

Leisure Research Symposium Paper

## **Redefining the National Park Service Role in Urban Areas**

*Bringing the Parks to the People*

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### **Abstract**

In 2016, the National Park Service (NPS) will celebrate its centennial. In this article, Deputy Director of Operations of the NPS Peggy O'Dell reflects on the great history of National Parks in American history, and the important role they play in telling America's stories and building communities. She then turns attention to the future, and discusses current NPS initiatives that bring parks to people, and the important role that collaboration with state and local parks can have in improving the health and well-being of individuals and communities.

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George Butler is celebrated for the value he placed on the role of recreation and parks in human development and his passion for having parks in communities as a means of improving the lives of people of all ages. I couldn't agree with him more. This is why I've chosen to speak to you about the importance of "Bringing Parks to the People."

It has always been the responsibility of the National Park Service to bring the parks to the people. Stephen T. Mather, the first director of the National Park Service, went to Washington in January 1915 as a special assistant to Secretary of the Interior Franklin K. Lane. Mather's efforts to build public and political support for a national park service helped persuade Congress to create the Service in 1916. Mather promoted park access, development, and use.

## **National Parks Tell America's Stories**

Today we have 408 national parks. There are the iconic sites such as Yellowstone, Grand Canyon, and Rocky Mountain National Parks. And we have unique sites such as the Rosie the Riveter/WWII Home Front National Park in San Francisco and Edison National Historical Site in New Jersey.

The National Park Service tells our American stories, stories of places that are symbols of our heritage and of extraordinary people who changed the world. One of our newer National Park Service sites is Pullman National Monument. Pullman is located in Chicago's South Side on the original Pullman town site. The town was created in the 1880s by the Pullman Palace Car Company to serve as a model factory town to manufacture railroad passenger cars and house factory workers and their families. It's a story about labor relations, about the rise of the African American middle class who served as porters in the Pullman Palace Cars. In many ways, it was the genesis of the civil rights movement. And today it is a community trying to improve itself by sharing its history.

Last week I was at the dedication for the visitor center at Flight 93 National Memorial. It was a moving experience as the exhibits use photographs, artifacts, and actual audio tapes to convey the Flight 93 story in the context of the other terrorist attacks which occurred on September 11, 2001. Spending time with the families of those lost on Flight 93 humbles me with the responsibility for their story. We tell America's stories. And we work with communities.

## **National Parks In Communities**

While you are in Las Vegas, take a trip out to Lake Mead National Recreation Area. We are partnering with Las Vegas to work on the Northwest Las Vegas Trails and Open Space project, which provides greater opportunities for learning and recreating on one of our designated National Water Trails that flows through Lake Mead. Our Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance program supports community-led natural conservation projects like this one, all across the nation. RTCA is the community assistance arm of the National Park Service, providing technical assistance to community groups and local, state, and federal government agencies working to protect natural areas and water resources to enhance close to home outdoor recreation opportunities. We help communities plan, organize partnerships, and achieve success on the projects most important to them.

It is in our mission to conserve these places unimpaired for future generations, an idea that has spread across the globe to nearly 100 countries. This idea has expanded, diversified, and evolved. What the founders of the national park idea had in mind was incredibly innovative, but it is a different time and a different era that requires new ways of thinking and articulating the meaning of parks.

## Celebrating 100 Years of National Parks

Earlier this year, we kicked off our centennial marketing campaign, “Find Your Park.” It is a message that encourages people to shed their preconceptions of what a “park” is. Not just national parks, but all parks. The campaign is about deepening the public’s understanding, not only of the National Park Service, but its own history. The message is that a “park” can be a place, a feeling, a state of mind.

As the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the creation of the National Park Service approaches in 2016, there has been a tremendous amount of thought and debate around the issue of relevancy of the national parks—individually, as a national park system, and as a continually evolving idea. I am sure that the same discussion is taking place in your circles as you reflect on your 50 years of service to parks.

Our centennial goal is clear: To connect with and create the next generation of park visitors, supporters, and advocates. Research has shown us that our country is more diverse than it has ever been. Over half of all U.S. newborns are racially diverse. Demographics are changing, as is where people live and how they recreate. Eighty percent of our population lives in urban areas. Millennials are less likely to spend time outdoors. Research has also shown us that the park service has not kept pace with these changes. Our workforce is not reflective of the American people we aim to serve and our stories can be more inclusive and multi-dimensional. Thirty-six percent of Americans are people of color; only 18.6% of the NPS workforce is.

At the core of the National Park Service idea is the role of parks and the park service to provide a benefit to the American people. A fundamental value of the NPS is to be an agent that improves the quality of people’s lives. And there is no better reflection of this value than in urban parks and programs, where the NPS is able to work directly with communities, local recreations groups, schools and youth organizations to lift up their efforts in the community. Our future depends on our ability to continue to provide benefit to and enhance the quality of life for all Americans whether they live in small rural towns or urban neighborhoods.

## The Urban Agenda: Bringing Parks to the People

In preparation for the next 100 years of the National Park Service, we launched the Urban Agenda last spring. Over the past several years, we have been looking for ways to reframe the role of the National Park Service in urban areas. One of the things we learned was that while some of us already viewed the Service as an agency with deep urban roots this was not the general opinion. People were surprised to hear how urban the National Park Service is. For instance:

- Forty of the country’s 50 most populated urban areas have national parks located within them.
- One-third of all NPS sites are located in urban areas.
- Thirty-six percent of all NPS visitation occurs at our urban sites.
- NPS historic preservation tax credits have contributed significantly to preserving the character of our cities, generating more than \$66 billion in private investment in historic rehabilitations.
- LWCF has helped communities create their infrastructure.
- Some 30 NPS programs serve urban communities, providing funds and technical assistance for recreational facilities, environmental restoration, historic architecture, historic research, trail building, and youth engagement.

As our Urban Agenda outlines, it is critical that we become relevant to all Americans and create a culture of collaboration. We have identified 10 model cities where we will develop our capacity to act as “One National Park Service” to better serve communities. In these 10 cities, we have deployed Urban Fellows who will serve as a pipeline for growing NPS urban leaders. We are also launching a national network to connect urban park and program practitioners from across the Service with partners to share their experiences, highlight lessons learned, and problem solve the critical issues facing urban parks together. In Washington DC; Boston; Richmond, VA; New York City; Tucson; Richmond, CA; Jacksonville; St. Louis; Detroit; and Philadelphia; our Urban Fellows will work with communities.

The scope of the Urban Agenda falls directly in line with the Department of the Interior’s efforts across the country. Secretary Jewell announced an ambitious youth initiative that will engage the next generation of leaders and stewards through recreation, education, volunteerism, and employment in 50 cities across the county.

The Urban Agenda is one piece of how we will prepare for the next 100 years, as we work to connect with the next generation. Within the National Park Service, we are recommending an unprecedented strategic alignment of parks, programs, and partnerships that will better serve communities.

## **Linking Parks and Public Health**

Like all of the recreational professionals at this conference, the National Park Service is committed to improving the quality of life for all Americans, so we are exploring how parks can contribute to a healthy lifestyle. We are able to make the connection of health and the outdoors tangible through initiatives like Healthy Parks Healthy People.

### **The Health Parks Healthy People Initiative**

Healthy Parks Healthy People is a global movement that harnesses the power of parks and public lands in contributing to people’s physical, mental, and spiritual health, and social well-being. Contact with nature through parks improves people’s physical, mental and spiritual health.

- Parks foster social connections that are vital to community cohesion and contribute to social well-being.
- For children, parks foster active play, which is associated with physical, cognitive, and social benefits.
- For adolescents, parks improve mental and social health during what is often a challenging time of life.
- Park use is linked to physical and mental health benefits among adults, especially older adults.
- Parks and their health benefits can be enjoyed by anyone regardless of who you are and where you come from.
- Being in nature can improve your mood.
- Having access to parks can increase physical activity and combat obesity.

The National Park Service’s Healthy Parks Healthy People program was established in 2011, to reframe the role of parks and public lands as an emerging, powerful health prevention strategy. With this renewed focus on health, we hope to bring about lasting change in Americans’ lifestyle choices and their relationship with nature and the outdoors.

In the last few years, the evidence linking parks and health has continued to build. This year, a seminal report entitled *Healthy Parks Healthy People: the State of Evidence 2015* was released by researchers at Deakin University in Australia (Townsend, Henderson-Wilson, Warner, & Weiss, 2015). Findings from this report suggest there is substantial evidence that access to parks and green spaces enhance the health and wellbeing of communities across their lifespan. This report provides a strong case for investing in and promoting parks as a health resource.

## **Parks as a Vehicle for Health**

### **The Science Plan**

In 2012, with the engagement of academic researchers, health professionals, and federal scientists, we developed a Healthy Parks Healthy People Science Plan that provides a framework and research agenda to expand scientific understanding of the role of parks and public lands in contributing to people's health and well-being. This Science Plan is based on the premise that our parks are health resources. Put another way, we define health resources in our parks as park programs, facilities, and environments that confer physical, mental, and social health benefits.

The Science Plan has generated research in a number of academic institutions across the country. The National Park Service is partnering with a team from Penn State and Harvard School of Public Health to test and validate cognitive, physical, and emotional responses to nature in the wild and in urban park settings. We have another initiative with North Carolina State University to identify metrics and measures tied to parks and trails environments.

We are taking measures to apply findings from this research in day-to-day operations in our parks. We have established hundreds of health partnerships in parks and communities, demonstrating the value of parks to improve health. These partnerships fulfill a broad range of programs and events, such as the Let's Move Junior Ranger Programs, walking clubs, health fairs, yoga clinics, fun runs, youth ambassador programs, and volunteer programs focused on trail building and habitat restoration.

### **Park Prescriptions**

One of the most exciting Healthy Parks Healthy People programs in partnership with healthcare providers is Park Prescriptions. Park Prescriptions are programs where doctors are actually prescribing a visit to a park for their patients' health. One thing that makes this so exciting is that it is an initiative that we are working on directly with NRPA, with local parks and communities promoting our national parks, state parks, and local parks as health resources.

I would like to recognize Zarnaaz Bashir, with the National Recreation and Parks Association, who has been instrumental in advancing park prescriptions nationally. Also, I would like to thank Kristin Wheeler, with the Institute at Golden Gate, which is a leading partner and close ally of the National Park Service, for providing leadership for advancing park prescriptions. These two women work hand in hand with the National Park Service's Healthy Parks Healthy People program to help make park prescriptions go main stream.

National Park Prescriptions Initiative is a movement to strengthen the connection between health care and parks and public lands. The goal is to expand the number of health care providers who prescribe outdoor physical activity to prevent or treat health problems resulting from inactivity and poor diet. The park prescriptions concept has grown out of a conceptual phase into a period of rapid implementation. There are currently more than 100 Park Prescriptions programs documented nationally and 15 of these are in our national parks.

Here are just a few examples:

- In Albuquerque, Petroglyph National Monument has partnered with local physicians, recreation leaders, and health insurance providers to produce a comprehensive trail guide for patients to fill prescriptions for outdoor activity.
- In Washington State's Fort Vancouver National Historic Site, physicians give written prescriptions to patients for individually prescribed exercise at the site.
- Here in Las Vegas, the Get Healthy Nature Prescription Initiative at Lake Mead National Recreation Area is a seamless partnership with local and federal partners to routinely bring urban minority youth and their families into nature for their health. The Children's Heart Center of Nevada recruits the kids who participate in the trips and the park handles the logistics. Outside Las Vegas Foundation raises the funds for transportation from the urban center to the park.
- In San Francisco, Golden Gate National Recreation Area has teamed up with the Department of Public Health, California State Parks, and San Francisco Recreation and Park Department to implement park prescriptions throughout its health system that serves 350,000 residents. The program was formally launched in October 2014 through a training session for 175 health providers and park professionals. Patients are referred to six co-designed, free, and introductory park programs led by park professionals that occur each week.
- Right in my backyard, in Washington DC, Dr. Robert Zarr, and a Park Rx Champion who is often referred to as "Nature's Doc" is a pediatrician at Unity Health Care. Dr. Zarr initiated a Park Prescription program for his more than 700 mostly low-income and immigrant population patients. As part of this program, Dr. Zarr created an online database of 350 green spaces in DC so he and other physicians can prescribe safe and accessible parks for his patients to get healthier. His database also allows Dr. Zarr to keep track of the health benefits of his prescriptions.

This morning, our nation's doctor, United States Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, discussed his Call to Action on Walking and Walkable Communities. This report highlights the significant health burden that exists in the United States due to physical inactivity and challenges communities throughout our nation to increase walking and walkability for improved health. The National Park Service is engaged with the Office of the Surgeon General to explore strategic locations through the National Park Service where this important public health message can be amplified and promoted. Director Jarvis will sign an Memo of Understanding with the Pan American Health Organization to promote the power of nature based solutions to address threats of chronic and infectious diseases and to be a model for effecting lifestyle changes to benefit the health and well-being of people and the planet.

And there's more.

### **Every Kid in a Park**

As part of our work with the White House, earlier this month we launched the Every Kid in a Park program. The parks hold tremendous potential as places for educational exploration for youth. Every Kid in a Park provides students with opportunities to connect with history, nature, and culture while making connections to their communities and their families. Education may be one of the greatest tools the park service has to enhance the quality of life for youth and their families.

The Every Kid in a Park initiative invites every 4th grade student to visit a national park or other federal land area, with his or her family, friends, and classmates during the 2015–2016 school year. Parks will offer special opportunities for 4th graders visiting with families and

friends, as well as for 4th grade classes visiting parks on field trips

This initiative is an important part of the National Park Service's 2016 Centennial celebration, which encourages people of all ages to Find Your Park. It will help us reach our Centennial goal, to grow a new generation of environmental ambassadors and stewards, ready to preserve and protect our public lands.

We are inviting all 4th graders and their families to explore the many different kinds of national park sites and lands protected by the federal government. There are more than 2,000 places to be discovered—such as wildlife refuges and national forests—for free for 4th graders and their families. Over 900,000 park passes have been downloaded during the first two weeks of the program.

We know from research that spending time outdoors is important to children's development in every major way. Connecting young people with our country's great outdoors will provide opportunities for learning and fun ways to get active, as well as opportunities to connect to art, literature, and history in the parks. You can visit [www.everykidinapark.gov](http://www.everykidinapark.gov) to get more information and encourage fourth graders to download their free passes.

## Looking to the Future

There is so much to be excited about for our future together. As outdoor and recreation professionals and as the National Park Service prepares to celebrate our 100th anniversary, we've spent a great deal of time thinking about how we can make national parks relevant to a new generation of Americans. The importance of urban parks and National Park Service programs in areas all across the nation have been a constant part of our discussions.

I would like to thank all of you for being our partners, for understanding the remarkable role parks and recreation areas have in building this nation, to applaud your role in preserving these wonderful places, and to celebrate all of our roles in instilling pride and optimism in the next generation. Bringing parks to the people is our role and our future. And from the NPS perspective the future looks very bright!

## References

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