

# NPS Servicewide Interdisciplinary Strategic Plan for Interpretation, Education, and Volunteers, 2013-2016

## *Introduction*

June 2013

Dear Colleagues,

Every day, I am reminded of our fundamental purpose:

August 25, 1916: “...*There is hereby created in the Department of the Interior a service to be called the National Park Service...The service thus established shall promote and regulate the use of the Federal areas known as national parks, monuments, and reservations...which purpose is to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.*” (U.S.C., title 16, sec. 1)

Few organizations benefit from such a clear, critical mission still relevant after almost 100 years, and reaffirmed through added legislation such as the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act:

*“The Congress finds and declares that (1) the spirit and direction of the Nation are founded upon and reflected in its historic heritage; (2) the historical and cultural foundations of the Nation should be preserved as a living part of our community life and development in order to give a sense of orientation to the American people.”* (U.S.C., title 16, sec. 470)

Our workforce and partners are devoted to accomplishing that mission, generation after generation. We are blessed with an incredible legacy of love, dedication and devotion—love for our nation’s natural and cultural inheritance, dedication to its stewardship in perpetuity, and through this work devotion to perpetuating a civil democratic society.

Every generation has its own set of challenges and opportunities in accomplishing this duty, and ours is no exception. We live in a time of exponential change that often feels

chaotic and overwhelming—climate change, globalization, rapidly changing technologies, exploding population, economic instability, struggling educational systems, and polarized politics are a few issues swirling around us on a daily basis. These challenges, along with shrinking financial and personnel resources require us to be highly strategic and make difficult choices.

Even children’s brains are developing differently due to their intensive use of technology. As a result 21<sup>st</sup> Century audiences have new needs and desires. Ninety-five percent of our learning today happens outside the classroom. (Falk and Dierking, 2012) Learning is highly personal and can happen anywhere, anytime. People want to engage in making meaning of the world around them. They demand interactive learning experiences and access to multiple sources of information. They also expect opportunities to participate in decisions on the direction and scope of experiences in NPS parks and programs, and in their communities.

As a result, more than ever before “the very existence of parks depends on an American public who values their collective natural and cultural heritage and wants to preserve it.” (*NPS Interpretation and Education Renaissance Action Plan*, 2006) In fact, the very existence of the *planet* depends on a global population that is scientifically literate, civically engaged, and CARES—*cares about*, and is actively engaged in *caring for* our shared environment and cultural histories.

It is clear, *we can’t do this alone!* Nor can we rely on our methods and techniques of the past. We must share power with park and program audiences. We might even have to say farewell to methods and techniques that remain dear to our hearts, but now have become irrelevant to our audiences.

How, in the face of all this chaos, do we accomplish the mission so elegantly stated in the NPS Organic Act and the National Historic Preservation Act? How do we improve our condition? More importantly how do we inspire others to be good stewards—to help?

The answers lie within each of us.

Like our founders, Stephen Mather and Horace Albright, “[we] have no blueprints and no architect. Only the ideals and principles, for which the Park Service was created—to preserve, intact, the heritage we were bequeathed.” (Albright, 1917)

In their spirit, *we are called to imagine new possibilities*: New directions in interpretation, education, and volunteerism; new ways to solve problems collectively; new ways to inspire and engage 21<sup>st</sup> Century learners; new ways to reveal meanings; new sources

of revenue; new ways to connect our parks and programs to communities across our nation; and new ways to keep the National Park Service a vibrant, nimble and effective organization, as Horace Albright entreated.

I know this is possible because I have witnessed brilliance throughout the Park Service in spite of the challenges we face, or perhaps because of the opportunities they present—nodes of innovation, openness to new ideas, risk taking and ongoing learning, unusual collaborations, sharing of power and authority with partners and audiences, and much more.

This Interdisciplinary Strategic Plan for Interpretation, Education, and Volunteers is a reflection of new thinking both within and external to the NPS—it is a tool for superintendents and program managers to scale up innovation and inspire change. It provides a blueprint for developing and assessing a successful, vibrant, robust interpretation, education and volunteer program. The plan offers a vision for the future based on the best past efforts, and developed from the trends, ideas, and effective work happening all across the fields of interpretation, education, and volunteerism.

The 2006 *Interpretation and Education Renaissance Action Plan* provided a solid foundation for this plan. The five “pillars” of the Interpretive Renaissance are still solid. Much was accomplished from the Renaissance Action Plan, and that which was not is carried over to this plan. The vision and focus of *A Call to Action: Preparing for a Second Century of Stewardship and Engagement* is also at the heart of this plan. The strategies outlined here are designed to provide a bridge between the Call to Action’s goals and its specific measurable action items. The “bridge” is built with tools like policy, metrics, evaluation, and professional development.

Finally, the spirit of interdisciplinary collaboration is infused throughout this plan. While interpreters play a key role in engaging the public and inspiring them to stewardship, this work is done by many people within all National Park Service disciplines and programs and among partners, more numerous than NPS employees. Therefore it is based on the thoughts and ideas of many. For two years, the Washington Office of Interpretation, Education, and Volunteers conducted listening sessions, met with internal stakeholders and partners, received ideas and recommendations from the National Leadership Council, National Park System Advisory Board Education Committee, National Interpretation and Education Leadership Council, and the National Education Council, and solicited input through review processes and planning meetings.

The problems we face today are too complex to be solved in isolation—they require systems thinking and the input of many good minds. True interdisciplinary collaboration requires *sharing power and leveraging resources* across disciplines and across

programs. Indeed, it is through collaboration, in concert with our partners that our generation will succeed in carrying out the NPS mission, safely passing on the NPS legacy to our children and theirs of our nation's natural and cultural inheritance and devotion to its stewardship in perpetuity. In the process, we can leave the world a better place: We can increase quality of life, we can help realize the vision of democracy, we can ensure that all Americans' stories are shared, we can facilitate learning, we can improve education and health, and we can help ensure environmental adaptation and resiliency.

Yes, we can!

With Love,

--Julia

Side Bars:

*To achieve the promise of democracy, we will create and deliver activities, programs and services that honor, examine and interpret America's complex heritage. By investing in the preservation, interpretation and restoration of the parks and by extending the benefits of conservation to communities, the National Park Service will inspire a "more perfect union," offering renewed hope to each generation of Americans. (NPS Call to Action 2011-2016)*

The Five Pillars of the I&E Renaissance

- Engage people to make enduring connections to America's special places.
- Use new technologies.
- Embrace Interpretation and Education partners.
- Develop and implement professional standards.
- Create a culture of evaluation.

## *How to Use this Plan*

This vision document is a guide for decision-makers at all levels of the National Park Service to make strategic choices related to interpretation, education, and volunteerism. We recognize that we face shrinking budgets and fewer paid staff. Yet even in good times, resources are not limitless. With a vision in hand, we can work towards a better future through our daily decisions.

We do not expect parks and programs to do more with less. This vision, however, does suggest that we should do our work differently. It may be time to say farewell to methods and techniques that remain dear to our hearts, but now have become irrelevant to our audiences. We also do not expect that all parks and programs will make the same set of decisions; there is not a one-size-fits-all response. We each

need to use the best understanding of our audiences, content areas, communities, and partners to make situational choices.

This document presents the overall vision. A companion website (to be developed) will serve as a place to share actions that align with the vision. This website will show how the Washington Office, regional offices, Mather Training Center, Harpers Ferry Center, parks, and many more all contribute towards the collective impact of the work interpretation, education, and volunteerism in the National Park Service. We ask that you work with your colleagues and partners to identify the actions that you will take to help implement this strategic plan, sharing them on the website.

## *Vision*

The desired future in 2016 resulting from NPS Interpretation, Education, and Volunteers efforts Servicewide:

**Society sees the National Park Service as a trusted interpreter of America's stories and heritage and as a critical, powerful educator. All audiences have opportunities for participatory, transformative experiences that promote stewardship and provide relevant, inclusive, and active learning.**

## *Strategy for Implementation*

To achieve the desired future in 2016, we will focus our limited time and resources on the following high-level activities:

### **I. Position the National Park Service as a powerful educator in the American ecosystem of learning**

We accept and fully embrace our role as a critical contributor in America's educational ecosystem, ensuring that parks and National Park Service programs are places for formal education and informal life-long learning that promote personal and societal growth.

### **II. Serve as a primary caretaker and facilitator of America's stories and heritage connected to an ever-evolving national narrative**

We facilitate experiences that help people find meaning and make sense of issues that represent the breadth of the country's natural and cultural resources and peoples. Programs and services draw from the most current, accurate, and credible understanding of science, scholarship, and management practices. We place park and program stories in their greater context and welcome multiple points of view. Through this, we promote a civil democratic society through science and historical literacy and civic dialog.

### **III. Ensure that National Park Service experiences are relevant, inclusive, and active**

We welcome all audiences by ensuring that park and program resources are fully accessible, stories represent our multicultural, pluralistic society, and communities are engaged in shaping programs and services. We are advocates for audience enjoyment of park resources. We emphasize service-learning, volunteerism, and citizen-stewardship as active engagement in parks and communities. Through this, we provide opportunities that draw new audiences and consistently meet audience expectations for excellent learning and visitor experiences.

### **IV. Employ best business practices to maximize and leverage National Park Service resources**

We use the best practices of business acumen in our work. Our programs are cost effective, leveraged, and data-driven. We make effective use of business models and systems, develop a diverse and trained workforce, and establish effective communication networks. Decisions are based on the best available social science and evaluative data to ensure effective outcomes for audiences, the National Park Service, and collaborative partners.

## *Measures of Success*

Strategy implementation is successful when the following indicators are present:

#### **Interpretation, Education, and Volunteerism Enable Stewardship**

We support the stewardship of cultural and natural resources for long-term conservation. Public stewardship occurs when visitors and local residents find personal relevance and meaning in resources. We provide multiple entry points for people to learn about, care about, and actively protect park resources on-site and in their own communities.

### **The National Park Service is an Educational Institution**

We are one of the primary sources for lifelong learning opportunities in the country. By providing place-based education, we play an essential role in our nation's learning and educational ecosystem, especially in the areas of science, history, conservation, and civic literacy.

### **Our Stories are Diverse, Multicultural, and Inclusive**

We provide universal access to America's stories and heritage in parks and communities by recognizing and accommodating pluralistic approaches, world views, and meanings. We provide a broad menu of ways for people to connect with and construct resource meanings through personal experiences and media.

### **Interpretation and Education are Thematic**

Rather than focusing solely on discrete historical events, chronological narratives, isolated phenomena, or physical specimens, we place resources and stories in broader contexts of cause and effect, ecosystems, landscapes, societal movements, and thematic frameworks.

### **Interpreters and Educators are Facilitators of Learning, Meaning-making, and Visitor Experiences**

Sharing and orientation will always be part of our functions; however, our primary role is to facilitate learning, meaning-making, and visitor experiences. We use specialized skills and techniques based on social science and learning theory to help people construct knowledge, use inquiry, test critical-thinking skills, and actively apply concepts in new and inventive ways. Deep content and audience knowledge, based on sound scholarship and evaluation, are the bedrocks of effective interpretation. We enthusiastically engage with audiences to help them discover, tell, and interpret the meanings they themselves find in the resources and heritage of our country, effectively becoming a bridge between National Park Service content/issues and public understanding.

## *Goals*

***I. To position the National Park Service as a powerful educator in the American ecosystem of learning, we will:***

**Goal 1: Strengthen the Service as an education institution and parks as places of learning that develop American values, civic engagement, and citizen stewardship. (A Call to Action goal 2A)**

WASO IE&V will collaborate with NPSAB (1.1)

STMA, NEC, NIELC will...

Regional Chiefs of Interpretation and Education Specialists will...

Park Chiefs of Interpretation and Education Specialists will...

**Goal 2: Collaborate with partners and education institutions to expand NPS education programs and the use of parks as places of learning. (A Call to Action goal 2C)**

WASO IE&V will develop a NP Teacher Corps strategy (1.2) and provide digital information to teachers and learners (1.4)

Regional Chiefs of Interpretation, Education Specialists will...

Park Education Program Managers will...

***II. To position the National Park Service as a primary caretaker and facilitator of America's stories and heritage connected to an ever-evolving national narrative, we will:***

**Goal 3: Engage audiences and build alliances with interdisciplinary internal and external expertise to make enduring connections to America's stories. (Based on I&E Renaissance Action Plan tenet 1)**

WASO IE&V will work interdisciplinary (2.1) and collaborate with scientists and historians (2.3)

Regions will...

Parks will...

**Goal 4: Develop thematic frameworks across content areas that tell meaningful stories, address pivotal issues, and raise essential questions that cross park and program boundaries.**

WASO IE&V will develop a thematic framework (2.4) Regions will...

Parks will...



**Goal 5: Promote 21<sup>st</sup>-Century skills in interpretation and education, transforming the role of interpreter and educator as facilitator of audience experiences.**

WASO IE&V will...

Regions will...

Parks will...

***III. To ensure that National Park Service experiences are relevant, inclusive, and active, we will:***

**Goal 6: Develop and nurture life-long connections between the public and parks – especially for young people - through a continuum of engaging recreational, educational, volunteer, and work experiences. (A Call to Action goal 1A)**

WASO IE&V will promote life-long learning experiences (1.3)

Regions will...

Park Interpreters, Educators, Youth Program Coordinators, and Volunteer Program Managers will...

**Goal 7: Welcome and engage diverse communities through inclusive park stories and experiences that are accessible to all. (A Call to Action goal 1D)**

WASO IE&V will advocate for program relevance and accessibility (3.2)

Regions will...

Park Interpreters and Outreach Specialists will...

**Goal 8: Use leading-edge technologies and social media to effectively communicate with and capture the interest of the public. (A Call to Action goal 2B)**

WASO IE&V will create a Digital Media Strategy (3.1)

Harper Ferry Center will...

Regional Interpretive Media Program Managers, Project Managers, IT Specialists will...

Park Interpretive Media Specialists, Web Authors will...

**Goal 9: Embrace and facilitate IE&V partners and volunteers in active stewardship (I&E Renaissance Action Plan tenet 3)**

WASO IE&V will embrace major interpretive partners to actualize tenets (3.3), enhancing VIP program (3.4), partnership assessment process (3.5), national level partnerships with underrepresented groups (3.6)

Regions will...

Parks will...

**Goal 10: Emphasize transformative visitor experiences that educate and inspire through engagement with natural and cultural resources as a desired outcome of NPS programming (Revisiting Leopold)**

WASO IE&V will...

Regions will...

Parks will...

We promote active engagement through service-learning, volunteerism, and citizen-stewardship in parks and communities.

**Goal 11: Develop and implement professional standards, systems, processes, and resources for delivering quality interpretation and education programs. (Based on I&E Renaissance Action Plan tenet 4)**

WASO IE&V will revitalize interpretive planning (2.2)

Regions will...

Parks will...

#### ***IV. To employ best business practices to leverage and maximize NPS resources, we will:***

**Goal 12: Develop and recruit NPS leaders at all levels with the skills to lead change, work with partners, ensure employee safety, and seek new ways to accomplish goals. (A Call to Action goal 4A)**

WASO IE&V will develop learning and development resources and career academy (4.5)

NEC and NIELC will...

Regional Chiefs will...

Park I&E Supervisors will...

**Goal 13: Create a flexible and adaptive organization with a culture that encourages innovation, collaboration, and entrepreneurship. (A Call to Action goal 4B)**

WASO IE&V will support culture of evaluation (4.1), overhaul awards (4.7), rewrite DO6 (4.4)

Regions will...

Park Chiefs of Interpretation and Education will...

**Goal 14: Recruit and retain a workforce that reflects the diversity of the nation, from entry level employees to senior leaders. (A Call to Action goal 4C)**

WASO IE&V will develop PDs and hiring practices in collaboration with Workforce Development (4.3)

Regions will...

Park I&E Supervisors will...

**Goal 15: Modernize and streamline NPS business systems and use leading-edge technology to enhance communication. (A Call to Action goal 4D)**

WASO IE&V will improve internal communications (4.2), new business model and funding sources (4.6)

Regions will...

Park I&E Program Managers will...

**Goal 16: Support decision makers in continually evaluating the most cost effective ways to accomplish the interpretive and educational mission of the National Park Service within the limits of the fiscal and human resources.**