboration, and the importance of managing a desert park in its ecological context.

Q: What role did strategic planning play in building your resource management program?

A: When I came to Lake Mead in 1987, I found that this park was driven by operations. About a quarter of all the visitor protection incidents for the National Park Service come out of this park. I looked at that and said, I'm going to learn about that. But we need to think strategically. We have to know where we want to take this ship. I'd ask our people what business they thought we were in and I could never get any consistency. That made quite an imprint on me. So, one of the first things we needed to do was to develop a strategic plan.

Q: To accomplish what?

A: We needed to interpret what it meant to be a recreation area. We had bought into the perception that we were just a law enforcement park, and the local people

thought of this as their local recreation area. We needed to define our desired future conditions so we could build a path to get there. I said, we *can* define what we're all about. We have an obligation and a duty to define what we're all about. I said, this is a serious exercise, and whatever we decide on *collectively* is what we'll put our efforts toward.

Q: How did resource management come to the forefront?

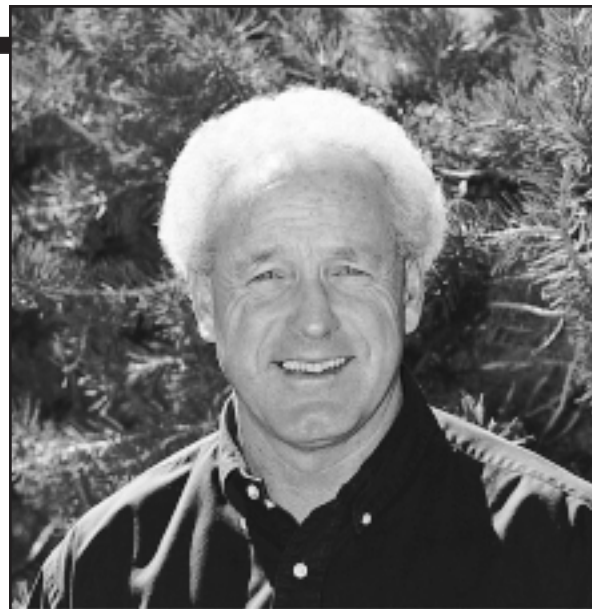
A: Bill Burke, the park's first resource manager, had labored for years trying to bring respect to the resource. He kept trying to make improvements, but he was a lone voice in the wilderness. When we went through the strategic plan it all came out that we had an incredible resource. Some of our people had not appreciated this. Until we embraced the resource, and could feel it, see it, and understand it, how in the world were we going to dedicate ourselves to the tough task ahead of protecting it? So, this was one of the first things we focused on.

Q: Did the staff just naturally buy in to this?

A: We had to do a lot of work internally first. We wanted the entire staff to understand the resource and have a chance to experience it. We did this through a series of three-day campouts where we would discuss the work that we're all about, the resource that we had, and build that commitment and dedication to protecting the resource. Once we had educated ourselves, then we were prepared to go out and build partnerships and community support.

Q: Any revelations from that experience?

A: Eighty-seven percent of the park's million-and-a-half acres is land on which we had done very little resource management.



Alan O'Neill, Superintendent of Lake Mead National Recreation Area.

We had acquiesced our responsibilities to other agencies like the state fish and game organizations. The Bureau of Land Management was in charge of burro management and grazing. We were so dependent upon other agencies doing our job for us that we had lost control of what was happening to our resource, and that was unacceptable.

Q: Did the public support this new orientation?

A: Yeah, but we had a massive job to do, because all the politicians, the users, and the local communities related to Lake Mead as a water recreation park. We wanted to wrest back some control over the land resources. So, we started a leadership program to train our people to work interdependently. We brought in scientists to help us think through what the desired future conditions should be. When we knew what the end in mind was, we brought in anybody who would listen to us.

Q: When did you see a change?

A: Once we got the attention of our senior senator, Senator Reid, who was on the appropriations committee, then we started hitting pay dirt. The politicians all of a sudden had a different view of Lake Mead. When we brought them out and educated them, they wanted to see the land resource protected also. And so we started working with them and building base increases.

Q: Were any particular resource issues important in the education process?

A: Tamarisk choking our springs and in the beach areas; the impacts from feral burros; the impacts of grazing. We flew the senator over and showed him how some of our systems were absolutely devastated, that the only community we had left was the creosotebush community. That's how far we had come from not caring properly for this resource. We had to show it on the ground. We had to get them to feel it.

Q: What effect did this have on your program?

A: We have gone from two professionals in 1987 and a \$120,000 resource management budget to 13 permanent, 15 FTEs total, and a \$1.1 million operating base in 1998. In addition, we have about \$500,000 in soft money. That's money we leverage through all kinds of interesting partnerships. It's money we get from grants. It's money we get from Clark County habitat conservation. Most of it requires hard work to keep attracting. We use our base money to make sure the most critical things get done and supplement it with these funds.

Q: Staffing must have been on your mind?

A: We were starting from such a low level that we could offer people a real chance to make a tremendous difference to the resource. Other parks can't always offer that. We had a clear priority staffing strategy and we wanted to get the best people. We went out and recruited who we thought had the interest, commitment, and talent to do the job. In return for that we were going to give them a tremendous amount of professional development. They would have an opportunity to develop a program, implement it, and provide leadership for it.

Q: Kent Turner has obviously been very successful as your Chief of Resource Management.

A: Kent is one of the most effective administrators I've ever worked with anywhere in my federal career. He's not a show horse, he's a work horse. That's what it has taken to build this program. He took the responsibility of making sure we stayed on our strategic course. He kept making improvements and hiring good people, setting up the structure, and getting the money. As a

result, our resources are better understood, valued, and supported by the park and local, regional, state, and federal partners.

Q: Was there any resistance to such rapid change?

A: When we started building a resource team some people saw that as taking away from their programs, because they had needs. Our rangers were overstressed, and our maintenance staff was shorthanded, so it was easy to take pot shots. We had to continually go back to the strategic plan that we had all agreed to.

Q: Were their concerns legitimate?

A: We didn't reshuffle park money. All the money for the resource program came as an addition to the park budget. It's true that if you don't get increases for maintenance and ranger activities your costs go up and your capabilities go down. There was some issue with that. But it's simply that the park had a duty by law to take care of the resource, and we had failed miserably in that duty. We had a large catch-up to do. Once we build this program up to where we have a suitable core then we can start adding to some of these other program areas, too.

Q: Have you reached that goal?

A: We think we have a sufficient core staff, so now we're building through partnerships and alternative funding sources. Kent is very, very good at using partnerships and alternative workforces that he can assemble at very little cost. Over the last couple of years, we have had lots of people out doing projects: AmeriCorps, work programs from the court system, SCAs, interns. There really is a way to leverage labor sources. Since we've built a solid core, we can be aggressive in going out to the outside community for private donations and grants that supplement our base program. That's where our emphasis is now.

Q: Is your success a model for other parks with similar needs?

A: We all hope that we can increase our base funding. But this is going to be tougher and tougher. The money in the future is going to come from collaborative initiatives and budget requests. It won't come as much from single agency proposals. The more agencies you can get as cooperators, the more collective agency support behind a proposal, the more chance it has in com-

ing. It's to our advantage to collaborate. We're learning that from the California Desert Ecosystem Management Initiative.

Q: Speaking of which, how will this huge desert area with all these different agencies be managed?

A: We have a philosophy in regard to the California Desert that whether you're the Bureau of Land Management, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Geological Survey, the Park Service, or the military, we have a grand experiment. We have collective responsibility for stewardship of the desert, and we all have our individual mandates. There's probably room in the California Desert for a diverse spectrum of recreational activity, but it doesn't necessarily have to take place within the park or even adjacent to it. Like biosphere reserves, we probably should have core areas that are lightly used, that serve as our most pure genetic reservoirs. And then we have managed zones in which we can advance the state of knowledge about mankind's relationship with the bioregion through experimental management and science. And there will probably be areas with concentrated activity, including recreational use.

Q: So Lake Mead really operates within the context of the desert ecosystem these days?

A: Absolutely. We knew we were not going to be able to protect our park unless we were able to be effective in collaborative ecosystem initiatives. We wanted to hire people who were committed to teamwork and collaboration, people who were inclined to work within larger ecosystems. This has served the park resource very well.

Q: Any examples?

A: We invested a fair amount of time working on the Black Mountain Ecological Plan, the Parachant Plan, the Clark County Tortoise Plan, and other plans for the management of areas adjacent to the park. What we got in return was compatible management on a large section of our boundary. About 70 percent of our boundary is now in protected status. We've got about 30 percent left with some tough issues to deal with. To me, that was the advantage of hiring people who think a little more broadly, a little more holistically.

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Q: How valuable is the resource management function to the park?

A: I don't know how we operated without it. I don't know how we were making the decisions we made without asking questions.

Q: Has a different decision-making process evolved?

A: We're learning it's the collaborative process that helps you. More effective solutions just naturally come out of the process of involving scientists and bringing together a broad group. We're learning a lot by grouping parks with similar problems, like the desert parks. Joshua Tree is going to learn something of value to us all, we learn, and we get together and discuss it. The more we share and collaborate, the more we advance the state of science and management.

Q: Any specific advances?

A: We've done a lot of work on how you restore desert systems, particularly those that have been overgrazed by burros, and springs that have been choked by invasive species. We have learned a lot about tamarisk removal through experimental management, trial and error. Finally, we've found some things that consistently work. We now have a multiregion tamarisk-busting crew going out under NRPP money and working in maybe 20 different parks: Zion, Petrified Forest, Capitol Reef. It's more efficient to have a crew go out and help parks than to duplicate that function in each park.

Q: Helping other parks seems to come naturally to Lake Mead. Why?

A: Everyone's got more work that they can be doing. But nothing would get done if we didn't help each other. Let's not forget that we are part of one Park Service. At Lake Mead, we spend between 15 and 18 percent of our budget in support of collaborative park efforts in our cluster and region. The restructured National Park Service follows a shared leadership/shared resources paradigm. Regardless of how busy we are in our own parks, if this paradigm is going to work, we've got to share our resources. A superintendent has got to support that.

Q: What about helping parks with less obvious needs?

A: The Pacific-West Region has a resource task force that is providing some leadership in this area. We have developed a strategic plan for the region that will guide our resource stewardship activities over the next five years. We want to be able to provide the best service to smaller parks that don't have a resource specialist. Is it through a "circuit rider" system made up of people from our advisory committee, combined with Biological Resources Division scientists and university people?

Every park needs to understand the conditions, the "vital signs" of its ecosystems and the normal variation of those vital signs. We need to monitor those vital signs, track them in "state-of-the-park" reports, and then we need to restore them. How do we do that in our restructured environment, knowing that some parks don't have any capability themselves to do that? This is what our strategic plan is aimed to do.

Q: On the whole, where is the Park Service in the process of integrating science in park management?

A: A positive sign was the attention science and resource management got from senior level people at the last George Wright Society conference. I mean, why would a regional director or senior superintendent spend time there unless they're starting to get the message? They're seeing it as important enough to not only send their resource people, but they come and learn, too. And more disciplines are taking an interest, too. Interpreters are taking a much stronger look at their programs, the importance of interpreting, and putting the message out in different forms for our different publics. In the Pacific-West Region, we recently brought back to the Park Service five Senior Scientists who understand the research needs of the parks. They're filling an important liaison role now between park management and the scientific community. To me, these are all good signs. **P₃**