

# A Mission for Education

*Julia Washburn*

## Background

The national park system encompasses an unparalleled diversity of educational assets—special places, ecologies, primary source documents, artifacts, and the many deeper meanings these things embody. Representing a multitude of complex topics and perspectives, the national parks inform us not only about their individual stories, places, and objects, but also about the larger context of our condition and purposes as a people, nation, and species. Yale historian Robin Winks called the national parks the “branch campuses of the world’s greatest university.” The system currently includes 391 such campuses in 49 states and U.S. territories, every one of which is owned by all Americans.

Some unit of the national park system is easily accessible from nearly every major urban center in the United States and many rural areas. The parks are also popular destinations for cross-country trips. The National Park Service hosts more than 270 million visits per year.

Education has been a core function of the National Park Service since its inception in 1916, playing a critical role in promoting public enjoyment and stewardship of the national parks. The Service provides interpretive (visitor experience) opportunities, such as walks, talks, and tours, for park visitors; it also provides on-site, curriculum-based education programs for several million school children annually and off-site programs for more than 30 million students. These programs are supplemented by workshops, graduate-level teacher institutes, seminars, and lecture series.

All park staffs use and depend on a great variety of media to facilitate and enhance the experiences of park visitors and to extend information and education services beyond park boundaries. In support of these efforts the National Park Service produces films, brochures, handbooks, publications, exhibits, interactive computer kiosks, podcasts, extensive websites, cell phone tours, audio tours, educational kits and “traveling trunks,” teacher’s guides, lesson plans, traveling exhibits, and more. As complements to personal services, media can provide constant support, appeal to multiple learning styles, and allow for individual privacy and choice. Park and trail brochures receive the highest importance rating of any interpretive service. New wireless technology can reach previously underserved audiences (like youth) on their own personal devices.

The whole national park system is virtually accessible to everyone with computer access through the National Park Service’s website, [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov), which is the most popular website in the federal government, receiving more than a million hits each day. It includes features such as WebRangers, a cutting-edge

interactive online junior ranger program co-designed by children, graduate students, web developers, and researchers at the University of Maryland's Human Computer Interaction Laboratory.

While education is a core function of the National Park Service, its emphasis has varied over the years. Some think NPS education programs reached a high point during the environmental education movement in the 1970s. Projects such as "Summer in the Parks" reached a climax around 1976, when uniformed park rangers regularly visited school classrooms, and educational groups spent extended time in parks at environmental study sites and participating in environmental living programs. Funding for educational programming, both for school groups and the general public, has waned since then. However, NPS leaders and key constituencies have been looking with renewed attention at the NPS education mission, recognizing the importance of its role not only in protecting the heritage resources and values included in the national park system, but also in strengthening the societal values that bring us together as a great nation.

The challenges facing society today, including many that directly affect the parks—depletion of natural resources, climate change, youth seemingly losing touch with their natural and cultural heritage, recreational needs of increasing populations, changing demographics and values—will best be met by an informed public aware of its history and the responsibilities of citizenship. NPS educational programs encourage these outcomes through learning opportunities that invite respect for natural systems and regard for civic values and purposes.

This growing sense of the importance of NPS educational programs has been reflected in the following initiatives over the past decade:

- In a first-ever NPS conference involving all park superintendents, program managers, and senior executives, education's critical role in conservation was reaffirmed, with emphasis on the context of globalization and America's changing demographics.
- In 2001 the National Park System Advisory Board, in its report, *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, urged the National Park Service "to embrace its role as a national education institution." The report declared that NPS education should be viewed as having a high public purpose of building an informed citizenry actively engaged in civic life.
- The National Park Service established an education council to encourage innovation, lead reforms, and advise management about program needs and opportunities.
- The NPS National Leadership Council (NPS senior executive team) developed a business plan, an action plan, and a program evaluation strategy to guide a "renaissance" in NPS education.

## Challenges and Opportunities

### *Effectively Engaging the Public in Park Enjoyment and Stewardship*

The success of the national park system in the 21st century will depend on how effectively it meets the needs of society, and how much society values it. Educational and interpretive programs are the primary means by which the National Park Service engages diverse publics with the parks, connects people and communities to the nation's heritage, and provides access to larger meanings. Currently what is known about the effectiveness of these programs is largely anecdotal. While available data suggest that NPS education motivates interest and deepens understanding of science and history, the Park Service has not invested resources needed for a thorough evaluation of its education program.

### *Potential to Strengthen, as well as Interpret, Our Civic Heritage*

The National Park Service has the potential to expand its traditional role of promoting enjoyment and stewardship of our shared national heritage, to embrace an even higher purpose of promoting a civic dialog and building community. What is more democratic than access to the places that embody our ongoing struggles for freedom, justice, and equality; the diverse natural systems upon which our quality of life depends; and the places where our cultures continue to change and grow? These public spaces can challenge us to think, debate ideas, and engage in civil discourse regarding the very fabric and values of our collective society.

The existing partnerships between parks and schools could also potentially be expanded. Current educational research shows that three learning environments are necessary for understanding and achievement: Formal learning of concepts and skills occurs at school, while informal, lifelong learning occurs in the real world and at home. Effective education reform will require a partnership of the formal and informal education communities. The National Park System Advisory Board has urged the Service to

*Embrace its mission, as educator, to become a more significant part of America's education system by providing formal and informal programs for students and learners of all ages inside and outside park boundaries.*

### ***Administrative Challenges***

Despite NPS initiatives to strengthen education, the funding and staff for programming, planning, and media have been reduced significantly over the past years. According to the NPS Interpretation and Education Business Plan: Fiscal Year 2004, over a five-year period (FY1999-FY2004) the National Park Service gained 600 full-time-equivalent positions; however the Division of Interpretation and Education lost 200 positions. Seasonal interpreters, once a mainstay of visitor services and an important source of new talent for the National Park Service were severely cut. The 2008 NPS Centennial Initiative has restored

seasonal staff, providing some relief to a beleaguered interpretive workforce. Increasingly, however, programs are delivered by partners, and innovations are privately funded. Of the estimated 70,000 full-time (or equivalent aggregations of part-time) positions providing educational services in national parks, only 4,000 are national park rangers or education specialists. Of those 4,000, only 2,000 are permanent positions. The diminishing financial and human resources devoted to national park interpretation and education, combined with the new challenges of engaging a population that is growing rapidly and becoming more diverse, more disconnected from the natural world, and more dependent on technology, pose major challenges to fulfilling the National Park Service's education mission.

### *Julia Washburn*

Julia Washburn is a conservation professional with more than 20 years experience working to help people of all ages form deep personal connections with their environment and heritage. She is passionate about helping organizations provide excellent and effective programs that make a difference for people and the planet. Julia recently led a diverse team of leaders from across the National Park Service through a process that resulted in an emerging movement to renew and revitalize the NPS Interpretation and Education Program. A national business plan, three-year action plan, national evaluation strategy, and three-day evaluation summit were a few of the products resulting from the process. Most recently, Julia served as Interpretive Specialist for the NPS Conservation Study Institute at Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park, and Senior Vice President for Grants and Programs at the National Park Foundation, the congressionally chartered, non-profit fundraising partner of the National Park Service. She has also worked as a park ranger and education specialist at six national parks, the NPS National Capital Region Office, and as a science teacher in the U.S. Peace Corps. She holds a master's degree in museum education leadership from Bank Street College of Education and a bachelor's degree in biology and psychology from Mount Holyoke College. Julia likes to say that her conservation career really started at the age of seven when she was a junior ranger at Rock Creek National Park. She now lives with her husband and two junior rangers in Takoma Park, Maryland