

Usable Knowledge:

A progress report on the NPS Social Science Program

By GARY E. MACHLIS

Understanding the relationship between people and parks is critical for protecting resources and providing for public enjoyment. Hence, social science research is critical to the mission of the National Park Service, and it is an important function of the agency.

In 1996, the National Park Service (NPS) approved a plan for an expanded program of social science. *Usable Knowledge: A Plan for Furthering Social Science and the National Parks* was the work of many individuals and groups: NPS managers and university scientists participating in several workshops across the country, a social science committee established by the National Park System Advisory Board, the Associate Director for Natural Resource Stewardship and Science, the newly appointed Visiting Chief Social Scientist, a review committee of park superintendents, and the NPS National Leadership Council. The plan outlined a specific and ambitious set of tasks to be accomplished in FY1996-99.

This article briefly reviews the progress made in achieving the objectives set forth in *Usable Knowledge*.

An overview of the plan

Usable Knowledge defined the scope of the program and its role within the National Park Service. The program's scope includes economics, geography, psychology, political science, and sociology, as well as interdisciplinary research. (Archaeology, anthropology, and ethnography programs are active within the Park Service, and located in the Cultural Resource Stewardship and Partnerships directorate.) The objectives of the program are to "conduct and promote state-of-the-art social science related to the mission of the National Park Service, and deliver usable knowledge to NPS managers and the public."

The plan inventoried current social science infrastructure and activities, and made several key recommendations for improving social science in the national

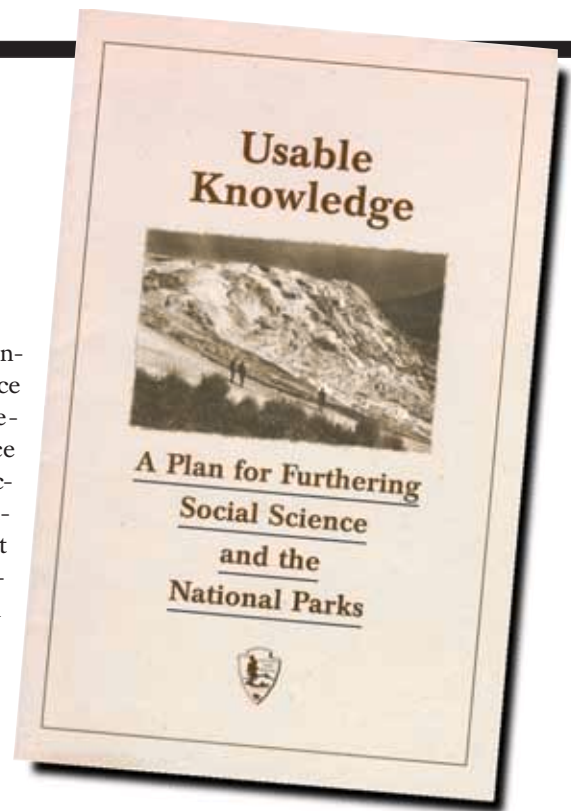
parks. These recommendations included integrating the social science program into the Natural Resources Stewardship and Science directorate, implementing key recommendations of the 1992 National Research Council's report on science in the parks, establishing a small social science program office within the Washington Office (WASO), expanding the cadre of social scientists working with the National Park Service through research competitions and other initiatives, and restructuring university partnerships to systematically include social science research.

The recommendations were followed by a detailed action plan that included specific tasks, an annual schedule, and a targeted budget for FY1996-99. Tasks were organized around three strategic areas: creating the WASO social science office, implementing new and critical initiatives, and improving existing programs. These are discussed below. (It is important to note that numerous other programs, activities, and cooperative partnerships are ongoing—the University of Minnesota's active social science partnership with the Midwest Region is an example—and that many social scientists are engaged in individual projects with units of the national park system.)

NPS Social Science Program

A small Washington, D.C., office was established. The position of Visiting Chief Social Scientist was created, to be filled by a university or government social scientist for a multiyear term. Responsibilities of the position include managing the overall program, conducting research, working with other agencies and the scientific community, and serving as a social science advisor to the NPS leadership.

An NPS social science specialist position was created to assist in managing the program. A university scientist works with the staff through a cooperative agreement. A graduate student internship



was established, and students from four universities have spent a semester in Washington, D.C., working with the National Park Service.

The WASO office has implemented several activities to serve NPS park managers. A website (www.nps.gov/socialscience/intro.htm) was created and is on-line, to provide current information and assistance to managers and scientists. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) survey approval process—required for all federally funded surveys of the public—has been streamlined. For basic visitor surveys, a new "expedited" process has reduced the time required from five months to two weeks, and now saves money. To provide NPS managers with "state-of-the-art" social science, a *Social Science Research Review Series* has been inaugurated. Each issue reviews the scientific literature on a specific topic of interest to the National Park Service. The first issue (Winter 1999) dealt with the effect of noise on visitor experiences; the second issue explored minority use of parks (Spring-Summer 1999); the third covered employee safety (Fall 1999). Additional issues will address carrying capacity and public involvement.

The Washington Office provides technical assistance to parks, clusters, and regions as requested; a common example

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is conducting peer reviews of draft research reports or research proposals submitted to park staffs. The office has been commissioned to prepare social science plans for parks and program centers. Research plans have been completed for the Harpers Ferry Center, the South Florida parks and preserve, and the Risk Management Division. The program has also provided assistance on selected international projects—including water conservation activities with South Africa, visitor surveys in Slovakia, and social science planning in Costa Rica and Poland.

Critical initiatives

A key recommendation of *Usable Knowledge* was to expand the cadre of social scientists working with the Park Service, and develop several competitive research programs. An agenda of research on national needs was developed (with input from park superintendents), to support research projects critical to the entire national park system, and unlikely to be funded by any one region, cluster or park. The program distributes to the scientific community a periodic request for proposals, and interested researchers submit detailed study plans to a review panel that includes social scientists and NPS managers, and which selects the winning study teams. The research covers a wide range of important topics, including:

- improving the Money Generation Model (used by many park managers to estimate the economic impacts of parks),
- evaluating the impact of the Fee Demonstration Program upon park operations, visitors and local communities,
- developing carrying capacity management methods supportable by science,
- conducting a national public survey (focusing on citizens that do not use the parks), and
- learning from special "events" that can teach the National Park Service valuable insights on park management—such as the 1995-96 government shutdown's impact on park gateway communities, or the socioeconomic impacts of the 1997 Yosemite flood.

To encourage and develop the next generation of scientists working in the national park system, a scholarship program was developed. While managed by the social science office, and including the social sciences in each year's competition, the Canon National Parks Science Scholars Program is broadly aimed at the biological, physical, social, and cultural sciences. The program is underwritten by Canon USA, Inc. Partners include the National Park Foundation (NPF), the National Park Service, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). Canon USA has contributed over \$2.5 million dollars to fund Ph.D. dissertations on topics selected by park superintendents, and announced to the nation's universities each fall. Eight Canon Scholars were selected in 1999, and the first class of new scientists will graduate in 2000.

Over 40% of the visits to the national park system take place in urban parks, and many parks once remote are increasingly surrounded by metropolitan regions. To provide NPS managers of urban parks with needed social science research, technical assistance, and education, an Urban Recreation Research Center (URRC) was established through a competition among nine historically black colleges and universities. Southern University—Baton Rouge was selected, and has begun its activities with a needs assessment of NPS managers, to ensure that

in park planning, operations, resource management, and working with local communities. An annual report, *Serving the Visitor*, is produced, and widely distributed.

Beginning in 1998, the Visitor Services Project was assigned the task of conducting visitor surveys needed to report performance toward Government and Performance Act (GPRA) goals. A short visitor survey card was developed, tested, and used in over 280 parks in 1998, and customized reports prepared for each park, cluster, and region. Based on the first year experience, the survey card was improved, and is currently being used in parks throughout the country.

A key component of *Usable Knowledge* was restructuring partnerships between the National Park Service and universities, so that the agency could effectively employ university social science to meet park needs. This objective is included in the development of the Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Units (CESU) concept. Each CESU includes a host university, partner universities and institutions, and several federal agencies. They are interdisciplinary in scope (including the social sciences), and will provide research, technical assistance, and education to park managers. The first round of the CESU network includes six federal agencies, 23 universities, and additional partners, and became operational in FY1999. Additional CESUs will be established this year.

The OMB survey approval process has been streamlined.

its future research projects meet NPS needs. An added, important benefit of the URRC is to increase the opportunity for minority students to gain experience with the National Park Service, and the URRC has a job fair, diversity training, and other activities planned and underway.

Improving existing programs

The Visitor Services Project (VSP) has, since 1982, conducted visitor studies at selected units of the national park system. An advisory committee of NPS managers receives nominations from the parks and regions, and selects up to 10 parks for a VSP study each year. Over 110 parks have undertaken a VSP study since the project began. These in-depth visitor studies are used by parks to assist

Not yet achieved

Not all of the tasks listed in the 1996 social science plan have been achieved. The plan called for several inter- and intra-agency working groups to more effectively coordinate social science activity; these have not succeeded. The social science website was initially conceived as including social science databases that could be used by managers and scientists; this has not yet happened. The plan called for regular meetings between managers and social scientists; social science sessions at last year's George Wright Society meeting were fruitful examples of the value of such interchanges, but they remain *ad hoc*.

The plan called for developing a sabatical program for social scientists interested in working in units of the national park system, providing technical assistance, conducting their own and park-

sponsored research, and offering training to park employees. The limited program has been replaced with a broader Sabbatical in the Parks Program now being developed. It will act as a “match-maker,” bringing together available university faculty in all sciences with interested park staffs—providing usable knowledge at low cost and high value.

Next steps

Beyond the 1996 plan, there is much more to do to fully deliver social science to NPS managers and the public. The plan focused on developing a national program, and this has largely been accomplished. An important strategic step is to now increase the social science capabilities of the National Park Service at the regional, cluster, and park level. Only a few parks have social scientists on staff or duty-stationed on-site. Only a few regions have efficient access to social science expertise through the U.S. Geological Survey or cooperative agreements with universities. Funding for park-specific social science research is largely not available, and must be increased, if park managers are to have the necessary information required for science-based decision making. Several social science disciplines—economics and geography in particular—are vital to the National Park Service, yet not well represented among available researchers.

Usable Knowledge represented both a practical definition of applied social science for park managers, and a detailed “road map” for the first several years of the new NPS Social Science Program. In this and following years, new directions and ways of serving park managers, the scientific community, the public, and the parks need to be explored and tested. Yet the basic rationale for NPS social science—that understanding the relationship between people and parks is critical to effective park management—remains a scientific and management constant critical to the National Park Service. **P_S**

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