

Dale B. Engquist

A Dialogue on the Natural Resource Challenge

Early in 2000, Peter Brinkley, then calling himself simply “citizen” and now a member of the Board of the George Wright Society, proposed that it would be a good idea to take the National Park Service’s (NPS’s) Natural Resource Challenge on the road. The idea was to engage leaders outside NPS to build partnerships and a broader constituency for the Challenge. With some reassuring words from some NPS leaders about the concept, Paul Heltne, president emeritus of the Chicago Academy of Sciences, and I were enlisted to implement the first of what was hoped to be series of forums.

The Academy’s new Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum in Chicago was selected as the venue for the event. Construction of the nature museum had previously first brought the three of us together in discussions of partnership efforts, efforts that continue between the Academy and Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore. Plans to hold the event later in 2000 soon proved overly optimistic, in part because of conflicts with Discovery 2000 conference, and it ultimately took place June 13 and 14, 2001.

The key word in the title for the event, “Dialogue,” came rather easily to us as planners. We wanted to facilitate open and candid discussion, not have presentations by talking heads. “Dialogue” also sounded positive and, while we wanted candor, we didn’t necessarily want debate as such. In fact, some of the people who were very involved with the Challenge were uneasy about

having the event at all, apprehensive that the delicately balanced support mechanism that had succeeded in bringing about the first appropriations might be upset.

After lengthy discussions, a format for the Dialogue emerged. There was to be one brief presentation to summarize the history and strategy of the Challenge. This would be followed by two-hour sessions of dialogue on five key topics related to Challenge. The dialogue was to take place between a group of about eight of the top managers of NPS and up to 16 outside leaders that we called “respondents.” The topics were place-based knowledge, long-term research in parks, institutional relationships, research and learning, and long-term needs of the Challenge. Each moderated and recorded session began with a brief introduction by an NPS participant followed by a response from one of the respondents followed by the

dialogue between the key participants. The session ended with open Q&A by all the participants, including a larger audience of superintendents and managers, largely from the NPS Midwest Region.

Choosing and inviting the respondents was easily the most debated and most difficult task. The respondents were all to be not only knowledgeable but have standing and influence in their field. We also strove to balance both a national and regional perspective. Last minute conflicts forced some, including Peter Raven of the Missouri Botanical Garden, to have to cancel. The final, prestigious assembly comprised:

- G. Thomas Bancroft, vice president, the Wilderness Society
- Jennifer Blitz, manager, environmental services, Chicago Academy of Sciences
- David Blockstein, National Council for Science and the Environment
- Margaret Cavanaugh, Office of the Director, National Science Foundation
- Strachan Donnelley, senior fellow, The Hastings Center
- Ron Engel, research professor, Meadville-Lombard Theological School, University of Chicago
- Denny Fenn, chief biologist, U.S. Geological Survey Biological Resources Division
- Bruce Hannon, professor, Natural Resources and Environmental Science, University of Illinois

- George Rabb, director, Brookfield Zoo, Chicago
- Laurel Ross, The Nature Conservancy and Chicago Wilderness
- Paul Risser, president, Oregon State University
- Rick Wilke, distinguished service professor of environmental education, University of Wisconsin

The lists of NPS managers who accepted the invitation to the dialogue was also impressive, even though both Acting Director Deny Galvin and Regional Director Karen Wade were called away at the last minute to brief the new NPS Director, Fran Mainella, and deal with the Cerro Grande fire report, respectively. The final group included Bill Schenk and John Reynolds (regional directors), Mike Soukup (associate director for natural resources), Gary Vequist (Midwest associate regional director for natural resources), Doug Morris and Don Neubacher (superintendents and co-leaders of the NPS Challenge Council), and Gary Davis (marine biologist). In addition, Gary Machlis (social scientist and Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit coordinator) and Bob Chandler (NPS Advisory Board co-chair) also participated.

If anyone harbored doubts about whether the dialogue could be maintained for two days, those doubts quickly vanished. The real problems turned out to be that the recorders compiled such lengthy

notes that it was hard, on Day 3, a day devoted to a discussion by NPS personnel only, to deal with the volume (30+ pages) of material at hand. A summary only of what we heard at the Dialogue is below.

It is clear that our respondents were impressed by the Challenge and the opportunities that the national parks present for research and education. They pointed out some of the obstacles that we faced, as well as those that researchers and others who might want to partner with us also face, but it was evident that the basis for partnerships to build on the

foundation laid by the Challenge was there. We learned from the experience, but we are also left with many questions, some old and some new. Not only should we, but will we, assume an expanded leadership role at the regional, national, or international level? Will we provide a means for our resource professionals to realize their needs for advanced education, training, and work experiences? Will we successfully strengthen cooperation between researchers and educators? Perhaps these and other questions can be put to participants in a new forum.

Dale B. Engquist, National Park Service, Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore, 1100 North Mineral Springs Road, Porter, Indiana 46304; dale_engquist@nps.gov



Summary, Challenge Dialogue, June 13-14, 2001

I. The NPS and the Natural Resource Challenge (NRC) are vitally important. As was true at last year's Discovery 2000 Conference, we heard again and again that national parks can and should be central to global efforts in ecosystem management and the biodiversity struggle. We were challenged by our respondents not only to keep the NRC going, but to increase our efforts and capitalize on our unique position in new ways.

1. NPS has an inordinately important role in the future of the planet. Can we be a catalyst for

the idea of living lightly on the planet in time to make a difference?

2. Whether we planned it or not, we are major players in the biodiversity struggle.
3. The parks and NPS are unequivocally important to America.
4. The NPS challenge is to educate our citizens and decision-makers about "good science" and the importance of its application in ecosystem management.
5. Parks are powerful ways of bringing different views together; we can use resources to help different groups understand each

other.

6. Untold millions are affected by their experiences in parks. "Appreciation is the father of understanding" (George Wright).

II. The NPS education mission.

Education is the core of the just-released NPS Advisory Board Report 2001, *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century*. Its first recommendation is "Building Pathways to Learning." The respondents at the Dialogue also challenged us to make education "a primary mission of the NPS ... [and] to collaborate with organizations and scholars to ... expand the Service's educational capacity" (quote from the Advisory Board report).

1. The NPS is uniquely positioned to communicate with the public.
2. There is much we do not know about how and why people come to have "feelings" about a place. We need to know much more about the personal assignment of meaning and value. Why are some people lovers of nature?
3. NPS, with other partners in "informal learning," should be exploring how people learn, change, and develop their values. The NPS could be involved in a multi-institutional research project to look into the issue of changing behaviors. Museum and zoos are in the forefront of the field now.
4. A challenge to the Challenge! What will NPS do to bring the public along on climate change

in parks? How will we help to assure a different country 50 years from now?

5. We must educate ourselves. NPS has inadequate training for professionals and managers. We need a "conservation university."
6. We should be as concerned about increasing the quality of environmental education as we are about generating and applying good science; both are critically important.
7. Learning Centers are to be more than research field stations; they must educate.
8. How will Learning Centers be involved in environmental ethics and ecological citizenship?
9. The NRC should have at least two staff to work on coordination with education and educators, providing national leadership for the effort.

III. There are partners for the NPS and the NRC.

There are many ways that NPS can and should partner with others to accomplish and enhance the goals of the NRC. The respondents, many of them existing or potential partners themselves, told us that the partners are not only there, they want to work with us. We were often reminded and sometimes chided for not "being at the table" with those we should be working with.

1. John Reynolds asked, "Who do we hang out with?" The respondents helped us develop a very long list of partners, both

new and old, including: natural history museums, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), botanical gardens, think tanks, university professors, science organizations, Federal Interagency Committee on Education, restorationists, theologians and ethicists (www.earthcharter.org), zoos, arboretums, international organizations (IUCN, World Wildlife Fund, UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Program), Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Units, North American Association For Environmental Education, International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, Partners in Resource Education, Coastal America, National Science Teachers Association, aquariums, Illinois Environmental Education Advancement Consortium, informal learning associations, National Science Foundation, Coalition for Science in Land Management Agencies, and more.

2. We need to define who our partners are and we need to better communicate what it is that we want our partners to do for and with us. For example, The Nature Conservancy wants to partner with the NPS but is not always sure how to work with us.
3. Be selective with partners; have a strategy and resist the urge to partner with everyone. When you partner, you adopt the partner's priorities.
4. We need to define who we are as

partners to others.

5. A lot of environmental NGOs want to help the NPS, but there can be limitations to working with advocacy NGOs.
6. If the NRC is the lever to help tip the organization toward change, partners can be the fulcrum.
7. Strategic partners can be helpful in finding "neutral turf" to confront controversial issues that they can embrace more easily than the NPS can. They can easily explore and develop programs on issues such as evolutionary biology ("How can we educate the citizenry unless we openly talk of Darwin and evolution?") and environmental and bio-ethics.

IV. Humans in nature. While it didn't dominate the dialogue, there was a recurring theme from respondents throughout that we must include humans and their influences when we deal with the natural landscape.

1. We must study nature with humans in it. It is an incredible challenge but we are learning how to do it. The NRC would be irresponsible without the element of humans within nature.
2. We need to know more about how humans have influenced and continue to influence the environment.
3. We must place humans in the natural landscape as a co-evolving part of the total biotic community; this is a part of the

turn to a more ecocentric perspective in environmental ethics and philosophy.

4. Place-based knowledge has to include the social and the cultural.

V. Science and research in the parks. The NRC is moving science to the forefront in NPS. That has not been the general rule in the past; in fact, NPS has even been perceived by some as anti-science or anti-scientist. The respondents offered many suggestions about how we might change our image to better foster science and research.

1. The NRC has to deliver on the concepts of science for parks and parks for science.
2. When we discuss research, we must define the current scientific issues and then place parks squarely in the middle of those issues; this will attract scientific interest.
3. The research design of the National Science Foundation is to integrate science and education; NPS should consider doing the same.
4. We need to pay attention to simplifying the research permit process and other procedures in order to do more to encourage researchers to utilize parks for their endeavors.
5. It is important to realize that universities do not have rewards in place to coordinate or take over the role of repository and disseminator; the parks ought to be

the keepers of their own research information.

6. We need to know what “rewards” the researcher and then create that reward in the parks.
7. Researchers find value in their research. NPS has to show that it too values research.
8. The expertise of NPS needs to be in “place” rather than only in “taxonomy.”
9. NPS hasn’t done a good job in the past in the “care and feeding” of the scientific community. We need to demonstrate that things have changed. We need to share success stories and not dwell on bad examples of past research in our parks.
10. There is an incentive for scientists to do research that gets fast results—they get papers published more quickly. We need to create the incentives now lacking for long-term ecosystem studies.

VI. We need to stop being “egocentric” and become more “ecocentric.” Respondents were candid in commenting that NPS has or can be perceived as having a fortress mentality. We need to broaden our perspective and think beyond park and national boundaries.

1. We need to accept an “evolutionary responsibility challenge”: a responsibility for our evolutionary and ecological origins and our planetary future.
2. The environment is a complex, global system.
3. We need to display a park op-

eration that obviously values resources, is ecocentric rather than park-centric, works as park networks, and represents our role *in* the ecosystem, not *as* the ecosystem.

4. We need to understand the role of national parks in regional strategies for biodiversity.
5. We have not cast our net widely enough to encompass the health of communities that must interact with parks and other natural areas.
6. The country that gave birth to the national park idea and ideal needs to be more involved internationally; almost all other national park systems in the world are involved.
7. We need to understand the linkages between park management and dynamic ecosystems.
8. Parks can be the places where we develop and contemplate how basic ecological and evolutionary systems work.

VII. Communications. The success of the NRC will in large part depend on how well we communicate with the public, policy-makers, partners, and the scientific community. Lots of suggestions emerged from the respondents in every session on how we might best hone our communication skills.

1. Focus and be clear about what we are communicating about the NRC. Clarity needs to recognize differing constituencies; different

language may be needed but the message must remain consistent.

2. Earlier generations had a much richer ethical vocabulary and we had much better civil discussions. We need to recover that richness of public debate.
3. We need to find ways to speak meaningfully to one another, distilling the information down so that scientists can talk to policy-makers and policy-makers can ask the right questions to get scientists to do applicable research.
4. The knowledge that the public needs to support the parks may not be the same knowledge that managers need to maintain the systems.
5. "Science recreationists" come to a park for completely different reasons than rafters or campers. They bring to the park unique opportunities to learn, to help, and to become advocates and volunteers.
6. The public is not familiar with the meaning of the word "biodiversity."
7. Tying environmental monitoring to indicators that the public in the park's region understands brings public acceptance, especially if they can be involved with the scientists in choosing the indicators.
8. Use the Web to get the full picture out to the public.

