



West by Northwest workshop restores spirit

Biennial gathering unites far-flung staff, inspires problem resolution in the 21st century

BY THE EDITOR

Note: Transcriptions of all plenary presentations at the West by Northwest 2000 conference will be made available on the Web at www.nps.gov/pwro/wxnw2000.htm as they are transcribed.

San Diego, California, provided a relaxing venue for more than 350 resource managers, interpreters, superintendents, and other NPS staff and partners to come together for a lively discussion of what it takes to preserve and interpret park resources in the new millennium. Held twice previously in 1996 and 1998 by the Pacific West Region, this workshop was co-sponsored by the Alaska Region and was held in mid-March several miles from Cabrillo National Monument. By joining with Alaska, the workshop presented a much wider variety of resource management and interpretation issues, solutions, and discussions, and provided greater opportunity to interact with colleagues on these issues. Similarly, participation by staff from several Pacific island parks, including their performance of traditional island music, enriched the gathering and gave it a distinct regional flavor.

The week opened with presentations by Regional Directors John Reynolds and Bob Barbee, who charted the challenge of the conference—to get to know one another and to listen, learn, and exchange new and better ideas as resource stewards. Reynolds also charted the challenge of the coming century, explaining that parks must be relevant to all Americans, important to their personal well-being, and perceived as valuable to American society “if we are to have a national park system 100 years from now that means as much to us as it does today.” Talk soon turned to sustainability, a familiar theme at recent conferences, which was addressed by Shawn Norton and George Turnbull in their very provocative plenary presentation on environmental leadership.

But the big buzz for the week was the Natural Resource Challenge, launched last August at Mount Rainier National Park by

Director Stanton. Deputy Director Galvin explained that “the challenge for the 21st century is to preserve resources.” The Natural Resource Challenge is necessary to help us meet these responsibilities; it is a catalyst for change. We must begin to “see the parks as part of a system” and “make them more useful to society at large,” he said. Certainly, we must engage science for the answers it can provide us in making better management decisions. But, he explained, we must also come to see scientific information about parks as valuable to society, and we must develop institutions for sharing that information. We need to develop a web of co-operators and capitalize on their influence. And we must bring science and education together to build a constituency of support for resource management.

A dinner gathering and festive ballet folklorico dance performance at Cabrillo closed out the day, setting the stage for the approximately 150 individual presentations, plenary sessions, posters, training sessions, or field trips that followed over the next four days.

For the concurrent sessions, the workshop organizers opted for broad themes as a way to integrate park operational and scientific disciplines in the discussions. For example, the week-long theme exploring

“innovative problem resolution” brought together presentations about natural and cultural resource management, interpretation, wildland fire, archeology, hydrology, geology, exotic species management, paleontology, and many others aimed at improving resource preservation and interpretation. “Park futures and a changing public” focused on exploring ways to develop constituencies through education programs designed for diverse audiences. “NPS leading the way” reviewed park management techniques that embody the spirit of recent NPS resource stewardship and education initiatives. This thematic, organizational strategy fostered interaction between attendees regardless of technical specialty. Additionally, starting times for individual presentations were intentionally not published, which encouraged the audience to stick with entire two-hour sessions, rather than hop from room to room. In the sessions I attended, the moderators did a good job of holding presenters to their appointed time limits, benefiting everyone. Future improvements can be made in the more widespread and competent use of microphones so that all can hear the substance of the sessions and in the computer-setup skills

See “Conference Corner” on page 10



"Conference Corner" continued from page 9

required for Microsoft PowerPoint presentations, several of which failed or were delayed because of technical problems.

Were the ideas new? Were the sessions valuable? Certainly, many resource management problems and the disciplines needed to deal with them are now routine parts of our discussions at these kinds of gatherings, albeit with new circumstances or other advancements being reported. Dealing with nonnative vegetation and animal species, for example, were common and familiar subjects during the week as were various ecological restoration activities and fire management. However, a new concept for many was the significance of park soundscapes and how to go about preserving them. Sounds not only have ecological significance, such as communication among whales, but they also signify physical processes that shape a park, such as surf and wind. And they represent cultural values to humans. In a time when human-caused noise is on the rise, many park soundscapes are threatened and their protection is fast becoming another responsibility for resource managers. The provocative presentation went on to describe a sound recording and inventory technique and a related database structure that may be useful in documenting, understanding, and raising the awareness of the significance of park sounds. Another novel idea at the conference was the management of hazard trees by converting them into safe, but standing, natural-looking snags that preserve valuable wildlife habitat.

Some of the other things we heard about were the need to establish "vital signs" monitoring strategies that show accelerated or unacceptable ecological change and some approaches being taken in this regard in various parks. Determining what is natural as a baseline to manage for can be problematic as one presentation pointed out, but some parks are figuring this out and are devising useful vital signs monitoring approaches. We also heard about computer software and modeling applications and Web-based technologies, including resource databases and GIS, that are in the works or are being refined as ways of sharing information broadly. Many other themes related to natural and cultural resources, NPS

history, and interpretation emerged, too, and showed new twists in the ways in which familiar disciplines are being applied in solving both common and new problems.

Out of this rich collection of presentations and interactions emerged a few trends. Not long ago, we were talking about the need to reduce divisions in park operations and encourage cooperation among all park staff for resource preservation. This gathering demonstrated that in many parks we are practicing what we preach. For example, strategic planning sessions have helped some parks unite behind resource preservation goals. Additionally, the "greening" of the National Park Service is a very good sign of the integration of all park operations toward a goal of resource sustainability, led, perhaps, by facility managers and administration staffs in parks. Conference organizers recognized the need to integrate park operational disciplines at this workshop; they coupled interpretation with natural and cultural resource management this time around. Next time, they plan to pair either the maintenance or visitor and resource protection function with resource management to stimulate discussion on such things as resource-sensitive facility management practices or technical aspects of resource law enforcement.

Another observation is that geology, not long ago perceived widely as irrelevant to park management by many, has come to a focal point at these gatherings. In San Diego, participants were given several opportunities to consider the role of geology in providing the foundation for ecological processes in many parks. Additionally, during a plenary session on closing day, a panel of U.S. Geological Survey western regional managers seemed painfully aware of the need for their services to become more relevant to park managers. They offered parks their assistance in developing useful mapping products, providing biological technical assistance and research, conducting hydrological work, and sharing geological research results in formats well-suited to management application and public consumption. Additionally, a conference poster by the U.S. Geological Survey and a presentation by a geology professor from Oregon State University highlighted ways in which they have helped parks to tell their geological stories in simple, compelling ways.

A change of pace to the productive sessions at the West by Northwest workshop was offered by both the excellent field trips on Wednesday and a banquet held Thursday evening to honor, in part, resource stewards from the Pacific West Region and interpreters from both regions for their achievements during 1999. Director Stanton was on hand to pass out the awards and Regional Directors John Reynolds and Bob Barbee made the presentations.

The conference closed with a plenary session on what it will take to be effective in managing and interpreting parks this century. Bryan Harry, Superintendent of the Pacific Islands Support Office, offered the "ranger mystique," or that unwavering commitment, enthusiasm, and can-do attitude common to so many NPS employees, as an essential element in attacking the problems of the future. Alaska Associate Regional Director Judy Gottlieb described a complex era to come with its contingent predictable challenges and numerous surprises that will require anticipation and the rational, professional application of science. Point Reyes Superintendent Don Neubacher reminded us that the best opportunity to improve our lot as resource stewards is at our doorstep right now in the Natural Resource Challenge. If we succeed in getting the proposed \$100 million over five years, the National Park Service will be able to do its natural resource protection job much more effectively. "It's ours to lose," he said, stressing that we need to put aside any jealousies about which parks or programs will see the greatest increases and give the Challenge our full, unified support. Finally, Director Stanton closed out the week by reiterating this point and by revealing plans for the development of a Cultural Resource Challenge over the next several years.

At West by Northwest, I refueled my internal fire. I made new professional contacts and visited with old friends. I reflected on how my job affects others and how I can improve at it. I thought new thoughts, made new plans for work, renewed my commitment, and considered my place in this organization as a resource steward. Where do good ideas come from? Anywhere and everywhere, of course, but West by Northwest was certainly a potent source of them. Now, to take action on the many good ideas! 