



“Stewards for parks, visitors and each other”

Statement of

HOLLY RIFE

on behalf of the

ASSOCIATION OF NATIONAL PARK RANGERS

before the

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS AND PUBLIC LANDS
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

for the

Hearing on the Future of the National Park Service

held

May 25, 2010

Chairman Grijalva and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am Holly Rife, a National Park Service employee for 17 years and currently the Chief Ranger at Catoctin Mountain Park in Maryland. I am appearing today on my own time and expense in my capacity as a member of the Association of National Park Rangers (ANPR). I am pleased to present this testimony on behalf of ANPR.

Thank you for holding this hearing on the future of the National Park Service and the National Park System.

The Association of National Park Rangers is a non-profit organization founded in 1977 and today comprises approximately 1,200 members that include current, former, and aspiring employees of the National Park Service. Our organizational purposes are to communicate for, about, and with National Park Service employees of all disciplines; to promote and enhance the professions of National Park Service employees and their spirit; to support management and the perpetuation of the National Park Service and the National Park System; and to provide a forum for social enrichment. ANPR provides education and other training to develop and/or improve knowledge and skills of National Park Service employees of all disciplines and those interested in these professions. ANPR provides a forum for discussion of common concerns of National Park Service employees and provides information to the public.

As an organization that strongly supports the fundamental purpose of the National Park Service (NPS) defined in statutory law, we believe that the *boots-on-the-ground* experience in operating national parks represented by our members is worthy of your consideration. If you put together legislation for the agency's future, please consider these thoughts:

Just Another Report?

Our experience with results from management and operations reports in the NPS is varied, but I think most of us have at one time or another in our careers encountered a situation where someone above us in the NPS hierarchy mandated that a plan be completed, only to have that completed plan sit on a shelf and never be used. Then five years later comes down the edict that the plan must be updated and revised by a specific date, even though the plan has not been touched in those intervening years. It is very frustrating to work on assignments that appear not to have any likely need or use, especially when your work plate is already full with what you perceive to be real, substantive issues and assignments. ANPR does not particularly want to be involved with "just another report" if it is likely that the National Parks Second Century Commission Report is just one of those documents that sit on the shelf.

Last year in Knoxville, Tennessee NPS Director Jon Jarvis spoke about the National Parks Second Century Commission Report comparing it to other well-written NPS reports in recent decades. He cited such reports as the The Vail Agenda Report and Recommendations to the Director (1992), the National Park Service Strategic Plan (1997), and the 2001 Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century Report. There were also others like the 12-Point Plan — *the challenge* Report (1985) and the NPS Business Plan Initiative in the early years of the last decade. Director Jarvis elaborated this thought by explaining that good reports containing good recommendations that can be used as park management and operational planning tools alone are not enough. He said that the NPS does not need more reports, and now is the time to get some of these things accomplished! We agree.

If one reads these various reports from the last three decades one finds very similar, recurring language and recommendations. So, the real questions seem to be how can we move

recommendations to actions and outcomes and what motivation might Congress apply to garner the results it desires? Would legislation codifying some of the recommendations in the National Parks Second Century Commission Report have the desired effect? Maybe, but we think any such legislation would need to include some accountability measures to be effective. These accountability measures, in our opinion, would need to be directed at the two areas that most quickly gain individual NPS employees' attention, those being operations' appropriations at the park level and the employee's annual performance appraisal. We are not saying that we think NPS employees are inept or unskilled or that they are willfully non-responsive to the prerogatives of Congress. We are saying that sometimes NPS employees have difficulty prioritizing their work when often the quantity of that work requested by the Executive Branch, Congress, and the visiting public is greater than the number of work hours available to accomplish it. But available funding at the park level and our individual annual performance appraisal, the latter of which is tied to our in-agency reputation and self-esteem, gets our attention quickly.

The following is an example of an instance where Congress passed legislation directing the NPS to accomplish something, but did not include enough accountability measures in the legislation. In 1976 Congress passed legislation that mandated General Management Plans for each unit of the National Park System be prepared and revised with an annual deadline of January 1 for the NPS Director to report back to Congress on the status of these plans [codified at Title 16 USC §1a-7(b)]. However, since there was neither "a carrot nor a stick" included in the legislation, work on these plans has languished for decades for some park units, and even some parks that have finalized them do not routinely use them for management decision making and/or revise them in a timely fashion. Had greater accountability measures/incentives, both positive and negative, been included in the legislation in 1976 perhaps Congress may have received the full results that it desired and been able to more adequately provide targeted legislative oversight in the following decades.

Workforce Recruitment and Diversity

Almost every uniformed NPS employee has at one time or another been asked by someone in the visiting public, "How do I get a job like yours?" And, quite frankly the path to such a job is sometimes almost unexplainable. There are certainly a myriad of improvements we think the NPS could make in its recruitment and hiring procedures.

How does the NPS recruit a workforce of the best and brightest that is reflective of the America's diversity? Step one might be working with the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to better define what academic requirements are necessary for specific NPS jobs. A high percentage of the jobs in the NPS have a strong natural and/or cultural resource management component, yet very few of those jobs require a 4-year degree in a natural or cultural science or resource management. It seems like a mistake in recruitment not to focus on those individuals that have shown an academic interest and academic success at the knowledge underpinning the work. In particular those positions titled "Park Ranger," the iconic position of the NPS workforce, should be included in this degree-holding group targeted for recruitment. The NPS can do that by working with OPM to specify the degree programs that would qualify.

The National Parks Second Century Commission Report recommends:

"Build a robust internal research and scholarship capacity in the sciences and humanities to guide management and protection of our nation's natural, historic, and cultural heritage."

Our perception is that this robust capacity in the sciences and humanities would also be well-served with employees robustly educated and interested in those same subjects.

A second thought is for the NPS to lobby OPM to reverse its ban on allowing selecting officials to utilize the Outstanding Scholar hiring authority. It allows non-competitive hiring of college graduates that have proven to be academically skilled (must have a 3.5 GPA or higher) in fields of study directly applicable to the work they would perform as NPS employees. Our recollection is that this authority was discontinued by OPM to prevent agencies from getting around consideration of applicants with veteran's preference. While the federal hiring process can be cumbersome, confusing, and frustrating for applicants and selecting officials, this hiring authority is easy to understand and apply for everyone involved. It can also be helpful to veterans that have college diplomas. Another hiring authority that can be highly useful for workforce recruitment is the Student Career Employment Program (SCEP). But this takes active recruitment efforts at universities and colleges to identify students in the proper fields of study and the proper temperament, skills, interests, and knowledge to work for the NPS. Further, there is a lack of effort to retain NPS employees after they graduate and lose Student Temporary Employment Program (STEP) status. These employees create an opportunity to hire a permanent employee that has experience and training in the position and with the NPS. Hiring officials and supervisors should actively work to provide SCEP opportunities to STEP employees who have career interests within the NPS.

Here is just one example of a college graduate (Stanford University) that has now given up on working for the NPS:

“After a backcountry internship at Yellowstone in 2005 and some seasonal jobs with the Forest Service, I reluctantly got out of field work for land management agencies and took a permanent job at Stanford where I've been working ...3+ years. Eventually, I would like to go back to work for the park service, forest service, or BLM in resource management and/or planning...I mentioned that I think one of biggest barriers for would-be applicants is that the application procedure is so confusing. As an example, it took a law professor I work with at Stanford several days to decipher the application requirements for a GS-05 seasonal ranger job and then to enter and upload all the pieces.”

Finally in regards to recruitment, we believe that the NPS could and should form close relationships with universities, community colleges, and other schools specifically to advance and recruit for NPS career opportunities. This should be a primary job responsibility for an employee or employees in each park unit and not just a collateral assignment that someone gets around to once every few years. These relationships require nurturing and active communications to make them pay sustaining dividends in terms of interested, well-educated applicants. As we will describe in the paragraphs below ANPR has already taken the lead to form some university partnerships. All that is required of NPS is for the agency to join productively with us in this endeavor. The NPS does not need to spend a lot of money here or invent a new bureaucratic wheel!

Employee diversity, especially racial diversity seems to be a goal that continues to elude the NPS. In our perception, the key is to create a racially diverse applicant pool for selecting officials to hire employees from because diversity of the NPS workforce will never increase if there are not diverse applicants on the list of selectees. We have watched the NPS try many different techniques over the years without achieving the desired results. Could it be several factors that seem to preclude a diverse applicant pool including confusing application processes, lack of successful agency recruitment methods, and failure by recruiters to explain what the internal culture of the NPS is about and how to navigate within it?

Here is an area where we think ANPR could help the NPS under a cooperative agreement. In recent years ANPR has started an ANPR College Chapters program where students at a university or college that aspire to one day work for the NPS can form a chapter and begin to understand the NPS culture and ways in which they might make themselves more competitive for NPS jobs. We currently have five student chapters, but we have not yet been able to start up any chapters at schools with a high percentage of minorities. The main stumbling block seems to be, as described to us by some of the responding professors, that their students have limited incomes and have pretty-well stretched their financial abilities already just to be enrolled in college. They do not have the \$45 necessary to join ANPR, and they certainly do not have the financial resources required to travel to ANPR's annual professional conference to learn more about the NPS culture and to network with potential selecting officials. And, a small non-profit such as ANPR that operates only on the membership dues it collects cannot afford to spend more than it takes in on servicing members or for travel expenses for members.

We cannot emphasize enough that getting hired into a NPS job often requires more than an education and technical skills. It also requires an understanding of NPS application procedures and best application preparation techniques, as well as an understanding of how to navigate the NPS agency culture to increase competitiveness and opportunities for networking within that culture. The NPS does not appear to have the human resources to do much sustained mentoring, coaching, and networking with groups of minority students. ANPR does have that ability if some source of funding, such as a National Park Foundation grant, could be secured.

The National Parks Second Century Commission Report recommends:

“The National Park Service should form partnerships with academic institutions to provide rigorous staff training and continuing education programs.” and “use...other means to actively recruit a new generation of National Park Service leaders that reflects the diversity of the nation.”

We say do not limit these partnerships to just training and continuing education. Use these partnerships to recruit a diverse workforce and from this diverse workforce a diverse group of new leaders will emerge as their careers progress.

Development and Training

In the biannual Federal Employee Satisfaction Survey in 2009 NPS employees ranked their agency at a score that put it 206 out of the 216 agencies surveyed with regards to their satisfaction with the training and development opportunities available to them. This low score is statistically unchanged for the last four of these surveys. In a less comprehensive 2007 survey of NPS employees, ANPR found that almost half of the respondents indicated that they would look to organizations such as ANPR to offer professional development and training opportunities. Our assumption was that these responses further indicated that these employees were not getting everything they wanted in terms of professional development and training.

However, one answer neither of these surveys ascertains is “What specific training courses and/or professional development opportunities or categories of the same do you believe the agency should be providing to you?” Here is another area where ANPR could help the NPS. We have funding from a Turner Foundation grant that would allow us to survey NPS employees via email to determine what they think the NPS is missing with regard to training and professional development opportunities. However, our last attempt to survey NPS employees via email was halted by the agency when questions surfaced concerning the source and validity of the email.

Should the NPS choose to partner with us to obtain such information we would need some advance notice to regional and park-level Information Technology Specialists to avoid a similar shut down. Perhaps the NPS could accomplish this survey on their own with existing funding, but potential respondents may more freely give this information to sources outside the agency such as ANPR. ANPR also offers professional development training courses to its members at our annual conference and such information would help us choose the best offerings.

We certainly believe there are current NPS training courses that should be supported and enhanced where appropriations allow. One such training is the recently established Superintendent's Academy. The duration of this academy may not be long enough to sufficiently investigate the lengthy list of responsibilities assigned to park superintendents. The greater flaw is that the academy is only offered to those that have already been selected as Superintendents. It would make more sense to us to make selections for this training from persons at the next lower level who are interesting in becoming a Superintendent. Field training and evaluation should be included. Those who do well would qualify for more challenging positions, those who do not would go to less complex parks or none at all. The NPS should be training professionals to perform the Superintendent assignment beforehand, not just selecting someone into it and hoping they will perform satisfactorily.

Seasonal, temporary employees, the workers who most often work face to face with the general public, particularly suffer from a lack of development and training. In addition, they lack employer-provided health insurance; they do not accrue retirement benefits; they lack recognition for longevity ("step increases"); and they are typically laid off from government service for all but three to four months of the year. The agency has begun to suffer the effects of employee dissatisfaction, as seen in the migration of talent from NPS to other agencies such as the Bureau of Land Management, US Army Corps of Engineers, Forest Service, State Parks, and private industry. If we want to remain the premier park agency of the world, we need to provide our employees with more opportunities for career growth and satisfaction, or else they will work for someone else. It would be a shame to reach the 100th anniversary of the National Park Service in six years while declining in our talent and effectiveness as an agency due to poor investment in the futures and cares of seasonal and full-time employees. The inevitable result will be a decrease in the quality of the individuals protecting and managing our national treasures.

As we discussed earlier in the workforce recruitment and diversity section of these remarks, it can be difficult to thrive in any work situation without a full understanding of the workplace's history and culture. Many of our longer serving members remember days in the NPS when some employees were fortunate enough to attend lengthy agency orientation courses (some as long as 12 weeks). Such training laid an excellent career foundation and immersed the employee (and sometimes their family, too) in the agency's history and culture. While courses of this duration may no longer be feasible for every permanent employee of the NPS to attend, the current NPS Fundamentals Training Program offers a portion of those same benefits. The NPS has budgeted for the costs of this training at the national level, so it is not necessary to take money from parks' individual budgets for their employees to attend. We believe this program should be expanded and made mandatory for permanent employees, especially those that wish to enter supervisory and management positions later in their careers.

One last piece of the training and professional development puzzle that needs a fix is the individual park's travel expenditures ceiling. Our recollection is that these ceilings were established at the insistence of Congress to curb what they considered to be "boondoggle-type" travel that was wasteful. However, if the ceilings are set too low then all allowable travel dollars at the park level can be eaten up by certain trainings and/or meetings that are mandated by law,

and/or regulation, and/or NPS policy. In these situations employees may receive no access to professional development opportunities or training courses for years at a time and this can lead to frustration, resentment, and a workforce that is not prepared to step up to the next level of work through reason of natural attrition or emergency circumstances. We concur with the National Parks Second Century Commission Report recommendation that:

“The National Park Service should follow private sector practices by investing an amount equal to 4% of its annual personnel budget each year in professional development.”

This amount should be fairly divided among that park’s employees based on ability and desire, and any portion of it spent on travel should not be counted against the park’s travel ceiling.

Conclusion

ANPR wants to join Congress and the NPS in taking actions and producing outcomes that mirror recommendations found in the National Parks Second Century Commission Report. We do not want this to be “just another report” that looks nice on the shelf but produces no substantive improvements or results. We believe we can be of the most assistance to Congress and the NPS in increasing the diversity of applicants for NPS positions through our College Chapters Program, and by surveying NPS employees to ascertain what types of NPS-provided training and professional development opportunities they view as lacking.

Our members represent over 10,000 years of experience in operating and managing units of the National Park System. For many of us the National Park idea, its fundamental purpose as described in the act of August 25, 1916 as amended, is the central theme not only in our professional lives, but in many cases our families’ lives and values, our sense of patriotism, and our very definition of what being an American is. In ANPR’s 2007 survey of NPS employees 60% responded that they viewed their connection to the NPS as a way of life, not just a job. We pledge to assist this subcommittee and the National Park Service in whatever ways we can to assure that the National Park idea remains relevant and accessible to our citizens today and for the many, many more yet to be born.

On behalf of the Association of National Park Rangers, I thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.