

editorial

An event that, on the face of it, was much like similar events taking place elsewhere in the National Park System, occurred the week of July 21 in Flagstaff, Ariz., (see story on p. 6). But there was a difference.

The event was the First Biennial Science Conference on Colorado Plateau NPs, sponsored by the CPSU at Northern Arizona University, and it featured the usual progress reports on scientific research in national parks.

The difference involved a comprehensive new focus for Cooperative Park Study Units – one that already has attracted unprecedented multi-Regional support.

Bruce Kilgore, Western Regional Chief Scientist, pointed out that the NAU/CPSU is the first to offer such an array of scientific expertise, targeted at such a wide-ranging but coherent region (the Colorado Plateau). Dan Huff, Rocky Mountain Regional Chief Scientist, echoed that sentiment, and pointed out that two – and possibly soon three – NPS Regions are enthusiastically (and financially) helping underwrite this Unit.

And the event was not without recognition from the top of the Service. NPS A/D Eugene Hester came to Flagstaff with strong words of encouragement for “this kind of cooperative relationship” as “a vital way to fill vital needs.” He spoke of the strengths inherent in an approach that provides scientific expertise of all kinds to parks, many of which are too small for science personnel of their own.

The growing partnership among NPS, other governmental agencies, and universities in pursuit of answers to pressing park management problems is producing far more science services than the Park Service alone could provide. And beyond that, the path being blazed by the NAU/CPSU is providing what Dr. Hester termed “a synergistic effect” that is more profound than anyone could have predicted.

This synergism is apparent in varying degrees at CPSUs all over the National Park System, but it was in Flagstaff, where the effect is perhaps farthest advanced, that it was given its most specific airing. The multi-Region support (Western, Rocky Mountain, and possibly soon the Southwest Region) being given this CPSU indicates that the Northern Arizona Unit is doing something very right. Capably led by Charles van Riper III, the NAU/CPSU has gone a long way toward dissolving the reservations that many park and Regional personnel still hold with regard to the CPSU approach.

It was obvious as the conference progressed that enthusiasm was one of the powerful multiplier effects at work – enthusiasm generated among scientists by the new insights that cross-disciplinary approaches provided and among resource managers who saw new problem-solving avenues opening up.

It occurred to this observer that what was happening here was akin to controlled fusion, resulting from a critical mass of mostly off-the-shelf items:

- A biogeographical approach to research and resource management that crossed NPS Regional boundaries;
- A multidisciplinary and interagency mix of scientific expertise;
- A group of park managers with shared problems and a willingness to look beyond NPS Regional boundaries toward a wider concept of “region;”
- An academic community ready to work collegially with NPS researchers; and
- A CPSU willing to make trade-off arrangements between its own staff and those of the Colorado Plateau parks.

From the opening words brought by Dr. Hester to the closing buzz of interacting scientists, resource managers, and academicians, the overall impression was of a smooth-working team of many parts. It was a team focused and fit to tackle current problems, and equipped to jump out in front of them before they become crises.

The CPSU idea is achieving critical mass and the benefits seem likely to match the high expectations for “controlled fusion.”