Review of Environmental Education in the US National Parks Service according to Social Transition: A Case Study on Two Pacific Northwest National Parks

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Abstract

National park, as a natural park, has a dual purpose, to promote both protection and enjoyment. The educational activities of the national park can be partly understood as one of the appropriate means to balance its double purposes. This study provides a review of environmental education in the US National Parks according to social transition. Taking historical perspective and case studies, environmental education has played roles in helping the balance between preservation and enjoyment. Since the environmental movement, environmental education goals, particularly understanding the natural processes observable at national parks, has become more a part of the interpretation and education missions of the parks. Also non-governmental and non-profit partners have played important educational-based roles in support of both the National Parks Service and environmental education goals. The two different models also differ in the public’s perception of them. Federal employees are presented in some rural areas in the U.S., but the general population automatically attributes authority, friendliness, and national-interestedness to NPS Rangers. This may in turn limit how strongly such staff could serve as strong advocates for the environment. On the other hand, the non-profit may be seen by some as strongly liberal biased and associated with urban wealth. It is also not as universally recognized as the NPS. It can, however, go far to develop new partnerships and undertake public relations. Non-profits vary greatly in quality, also affecting public perception.

Key words: National park, Environmental education, Non-profit partner, Interpretation

1. Introduction

The first U.S. National Park, Yellowstone, was established in 1872. But it was some decades later, several other national parks were designated, and the National Parks Service was established to administer the natural parks. The enabling legislation, signed by President Woodrow Wilson in 1916, states that the purpose of the National Park Service is “to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life 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” (Forest, 1984). Thus the National Park Service (NPS) has a dual purpose, to promote both protection and enjoyment. These purposes can conflict, but the language suggests that ‘enjoyment’ should be conducted in ways that does not contradict the preservation purpose. The educational activities of the NPS can be partly understood as one of the
appropriate means to balance its double purposes.

This study provides a review of environmental education in the U.S. National Parks according to social transition, particularly in the natural area parks, and particularly with reference to environmental educational aims served by the various educational strands pursued by the NPS. The NPS includes 397 units, which may be historical sites or parks, battlefields and military parks, and so on. Of the total, 58 are national parks, 18 are preserves, 18 are recreation areas, 10 are seashores, 4 are lakeshores and 2 are reserves (NPS, 2012). Although education happening on the remaining 224 historical, cultural, or military units might touch on nature, science or the environment, this study is concerned primarily with those units focused on nature.

2. Materials and Method

2.1. Review of Early Environmental Education in the US National Parks

To understand the form and roles of education in the U.S. National Parks today, some historical perspective is helpful. Education and related activities have been part of the national parks from the beginning. The end of 19th Century, John Muir, whose nature preservation movement led to the formation of the first national parks, served as a guide in Yosemite as did many others. He had a different ideology from Gifford Pinchot who was a leader of conservation movement. Pinchot defined conservation as a means of managing the nation’s natural resources for long-term sustainable commercial use. But Muir valued nature for its spiritual and transcendental qualities. Enos Mills, who was a collaborator with Muir and played the central role in the establishment of Rocky Mountain National Park, wrote prolifically about natural history and strongly promoted interpretation (Malitz, 2005). In the early years of the NPS interpretation was infused with the language of preservationist. Interpretation may have helped consolidate public support for the protection of land in national parks. As early as the 1920’s it was distinguished from academic instruction in terms of its aims. The aims of interpretation were to inspire enthusiasm for and understanding of nature in visitors, regardless of the visitor’s place in society, and to make presentations engrossing (Mackintosh, 2000). Interpretation was to be in-person and personalized. The interpreter thus needed a deep knowledge and familiarity of the site and strong communications skills to carry this out.

Regardless of the role of interpretation in fulfilling the dual mission of the NPS, some perceived it to lack clear foundations. This was noted by Freeman Tilden in 1942, and he provided such foundations in his book classic Interpreting our Heritage (1957). He describes “interpretation” can create a kind of "understanding” that would indeed lead people to “protect” (Ham, 2009). In roughly the mid 1970’s critics argued that the original vision of interpretation had become confused with entertainment. It was possible to call for a stronger educational emphasis in such programs (Mackintosh, 2000). Such criticism, while sparking greater professionalization of interpretation, may also have made room for a stronger presence of the contemporaneously emerging environmental education field.

Indeed, in the early 1970’s the NPS developed a stronger environmental education emphasis, in keeping with the strong national desire to address environmental problems. The NPS formed an Environmental Education Task Force in 1970 which reviewed existing efforts and recommended stronger environmental emphases and tools. The Division of Environmental Projects at the NPS Harpers Ferry Center helped produce communications materials for NSP units. Three interrelated programs were developed with guidance from the National Education Association, a consultant, and the task force as well as NSP staff. The core was