

Research Permit and Reporting System:

The On-line LAUNCH Is UP

By Jonathan Bayless and Norm Henderson

The National Park Service reached an important milestone on 16 January 2001 when it became the first bureau in the Department of the Interior to enable researchers to apply on-line for a research and collecting permit. Although few people were aware of this development initially, the launch of the Research Permit and Reporting System (RPRS) at <http://science.nature.nps.gov/research> began an era of better service to researchers and improved access to research information for all. The first researcher to use the system logged on in the first hour of operation; nine months later over 2,700 research applications had been made. Like Friendship 7—the capsule that carried John Glenn as the first American into orbit—the launch of the new permit system is both a crowning achievement and yet only the first step.

Improvement on old system

The Research Permit and Reporting System provides many improvements on the former system designed to help the National Park Service facilitate research in a consistent, streamlined manner. Moreover, it contributes to making the national park system a better place for science, a goal that has required more than goodwill to achieve. The long and complicated history of permitting research and collecting in the national parks shows only mixed success in attempts to improve the bureau's reputation among researchers (Bayless 1999). Some scientists expressed frustration and anger at what they saw as an unfair and illogical research permitting process. They claimed a lack of consistency was causing them hardship when they dealt with unclear permit requirements. Investigators complained that the application procedures between parks were vastly different for no discernable reason, and that this was causing delay in the implementation of research programs.

In 1996, at the request of the National Park Service, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) reviewed the administration of the special use permit (SUP) for research activities and found that it was being used inappropriately for that purpose. The SUP process was intended for non-recurring special uses, and given that the National Park Service routinely reauthorized research, a

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Research activities in the national park system are regulated through a Research Permit and Reporting System. Revamped in January 2001, the on-line permit system streamlines the permit application process.



A product of many park research activities is the collection of plant, animal, geologic, and other specimens that require care and storage per NPS standards. Proper collections management emphasizes the need for park research permit coordinators to work closely with park or regional NPS museum curators.

specific research permit would be needed. Further, while the SUP form was originally approved as both an information gathering and permitting tool, it was being used strictly as a permit. To complete the form, parks gathered information using a multitude of techniques, all in violation of OMB rules and requirements. With the passage of Public Law 105-391 in 1998, the Service was given a research mandate to “assure that management of units of the National Park Service is enhanced by the availability and utilization of a broad program of the highest quality science and information.” The law highlighted the need to overhaul the research and collecting permit process.

Task force

The successful on-line launch was due in large part to the efforts of the NPS permit task force, which developed the new approach (Winfree 1999). The task force consisted of 15 members from parks, support offices, and the Washington Office, including the authors, from a diverse background of scientific and program expertise. Headed by Tim Goddard, Computer Specialist, Natural Resource Information Division, Natural Resource Program Center, the task force identified several needs to implement a simplified yet comprehensive research-permitting program.

Specifically, a new permit form, an OMB-approved application, and a comprehensive set of standard requirements would be needed. Their recommendations formed the foundation for the RPRS system.

Through a cooperative agreement between Yellowstone National Park and the Department of Energy, Idaho National



Engineering and Environmental Laboratory, came the next step: development of a conceptual software model of the system. The goal of integrating the model with the Investigator's Annual Report was realized through an interagency agreement with the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), Biological Resources Division. Under guidance from the Natural Resource Information Division, the USGS Midcontinent Ecological Science Center currently maintains the RPRS software and servers. Dr. John Dennis, Biologist, Natural Systems Office, Washington Office, is responsible for policy support and assistance to park permit coordinators (available via waso_nrss_researchcoll@nps.gov).

New features

The Research Permit and Reporting System replaces the diverse array of earlier park research applications and creates a uniform standard for the national park system. This allows scientists, once they become familiar with the application process in one park, to repeat it easily in any other park. The system also allows the applicant to submit a research and collecting proposal of any content-format providing it has sufficient detail for staff to assess the impacts and benefits of the project, potentially eliminating the need for staff to rewrite proposals. The ability to report progress or research findings is possible through the incorporation of the existing Investigators Annual Report into the new system. Another innovation is the creation of a unique "study number" that links proposals, permits, reports, and citations and allows for tracking and updating.

Park permit coordinators still evaluate each permit application, communicate with investigators, and coordinate other related matters. However, the process is now centralized and consistent. Park coordinators work with applications, permits, and reports through on-line access to the permit system without having to manage the software and databases that reside on a central server. Upgrades and problem solving are the responsibility of NPS programmers and contractors with the necessary skills and expertise. Two training courses in 2001 have provided 45 park coordinators with hands-on experience and increased knowledge on policy and procedural issues related to the permit system.

The system has had its share of technical problems in its first year. Computer viruses and Internet service interruptions have caused the system to go off-line; fortunately it has been restored in each instance within a day or two. While loss of passwords by park coordinators has caused frustration, it has been the simplest problem to fix. Also, some parks have poor Internet connections, via telephone modems, that can slow access speeds to a crawl. But overall most parks seem to be on-line and enjoying the power of the system.

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Future

The Research Permit and Reporting System will eventually be the primary method for researchers and government agencies to access information on past research, research needs, and to exchange information and applications with parks. However, many system improvements will first need to be achieved to realize this potential. At the Third Conference on Partnership Opportunities for Federally Associated Collections held 12–15 November 2000 in Austin, Texas, we attended the "Permit Me" workshop on federal permits. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service discussed their permitting processes for importing and exporting threatened and endangered species, and the taking of migratory birds. Approximately 25 different permits are available on the Internet for these purposes, but only as downloadable forms that must be printed, filled out, and mailed back. The diverse and overlapping nature of many permits was of concern to many workshop attendees. The future challenge for the National Park Service will be to integrate the RPRS with all other government permits in a manner that is clear and understandable to scientists and specifies the correct permit for a particular situation. Indeed, the concept of a standardized Department of the Interior permit has already been discussed.

The launch of the current system is creating new visions for what features and capabilities are desirable in the next round of upgrades. For example, connectivity between databases, e-mail, and on-line systems are goals for improving the system. In addition, many specific policy application issues revealed by this initial launch must also be addressed. If the first release of the Research Permit and Reporting System is analogous to a space capsule orbiting Earth, then the system still has a long way to go before it attempts a lunar landing. Undoubtedly the success of this first step, with the continued cooperation and feedback of park research coordinators, is critical for the realization of all subsequent improvements. 

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About the Author

Jonathan Bayless is National Natural Landmark Coordinator, Pacific Great Basin Support Office, 1111 Jackson Street, Oakland, CA 94607; 415-215-3802; jonathan_bayless@nps.gov.

Norm Henderson is Research Coordinator, Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, P.O. Box 1507, Page, AZ 86040-1507; 520-608-6272; norm_henderson@nps.gov.