

National Park System Advisory Board



Citizen advisors chartered by Congress to help the National Park Service care for special places saved by the American people so that all may experience our heritage.

Appendix F

Urban Sub Group Report

National Park System Advisory Board

Planning Committee

November 2012

NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM ADVISORY BOARD
Planning Committee,
Urban Sub Group Report
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Background

Connecting urban populations to NPS parks and programs has been a focal point of the Second Century Commission, America's Great Outdoors Initiative and the NPS Advisory Board. The issue of connection to urban communities is extremely critical since more than 87% of the U.S. population will be living in cities by 2030. In order to address this issue an Urban Sub Group was formed within the NPS Advisory Board Planning Committee to make recommendations on how to improve the National Park System in order to provide enriched connections for urban populations with the natural environment, recreation, public health, economic, cultural history, civic engagement, and other benefits of National Parks and Programs. Over the course of the last 18 months the sub group reviewed various reports and articles and conducted numerous conference calls to discuss and formulate recommendations to the full committee. One particular quote from the President & Chief Executive Officer of the Trust for Public Land summarizes why the NPS must take action on this issue:

September 2009, Will Rogers in the Huffington Post stated that:

"The National Park system is also incomplete in that it needs to grow to keep pace with the recreational needs of our ever-increasing population. If we don't grow the system, we risk losing to death the parks that we have. And nowhere is this truer than in and around cities, where most of us live. We need new and expanded national parks, especially in our urban areas."

A general conclusion drawn from our research and identified by many of the leading environmental organizations is that the NPS must engage with urban communities to establish positive lifelong connection between Americans and their national parks, trails, waterways, and natural and cultural heritage. In addition, the NPS should take a leadership role to help address the increasing instance of environmental injustice and barriers between communities and parks and open space. This leadership role must be implemented in a way that facilitates the vision, ideas and strategies of the community and other partners and does not feel like a "top down" process. There are many cases where the vision stems from the local community and/or the partner organizations. In that case, it would be great for NPS to provide simply effective support for community based initiatives. There are many things that a large, competent, billion-dollar agency can do that a small, local, non-profit cannot. Often the vision is less important than the effectiveness -- power -- to get an idea to reality.

Together the NPS, its partners, sister agencies, stakeholders and community members can play a significant role in ensuring that densely populated diverse communities across the country support connections to parks and open spaces, however it is important to recognize that these relationships, in order to be reciprocal, must be transparent and focus on those areas where NPS can be an equal partner with the community. Reciprocal and sustainable long terms community relationships are even

more critical if NPS is serious about taking a leadership role to help address the increasing instance of environmental injustice and this leadership role will get much of its energy from the collaborative action that results from sustained reciprocal relationships.

This definition and practical implementation of “reciprocal relationships” merits a facilitated conversation with some of NPS’s actual and potential partners in urban areas. From the sub group’s collective experience and discussions with actual partners, some outside organizations do not feel that partnerships with NPS always operate on a two-way street basis. There are occasions when the Park Service rejects an idea or a proposal on the grounds that approving it would come in conflict with precedents established for large rural or wilderness national parks, i.e. establishing parks in urban areas where habitat may be fragmented or in need of restoration. There is often recognition that, while a particular action is appropriate in an urban setting, it cannot be supported because it might set a poor precedent elsewhere for the Park Service. This is probably the single most common reason for strife between the Park Service and its potential partners in urban areas. This problem does not seem insoluble, but the Park Service would need to explicitly set up internal structures to deal with it.

Therefore, it is critical that the NPS establish an urban parks strategy that embraces *all NPS resources* including national parks and highly effective NPS programs such as the Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program and the National Historic Landmarks Program to build on and enhance community engagement that improves urban connections and access. This strategy must include considering opportunities to update or revise current criteria, policies and guidelines used in evaluating potential new national parks and landmarks in the urban context. For example, current guidelines regarding “integrity” seem to focus on substantial architectural features, overlooking sites that represent stories of recent immigrants and the working population; a factor that was identified by the American Latino Heritage Scholars panel as a primary reason for the extremely low numbers of Latino National Heritage Landmarks. For natural areas, current integrity criteria also would preclude favorable consideration of damaged urban sites with potential for restoration; guidelines related to national significance determinations could better recognize the challenges for communities where the most important resources may not be substantial structures. This strategy must also include the complimentary recommendations of the Relevancy, Education and Science committees to insure that all new initiatives pursued by NPS are leveraged to the fullest extent possible. This is also a chance to assess re-allocation of resources as aids to best practices once both the assessment of existing urban parks and programs is completed and successful models are more thoroughly understood.

The sub group focused its work on two areas consistent with the framework for this committee, *gaps and models*. Over the last six months the sub group has also joined with the Directors’ “Champions” for his Parks for People goal under the Five Year Action Plan to collaborate on mutual goals.

The sub group has an overall recommendation to the Advisory Board that the Chair appoint an Urban Panel to continue the work initiated with the Planning Committee.

The Urban Panel should be comprised of at least 7 members representing urban/metropolitan areas who: 1) have nationally recognized experience/knowledge of urban/metropolitan park and open space issues and 2) are geographically diverse. Further consideration should be given to insure that the panel members as a whole will have the following qualifications:

1. Community Based Organization Partner (at least three of the members, one of which should represent areas that do not have a NPS unit within 50 miles)
2. National Private Organization Partner
3. Youth Organization Partner
4. Civic Leader/Local Agency Partner
5. Academic

Further, it is essential that the Panel, if appointed, continue to work with the NPS staff designated as “Champions” for his Parks for People goal under the Five Year Action Plan to collaborate on mutual goals. The sub group also recommends that the Director’s identified Urban Champions should be expanded to include self-selected representatives of existing major urban NPS units, preferably with geographic diversity and representatives of existing partner based programs such as the Diverse Outdoor Leadership Institute Program (DOLI) in the Pacific Region. The work of this group should be conducted consistent with the Director’s Organizational Development Community of Practice principles. It is also recommended that when considering appointments to the Panel that not only the make-up of the participants is important but that reflection on the characteristics of successful models stated below be reviewed in clarifying the mandate for the panel in terms of practices and planning.

The Urban Panel would provide further guidance to the Director on implementation of the gap analysis and model recommendations identified below.

GAP ANALYSIS RECOMMENDATIONS

A review of literature on the issue of urban area park/open space gaps found that while there is significant published information related to urban parks they focus primarily on the delivery of municipal type recreation services such as the Trust for Public Land’s Urban Parks report. However, this report and others should be used to help the NPS identify and prioritize next steps related to communities with the least access to park and recreational resources, poor physical environments, poor health factors, as well as, civil rights and environmental justice barriers to parks and open space.

The working committee agreed to use the US Census to identify the largest 50 Metropolitan areas in the Nation (Exhibit A) as the starting point for identifying how to proceed with a gap analysis recommendation. NPS staff was able to identify the national park units located within a 50 mile radius (one/two hour car drive) of each metropolitan area (Exhibit B). It is noted that there are 10 metropolitan areas where there is no NPS unit presence within 50 miles: Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington, TX, Houston-Sugar Land-Bayton, TX, Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario, CA, Sacramento-Arden-Arcade-Roseville, CA, Indianapolis-Carmel, IN, Austin-Round Rock, TX, Milwaukee-Waukesa-West Allis, WI, Memphis, TN, Birmingham-Hoover, AL, and Raleigh-Cary, NC.

Park Units within a 50 Mile Radius of Metro/Urban Areas

Committee members agreed that the Park Service should focus initial efforts on identifying how well the existing NPS 40 units within a 50 mile radius serve adjacent urban communities. As recently as ten years ago a survey of Santa Monica Mountains NRA generated the following conclusion:

“Findings show park visitors were predominantly white, affluent, and lived nearby. People of colour travelled further, were significantly less likely to be return visitors, and were less inclined to use the park for active recreation. Seemingly, this park fails to meet the needs of the disadvantaged urban

communities for whom it was created, a problem that may also affect other parks in the United States and potentially parks in other countries.” (Byrne, Jason; Wolch, Jennifer and Zhang, Jin (2009) 'Planning for environmental justice in an urban national park', Journal of Environmental Planning and Management, 52: 3, 365 — 392)

Since that survey was conducted the SMMNRA has become well known and even a poster child for successful partnership programs that have increased connections with surrounding diverse urban communities, however physical and social barriers are still of concern. Given limited resources to conduct a comprehensive survey of all 40 urban park units it is recommended that a trial group of 3 -5 park units undertake a survey of not only the factors studied by Bryne, Wolch and Zhang but also such elements as:

1. Need and Interest of Communities: Data on community needs and the level of existing park and community connections should be analyzed from existing studies, reports (e.g., AGO Listening Sessions) and location-based anecdotal information. Reports from the Relevancy Committee at Cuyahoga NP will be particularly insightful and it is recommended that to the extent future Urban Park sites are selected by the committee that there is collaboration in order to leverage each committee's work.
2. Access to a Park/NPS Office: 50 Mile radius does not equate to an NPS presence near all major urban areas; there are both physical and social barriers to park access. The survey should identify local barriers, some of which will likely be unique to each location.
3. Capacity of Parks for Meaningful Engagement: Capacity constraints the ability of parks to provide community engagement, recreational and interpretive services within and for urban areas. For example the difference between a small national monument site and a national recreation area typically in staffing levels is but one of these elements. Again, the survey developed by the Relevancy Committee for Cuyahoga is a good example of the data that should be collected.
4. External Programs: To what extent does the Park Unit or Office engage with diverse/impacted communities in its geographic region? Examples of other park providers (local/state/federal). Identify characteristics of successful programs.
5. Transportation: To what extent does the Park Unit or local jurisdictions provide transportation for urban communities?
6. Programming: Is the Park programming developed to meet the needs of diverse urban communities? Coordination with the Education Committee on this topic is critical.
7. Long Term Engagement: Programs that seek to engage diverse urban populations are not new to the Park Service. The gap analysis must identify the key elements of long term sustained engagement and prioritize essential strategies to achieve this goal.
8. Park history and organizational culture:Crucial to all of the points above. The history of how the park has previously engaged with the diverse urban populations surrounding the parks could be a starting point for engagement – either interrupting historic patterns of oppression or building on patterns of support that have languished.

Priority for these surveys should be for those park units adjacent to communities that have the least access to park and recreational resources, poor physical environments, poor health factors, civil rights and environmental justice barriers to parks and open space.

The Park Units that may be appropriate for this survey are: Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, Lowell National Historic Park, Biscayne National Park, National Parks of New York Harbor, Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore and Trail of Tears National Historic Trail. The key recommendation is that the units selected should be representative of traditional park units, recreation areas, historic and cultural sites.

No Park Units in 50 Mile Radius

The Five Year Action Plan places a significant emphasis on the Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program (RTCA) as the most strategically poised program within the Park System to positively impact urban communities due to its historical success in urban areas. However, as noted previously, it must be considered as part of a host of opportunities and traditional park unit designations must play a significant role if we are to address the unmet park and program needs of urban communities.

The following recommendations for a gap analysis of the 10 largest metropolitan areas are preliminary ideas related to this topic and will be finalized as part of the next series of sub group meetings:

1. How can the RTCA program be expanded to meet the long term needs of urban areas, i.e., RTCA projects are usually limited to a maximum three year, life span. Partnering with existing urban partnership efforts, i.e., river/watershed revitalization efforts such as the Trinity River, Dallas could benefit from the sustained long term participation of NPS technical assistance such as the RTCA program and meet a critical major metro area gap.
2. How can NPS resources be positioned to strategically benefit urban communities, i.e., should the RTCA program direct a significant portion of its program to the 10 urban areas without a NPS unit. How can the Land, Water Conservation Fund, Urban Park and Recreation Recovery Act, National Historic Landmarks and other cultural resource program funding be utilized to further urban goals and programs?
3. The NPS must strategically analyze completed or in process Special Resource Studies in Urban areas to prioritize those which would leverage strong local community support.
4. Analyze the cost benefit of establishing relatively permanent NPS "Service Centers" in those urban areas where there are no park units, or where existing parks lack capacity to engage the community on other opportunities. The wide variety of park service expertise including cultural resources, Science and Education would build on the RTCA program. The "Service Centers" have the benefit of providing long term sustained community based services that are near impossible to achieve from large regional offices. Part of the process for establishing these services centers must include a community based participatory processes.

The results of the gap analysis will also inform the development of new urban National Park models.

MODELS

Models and best practices for urban national park and community connections

The Committee has started to gather information on successful urban connection and community access models. The group discussed NPS models such as National Recreation Areas, Heritage Areas, Networks

and those outside the NPS. Some of the characteristics of successful models that have been identified as common indicators of success are:

1. Community support and buy-in resulting from strong reciprocal relationships.
2. Strong local partners
3. Visionary NPS leadership
4. Long term commitments
5. Reciprocal relationships with diverse community members
6. Partnerships with other federal, state, local, non-profit entities to leverage synergistic opportunities such as the Groundworks program, AGO, local conservation corps, river parkway programs, etc.
7. Partnerships with local health priorities, i.e., programs to address obesity, diabetes
8. Partnerships with schools, youth groups
9. Partnerships with prominent local community organizations such as churches
10. Programs that build community engagement capacity
11. Sustained investment of NPS (or other government) resources
12. A sustained program for staff development which facilitates community engagement
13. Strong interpretive programs which promote the stories of indigenous and immigrant peoples will provide a relevant context for community engagement.

These factors will be used to identify a series of signature models across the nation. The models are expected to include at least three types of park units: historical, recreation area and a traditional park unit. Two to four programs will also be selected including the RTCA Program. These projects may range from adding capacity for existing programs to supporting new efforts. The intent will be to support and illuminate successful urban community relationships that can be used as models by other parks and programs. The key finding of the sub group is that strong partnerships are essential to a successful NPS Urban program.

Lastly, the sub group has joined with NPS Champion Steve Whitesell to recommend the need to reposition the Director's Call to Action Plan to address two issues:

1. Number of Communities: Team recommends the Action drop the "in at least 50" communities target and instead focus on a smaller number of communities to ensure greater success, value, and impact.
2. Include Parks and Other NPS Programs: The Team recommends expanding the Action to include Parks and other NPS programs (along with RTCA) to ensure long term success of the Action.

Members of the sub group look forward to cooperating with NPS in implementing these recommendations as part of progress with the Director's Call to Action in the years ahead.