

The 2018 Howe Ridge Fire burned over 14,000 acres in Glacier National Park, closing park roads and destroying numerous park structures.

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How to Counter Debbie Downer

"You're enjoying your day, everything's going your way, then along comes Debbie Downer."

There's a reason Debbie Downer was a phenomenally popular, long-running sketch on Saturday Night Live. It's *painfully* relatable. In life, we often encounter individuals in a constant state of belly ache. They harp endlessly on the bad—rattling off slights, snubs, and misfortunes with no silver lining in sight. Like Debbie Downer herself, such individuals can clear a room faster than a grease fire.

When it comes to discussing climate change in parks, National Park Service interpreters often fear being Debbie Downer. We've seen this firsthand, working alongside fellow interpreters in national parks experiencing major climate change impacts such as Everglades and Yosemite. Today, as lead instructors for the past five years in the annual National Park Service *Interpreting Climate Change* course, we still hear that consistent refrain: "Our visitors are on vacation…I don't want to bring them down!"

The sentiment is understandable. The realities around climate change can, indeed, seem bleak. Given the wealth of more uplifting interpretive themes at our disposal, why broach such a potentially off-putting topic? We could offer a lengthy list of reasons, but perhaps the most important is this: Climate change is the single greatest conservation challenge we have ever faced. And—in the same way public perception has changed on everything from wilderness





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to wildfire to wolves—good interpretation can help shape public understanding, sentiment, and action around climate change.

Interpretive programming should include thoughtful opportunities for audiences to learn what climate change means for the places, values, and experiences they cherish, and parks increasingly rise to the challenge. Many now readily provide information on the implications of climate change for wildfire and water availability. For others, it's the plight of pikas and pine trees, or impacts to historic structures and human health. Yet even as you read this, you probably hear the sad trombone beginning to sound, *waa-waaaaaaaaaa*.

Interpreting the impacts of climate change is important, but we cannot stop there. If we hope to keep our audiences from running to the nearest mental exit, we must go well beyond the negative. To keep our audiences with us, we must lead them on a journey of sorts. In short, we need to tell the full climate change story.



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In 2017 the National Park Service Eastern Incident Management Team monitored the movement of Hurricane Maria with a wary eye from an Incident Command Post at Everglades National Park.

We and others in the National Park Service appreciate the power of good story arcs and narrative structure. Indeed, the importance of storytelling is currently enjoying a moment in the zeitgeist. But exactly what is story?

Randy Olson, author of *Houston, We Have a Narrative*, writes that story is the sequence of events that occurs in pursuit of a solution to a problem.

Rather than a collection of loosely related events, every good story has

OUTDOOR SIGNAGE AND EXHIBIT BASES
OUTSIDE OF ORDINARY

- FIBERGLASS EMBEDMENT (FE)
- GEL COAT LAMINATE (GCL)
- EXHIBIT BASES & FRAMES









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Parks are increasingly investing in efficiency improvements and alternative energy. This solar array at Craters of the Moon National Monument and Preserve supplies roughly 45 percent of the park's overall energy use.

one or more discernable problem/solution dynamics. Grief-stricken Romeo longs to join his seemingly deceased love in the afterlife, so he drinks a vial of poison. Dorothy wants to return home from the land of Oz, so she seeks out the Wizard. Ariel feels stifled under the sea, so she trades her voice for two legs. Good stories are never-ending, integrated spirals of problems and solutions.

This is particularly relevant for communication about critical issues like climate change. If we offer only problems—without the promise of a solution—we can, in fact, morph into Debbie Downer and send our audiences running. To avoid despair, we must be intentional about engaging both halves of the narrative in a full story arc. Yes, the problems posed by climate change are many and can seem formidable. But climate change is fundamentally a human problem, against which we retain the power to course-correct. Therefore, solutions are possible and—as we highlight annually with our students—many concrete examples worth sharing can be found in parks across the country.

National parks are both valuable laboratories that provide important insights into the effects of climate change, and crucibles where solutions are forged with the fires of ingenuity. At Haleakalā and Glacier, park scientists actively move imperiled species, working to secure their survival in a warming world. At Everglades and Assateague Island, park facilities have been redesigned with the effects of sea level rise and storm surge in mind. At Big Bend and Acadia, park infrastructure is being augmented and upgraded to accommodate anticipated changes to local hydrology. And at Devils Tower and Badlands, park managers are formulating long-term resource management plans in light of climate-informed future scenarios.

Parks aren't just planning for expected change—they're actively working to minimize their contribution to the problem. At Craters of the Moon and Golden Gate, investments in renewable energy now power park operations. At Zion and Rocky Mountain, visitor shuttles simultaneously reduce personal vehicle use and provide a better visitor experience. At Petroglyph and Great Smoky Mountains, charging stations and alternative fuel vehicles help make park fleets greener. In total, over 120 sites have now earned recognition as "Climate Friendly Parks" for their efforts to curb greenhouse gas emissions.

And cultural and historic sites across the National Park System spotlight inspiring stories particularly relevant to our response to climate change. Coltsville and Thomas Edison remind us about the promise of new technology and human ingenuity. Stonewall and César Chávez recall how the actions of a committed few can spur positive societal change. And Yorktown and Rosie the Riveter are powerful reminders that our entire nation can unite against a common threat.

As much as they are outdoor classrooms of climate problems, parks are equally showrooms of climate solutions. Telling the full climate story requires that we share both in equal measure. As storytellers, walking the balance is critically important. Though we don't want to drive our audiences away with despair, we similarly don't want to minimize the realities we face. Because being a Pollyanna might be even worse than a Debbie Downer.

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