

# ‘My role was to listen’

Ranger Dick Martin: An interview with historian Alison Steiner

In 1985, Dick Martin became the second superintendent of Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve. His five years in Wrangell taught him how to work with local communities in the face of controversy. During an interview conducted for the ANPR Oral History Project, he reflected on the lessons he learned while living and working in rural Alaska.

The situation at Wrangell-St. Elias — it was a new park, five years old. At the time, I was the second superintendent. (The regional office told me to) report in January. Coldest month of the year in Alaska. I get up there. It’s 60 below. I can’t rent or buy a place in town because they won’t rent to the Park Service. We were the least loved people in this small town in rural Alaska. You went into the grocery store, they gave you dirty looks. You buy gas at the gas station, you’d hear snide comments from the back of the room: “There’s a goddamn parkie out there.” We were pretty much socially ostracized from polite society. I finally found a place (to rent), a little ways out of town. A one-room cabin with a loft for sleeping. No running water. Outhouse and a wood stove. I lived there for five years.

The place was hugely controversial. I think it was one of the most controversial parks in the system at the time. There were several new parks or expanded parks in Alaska right then as a result of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980. If we’d been the one new park with 13 old ones, we’d have been fine, I think, because the regional office and the other parks could’ve supported us. But there were five others — Gates of the Arctic, Northwest Areas, Kenai Fjords, Bering Land Bridge and Yukon Charley — that were all just as new as Wrangell.

The work requirements were just plain overwhelming because of all the demands and needs of the park as well as our limited ability with staff to perform them. Every day we had to do about a hundred things, and we could only do about 10 of ’em. It was a great exercise in priority setting. A real lesson learned in dealing with the big rocks, not the little rocks.

Wrangell was, of course, the largest park in the system then by far. Thirteen million acres. It was essentially the size of the state of West Virginia.

There were a lot of ongoing uses out there



In Volcanoes National Park, Rwanda, 2012

that had been allowed prior to the establishment of the park that made it very controversial. One of the big ones was sport hunting. There was also mining under BLM management. There were folks that lived in the park, sometimes under permit but more often not.

I was poorly prepared, to put it mildly, for the level of controversy, acrimony, and in some cases, downright hostility to National Park Service management. Having been a ranger for 15 years at that time, I’d dealt with a lot of unhappy people and a lot of dangerous situations. But dealing with a room full of unhappy local people was something I was poorly prepared for.

It became obvious to me that there were few people I could go to in the National Park Service to provide me with advice on how to deal with this issue productively. Productively being how do we move the park forward, how do we establish NPS principles in management, and (how do we) do this in a way that does not result in a mushroom-shaped cloud of acrimony, hostility and political repercussions.

The approach that finally evolved in my mind was that my role was to listen. My role was to be sympathetic and understanding. To assure I understood what folks’ concerns were. To explain what the NPS was actually doing and proposed to do. To assure folks that their concerns would be listened to and considered. To explain that the national park program would, in fact, be established and would be followed. And that we would mitigate that to

the extent we could when folks had a legitimate concern.

I decided, for lack of a good alternative, to hold regular meetings, to talk to anybody that would talk, to listen to anybody that had anything to say, to get back with folks that had questions, to promise that we would always be available to hear their concerns, and that we would respond with what we knew to be correct.

The first year I was there, we had 39 public meetings, all over that part of Alaska. Never turned down an invitation to go to a meeting, even if it was in a bar. Went and listened. Responded as best I could. And I always got back with people regarding their concerns.

And over the course of a year, I believe that we, the park staff, gained credibility with people because we were speaking facts, not fantasy. We weren’t making promises we couldn’t keep. And we were not saying things that were not true. We were speaking facts and we were responding sympathetically, understandingly.

The second year I was there, we had fewer meetings. By the third year, some amazing things began to happen. Many of the concerns that had been expressed began to be relaxed a little bit. Totally, no. But I began to feel like I was more welcome when I went to the grocery store and the gas station in the towns around (Wrangell).

I found it a tremendously rewarding experience, and a lot of fun and very inspiring. I learned a *tremendous* amount about dealing with controversy — *tremendous amount*. This helped me so much in my later career in Washington, D.C., and particularly at Death Valley. At Wrangell, I grew as an individual. I grew as a parent, I grew as a family member, and I grew as a leader.

I thank the Park Service for giving me that experience. If the Park Service hadn’t been there to trust me to succeed, I wouldn’t have been able to learn and grow. 🏔️

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