

The Real Thing in the Right Place

Unlike traditional museums, which often contain real artifacts and icons isolated from their origin; and unlike classrooms where knowledge is conveyed through various media that may describe real artifacts and icons; national parks have the real thing in the right place.

Assuming presentation and accuracy are the same, the Civil War and its associated stories can never be conveyed in a classroom or museum as well as it can standing in the fields at Antietam or Gettysburg. No printed page can teach geology as well as what is depicted on the walls of the Grand Canyon. Even the most jaded students must be moved by the sadness of war as they gaze at the black granite wall of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Yellowstone can never really be experienced outside of Yellowstone. Even the finest Ansel Adams photograph can't take the place of standing at Inspiration Point and gazing out at Yosemite Valley on a misty morning. National parks—the real things in the right place.

The national parks have always been viewed as unique classrooms. Robert Sterling Yard produced the first *National Parks Portfolio* in 1916 in which Secretary of the Interior Franklin K. Lane wrote, "It is the destiny of the national parks, if wisely controlled, to become the public laboratories of nature study for the Nation." When Stephen T. Mather became the first director of the National Park Service (NPS) in 1917, one of his first appointments was that of Robert Sterling Yard as the first education chief. In 1923, Mather appointed Ansel Hall the first chief naturalist to head up the now official Education Division, which was located at the University of California, Berkeley. In 1925, the Yosemite School of Field Natural History was developed offering a seven-week summer course designed to train naturalists. Soon, most parks were offering programs designed to interpret the natural history of their resource.

The 1933 reorganization of the NPS incorporated a large influx of historical areas into the national park system. The Historic Sites Act of

August 21, 1935, mandated that the NPS "develop an educational program and service for the purpose of making available to the public facts and information pertaining to American historic and archeologic sites, buildings, and properties of national significance."

Most of the educational efforts in the parks focused on the park visitor rather than students or researchers. In some cases the programs were considered more entertainment than educational with "sing-a-longs" around the campfire and slide programs designed to illicit "oohs and ahhs" from the audience. Working with schools was not a common occurrence and when a ranger was invited to speak to a class, he or she generally just packed up the slide program that was used for campfire talks and presented it to the students.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the public was becoming more aware of the effects of the environment on everyday life. The NPS believed that the fate of the environment was dependent on educating youth and it began an extensive environmental education program. Under the National Environmental Education Development (NEED) program, curriculum materials were developed for every grade, teacher workshops were offered, and National Environmental Study Areas (NESAs) were designated in parks throughout the United States. What the NPS had not taken into consideration was that environmental education had not been elevated to curriculum status and was, therefore, not being taught in most schools. An important lesson was learned: any materials that do not relate to the curriculum will not be used.

By 1975-1976, the educational and interpretive effort was focusing on the bicentennial of the nation and environmental education began to wane. By the early 1980s, the NPS had "returned to the basics" of resource interpretation and with a few exceptions, such as Everglades and the large urban parks, formal outreach programs had come to an end.

In 1989, George Bush was sworn in as the president of the United States after running a campaign that promised that he would be the

“Education President.” Shortly after that, NPS Deputy Director Herbert Cables called for a task force to re-examine the role of education in the NPS and to make recommendations on how to reconstitute the program. After carefully reviewing the strengths and weaknesses of the former environmental education programs, the task force made the following recommendations:

- Education programs should be locally driven, resource-based, but tied directly to the school’s curriculum. The NPS should avoid generating national “generic” educational materials.
- Funding should be made available as seed money to support park educational programs. Parks should not be asked to “do more with less.”
- Recognizing that most interpreters are not formally trained in education, training should be offered and paid for by the Washington Office.
- Education programs should encompass all facets of the national park system including natural, cultural, and recreational sites. Programs should be multi-disciplinary going beyond environmental studies to include the arts, humanities, physical science, history and cultural diversity.

In the summer of 1990, NPS Director James Ridenour accepted the recommendations and the Parks as Classrooms program was created. In 1991, the program received \$776,000 and the first projects were funded. Since then, over \$7 million have been distributed, funding over 550 projects. Almost every park in the system has been touched in some way by the program which has been used as a model by other land managing agencies.

In September 1997, an education symposium was held in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The

findings and recommendations resulting from this meeting supported the Parks as Classrooms program, but went beyond school-based programs and provided a broader view of education. The group recommended that the National Park Service:

- Expand the relevance of the national park system to an increasingly diverse population.
- Offer better access to cultural and environmental stories and reach people who may not visit the parks.
- Increase connections between the National Park Service and educators.
- Increase the skills of NPS employees and the effectiveness of NPS programs.
- Help build a national ethic of resource stewardship.

The Parks as Classrooms program easily assimilated these recommendations into its school-based program. The feature that makes Parks as Classrooms unique is its relationship to learning institutions. In order to be funded, a Parks as Classrooms project must be curriculum-based or related to a formal sequence of learning. This usually requires that park staff develop a working relationship with a school or district and an understanding of curriculum needs.

Projects over the years have ranged from simple projects, such as reprinting student worksheets, to complex live interactive electronic field trips that simultaneously reach two million students in 60,000 classrooms across the United States. Over the last nine years we have seen the development of traveling trunks containing teaching aids that introduce students to subjects ranging from westward expansion to biological diversity. Thousands of teachers have participated in workshops and hundreds of teacher guides and student workbooks have been produced. Four TwHP workshops for NPS interpreters produced more than 30 new lesson plans on historic sites in national parks.

While teaching guides, videos, traveling trunks, and teacher workshops may be important, they are only a means to a greater end. The most important product of the Parks as Classrooms program is the opportunity for millions of students to experience a part of their natural and cultural heritage through interactions with the real things in the right place.

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Students try their skills at bargaining at a St. Louis, Missouri, fur trading post operated by interpreter Doug Harding. Courtesy Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, National Park Service.

