

New media

IN THE NATIONAL PARKS

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New media in the national parks is not a new phenomenon. National Park Service areas have communicated with visitors using the World Wide Web for a while now. Many NPS areas publish digital brochures as PDF files. Some parks post digital video that is streamed over the Internet. Some areas also provide digital image collections for visitors to access and use. These are all forms of what is called new media.

New media is defined by its reliance on digital technology for production and distribution. In its most powerful form it permits media convergence into a new media or distribution approach. Other forms of new media include audio programs for mobile interpretive devices and cell phones, virtual worlds like Second Life, and blogs and wikis.

Not all of these forms of new media are part of the current NPS communication strategy, so they might not be familiar. One form of new media that is beginning to find a place in agency communication efforts is podcasting.

Podcasting is a way of distributing audio, video, PDF files and interactive links to visitors via digital means. The term podcast is a blending of the words iPod and broadcast and is often associated with visitors being able to play podcasts on their portable media player (such as an iPod) or their computer.

Figure 1. Screenshot of current NPS podcast offerings in iTunes (April 4, 2008)

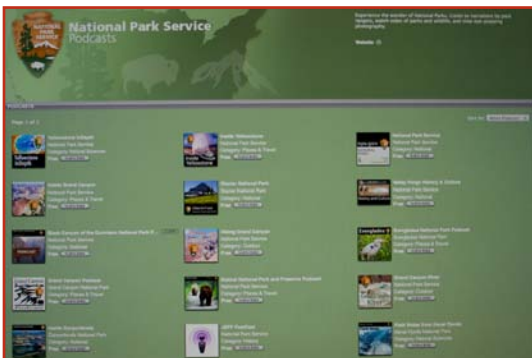


Figure 2. Sample podcasting program opportunities for NPS managers

Management Concern	Sample Podcast Program Opportunities
Administration	area news policy reviews and announcements sharing of results of public involvement in decision making public relations statements seasonal closures and area restrictions
Interpretation	audio or video guide of visitor centers and museums • trail and road guides and tours • environmental education programs • orientation to area • special event programming • historic reenactments and performances
Protection	trail and backcountry safety • area rules and regulation presentations • wild animal safety (bear, alligator, bison, rattlesnake) • campground security and safety • backcountry permit system presentations
Resource Management	wildland fire and fire management practices and issues historical and cultural resource protection Leave No Trace practices public involvement in resource management decisions information on prevention/control of invasive species

The Visitor Experience

From a visitor's perspective getting a favorite NPS podcast is pretty easy. Using common music and podcast directory software, like iTunes (www.apple.com/itunes), visitors search for NPS-created shows that they are interested in and either download an individual episode or subscribe to the podcast show. Currently there are 15 NPS podcasts listed under the NPS banner on iTunes. See *Figure 1*.

When a visitor subscribes to a show it becomes a part of their chosen podcast collection. What is significant and makes podcasting unique is what happens next. Once a show is subscribed to, any subsequent show episodes published by the NPS area automatically download to the subscriber's computer. Subscribers can then transfer the episode files to their iPod or other device (i.e., Apple TV) for playback on the home widescreen television.

This process is much like subscribing to a magazine. Once you get a magazine subscription, the latest issue shows up in your mailbox. Each issue may have a different focus. In the case of podcasting, you subscribe to the podcast (or show) and each show has episodes. Upon subscription to a show the latest episodes of the podcast download automatically. As new episodes are published they are sent to the visitor's computer with no effort required by the visitor. A person need only open the media player (iTunes or other software) and click on the show to enjoy the latest NPS audio, video or print episode.

Podcasting brings together the attractiveness of audio or video content with the delivery mechanism of a magazine.

This is what makes podcasting so intriguing for NPS managers.

The Manager's Experience

Imagine for a moment that your NPS unit could deliver your park brochure, newspaper and most compelling interpretive media program for free to anyone interested. All visitors would need to do is simply click a button to subscribe to it. Would you do that? The answer for most managers would probably be yes. Podcasting provides that capability. *Figure 2* provides some potential podcast programming ideas that managers might explore.

From the perspective of a manager and podcast producer, the development of a podcast occurs in five steps:

1. Develop podcasting opportunities/needs and related strategies
2. Produce media for distribution: audio, video or PDF files
3. Create a text file (i.e., XML file) used in the podcast subscription, also known as the RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feed
4. Upload XML files and media files to the NPS server
5. Test the podcast with podcatcher software (e.g., iTunes)

In large NPS areas managers have technology specialists who can assist with this process. Other areas may need to depend on fostering partnerships with media production specialists in their area. Typically these individuals may be found in local public or community television and radio organizations. You also could contract with a specialist in the area to help.

Colleges and universities with interpretive programs also may be a good source of support. Northern Michigan University in Marquette, Michigan, is working with Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore to produce podcasts. NMU's Outdoor Recreation Leadership and Management Program teaches podcasting methods in its interpretive media course. NPS managers could provide students who have new media knowledge and interpretive skills with internships or volunteer opportunities. This arrangement could benefit all parties — interns, the NPS site and park visitors.

What Makes A Podcast Good?

As in all NPS media, production quality is an ever-present concern. Podcasting is no different. Quality audio, image and video are essential. What separates the average podcast from the good podcast is not only quality production but story development and timeliness.

Unlike the park brochure or interpretive panel the park podcast is not a one-shot ef-

fort. Podcasting, like a magazine, is a flexible media that can be published in a serial nature. It provides unique opportunities to produce seasonal and situational interpretive and administrative programming to benefit both the visitor and the park area. Podcasting can be done as a one-shot effort but is most effective when it is designed to build an audience over time. This serial component challenges managers to think creatively about how podcasts are used. How could you capitalize on a series of podcasts about your NPS area?

Recent NPS Podcast Review

A small research group at NMU conducted a survey of 206 NPS areas to assess current involvement in podcasting and other new media. The survey was completed between January and March 2008. The survey staff reviewed each park's website and iTunes to find active podcasts. Included were national parks, monuments, recreation areas, historical parks, lakeshores and seashores. The survey

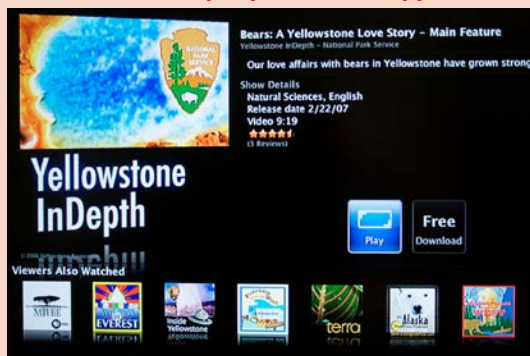
found only 10 areas currently host podcasts with accompanying RSS feeds — just 4.8 percent of NPS areas. All but two of the areas with a podcast were national parks, bringing the number of national parks with podcasts to 13.8 percent. Although podcasting is in its infancy in the NPS, it is expected to grow. Listed below are the current NPS areas with podcasting as part of their communication strategy. These podcasts have been produced by NPS personnel or partners and published under the NPS name.

1. Black Canyon of the Gunnison
2. Canyonlands
3. Curecanti
4. Everglades
5. Grand Canyon
6. Glacier
7. Katmai
8. Kenai Fjords
9. Valley Forge
10. Yellowstone

BEST PODCASTS

In examining the presence of NPS podcasting we also reviewed each podcast episode for quality of production and story line. Here is our assessment of the best podcasts in the areas of NPS administration, resource management, interpretation and protection.

Yellowstone InDepth podcast on Apple TV



Management Focus: Resource Management
Podcast Title: Yellowstone InDepth
Episode: Bears: Yellowstone a Love Story **Format:** Video
Length: 09:19 min (77.4 MB) **Producer:** Jennifer Shoemaker, NPS 2006; published as podcast in February 2007

This podcast is a great example of quality videography and the ability of Yellowstone National Park to partner with the Yellowstone Association in its production. The podcast serves as a powerful management tool that describes the historical relationship between park visitors and Yellowstone's bears. Since the late 1800s the interaction between man and wild bears has been a heated management topic. Some past interactions led to the habituation of the Yellowstone bear population. Since then the NPS has spent years undoing the damage and reintroducing bears to their natural habitat. This compelling program chronicles the progress and helps the public understand this important resource management issue. Find this podcast in iTunes by searching for Yellowstone InDepth.

Hiking Grand Canyon podcast on Apple TV



Management Focus: Protection
Podcast Title: Hiking Grand Canyon
Episode: Preparation-Hiking Grand Canyon **Format:** Video
Length: 08:16 min (16 MB) **Producer:** Environmental Media Corp. for the Grand Canyon Association and the NPS, 1997

Video reformatted for podcasting 2008. The Hiking Grand Canyon podcast is a great example of how new media can be used for visitor protection. In this three-part series viewers are provided with a solid overview of how to best prepare for hiking in the rugged and fragile Grand Canyon environment. The podcast contains helpful safety information for those less experienced with outdoor adventures. Specifically, the episode touches upon important preparation tips for taking care of yourself and the environment. The information is concise and fluid in its delivery. This podcast is a reformatted park video originally produced in 1997. Find this podcast in iTunes by searching for Hiking Grand Canyon.

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Katmai podcast on Apple TV



Management Focus: Interpretation

Podcast Title: Katmai Podcast

Episode: The Sockeye Story **Format:** Video

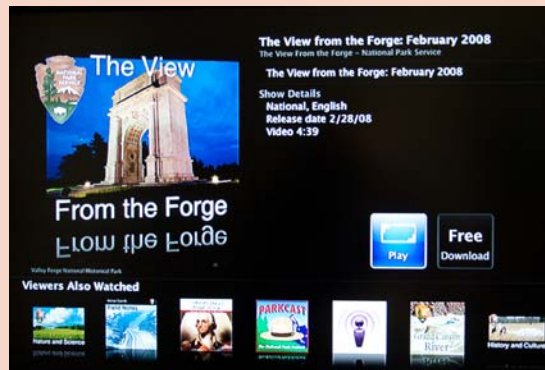
Length: 04:15 min (6.5 MB)

Producer: Michael Glore, National Park Service, 2007

One of the best podcasts in the interpretation category, The Sockeye Story tells the story of the life cycle of the sockeye salmon. The producer (Michael Glore) utilizes still images and music to create a strong interpretive experience. Glore modulates his voice well and is clear in his presentation. The music chosen for the podcast is very mellow and does not overpower the interpreter. This is a very nice podcast that is thought out and communicates its interpretive message very well. It is a good example of a podcast production that does not need video elements to make it work. It can be found in iTunes simply by searching for Katmai Podcast.

These four podcasts provide a glimpse into the potential of NPS podcasting. They demonstrate the value of new media for the resource management, protection, interpretation and administration elements of national park management.

Valley Forge podcast on Apple TV



Management Focus: Administration

Podcast Title: The View From the Forge

Episode: February, 2008 **Format:** Video

Length: 04:40 min (54.9 MB)

Producer: Valley Forge National Historical Park, 2008

From an administrative perspective being able to get timely information to visitors about policy and programs is essential. This is what The View From the Forge is doing with its monthly podcast. It is podcasting in a serial form and takes advantage of the potential of podcast syndication to bring updated programs to the view as soon as they are available. The February, 2008 episode covers information about the park resource, upcoming events, recent additions to the encampment bookstore, and a review of significant public events that have been successfully completed. This serves as a park video magazine of sorts and is a terrific way of publishing this type of content without the actual costs of publishing a television program or paper magazine. More park areas should consider publishing this type of programming as part of their podcasting strategy. The podcast can be found in iTunes by searching for The View from the Forge.

The Future of NPS Podcasting

Current NPS podcasts are typically experienced on personal computers or portable media players. With the steady growth of desktop technologies that enables parks to produce their own audio and video content, podcasting will continue to grow in the NPS. As that occurs, the ways in which the public engages in podcast viewing will also grow. Set-top television devices, like Apple TV, allow people in their homes to watch podcasts without a computer or iPod as an interface. Some NPS areas, like Glacier and Canyonlands, are now publishing their podcasts in Apple TV format. These parks are ahead of the pack in podcast production and publishing.

As park visitors become more aware of NPS podcasts, they will embrace the technology via their computer, iPod or Apple TV.

As a communication tool podcasting is only limited by an agency's ability to creatively use and promote this approach to new media delivery. As an outreach tool it has stagger-

ing potential. Podcasting brings together the strengths of rich multimedia experiences with the ease and low cost of program syndication delivery. This is a unique combination. If properly planned and produced, NPS podcasts will reach audiences in new ways, at new times and build new valued stakeholders. We encourage you to explore the possibilities of podcasting — the new media in the national parks. 🏠

On the Web

For more information on podcasting in the NPS and other selected samples visit these websites:

www.nps.gov/archive/yell/insideyellowstone/podcasts/index.htm

www.civilwartraveler.com/audio

www.nps.gov/cany/photosmultimedia/insidecanyonlands.htm

<http://www.parkcast.com>

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