

Preparing the Next Generation of Protected Area Managers and Researchers: A Panel Discussion on the 2008 ParkBreak Program (panel discussion summary)

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Background

In 2016, the National Park Service (NPS) will celebrate its 100-year anniversary. In preparation, the agency and its partners have stepped up efforts to be world leaders in natural and cultural resource stewardship by engaging the next generation of park managers and natural resource management scientists through the Centennial Initiative.¹ Over the next 100 years, continuous challenges, both predicted and unknown, will drive the operation of the NPS and other land management agencies. For example, shifting demographics, and population migrations closer to NPS units will create new target audiences. Advances in technology, and trends in youth activity levels will require adaptation of education and outreach methods. Climate change will continue to pose challenges for resource managers, and in some cases necessitate development of new management strategies. Future NPS employees may contend with increased visitation pressure, and the dilemma of how to balance use and preservation. Collaborative management will become more important to ensure the public is engaged in the decision making process, thus adding relevancy to the NPS. Additionally, within the coming decade, a large turnover of NPS employees will create a need to fill many vacant positions with the next generation of conservation-minded stewards.

This new cohort of scientists will be required to promote the same tenets developed by previous NPS employees, such as appreciation of nature, preservation of history, and pride in places of national significance. However, the new cohort must also develop innovative methods of sharing the conservation ethic in light of the challenges mentioned above, namely shifting demographics and competition with the numerous avocations available to today's public. By attracting young, bright, and diverse conservation professionals, the NPS will continue to share its mission and proceed towards its goals, while gaining the unique perspectives of a youthful generation that may better engage the current public.

For the sake of successional planning, the NPS, United States Geological Survey (USGS), George Wright Society, Texas A&M University, and the Student Conservation Association sponsored and organized the inaugural Park Break program, which took place

in March 2008. Park Break manifested as a week-long series of theme-based seminars designed to expose graduate students to critical land management issues in a field setting, connect students with conservation leaders, and exchange perspectives on the future of park and protected area management. This undertaking introduced small groups of graduate students to pertinent issues faced by protected area managers, thereby contributing to their professional development. Selected through a competitive application process, students attended one of four sessions associated with a relevant theme. Acadia National Park hosted seven students to discuss the role of civic engagement in protected area management. Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area hosted eight students to discuss the tenants of conservation policy. Gateway National Recreation Area hosted six students to interface challenges of global climate change with protected area management. Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore hosted eight students to explore opportunities and drawbacks to management in the wildland-urban interface. This unique experience gave graduate students an insider look at the issues facing the NPS, and provided them with the opportunity to interact with park managers in an intimate setting.

During the 2009 George Wright Society meeting, approximately one year after completing the 2008 Park Break program, interested students organized a panel discussion to provide program organizers with feedback, recruit potential students, communicate with future park hosts, and share students' perspectives on program effectiveness. This paper outlines impacts of Park Break 2008, summarizes the participants' suggestions on how the program could improve, and offers several insights into how land management agencies and professionals can effectively bring the new generation of scholars and professionals into the fold of natural and cultural resource management.

Impacts of the program

The 2008 Park Break program was a resounding success. Statements about the uniqueness of the opportunity recurred throughout the discussion. Panel participants greatly appreciated being engaged in a forum to share their perspectives on the Park Break program. Many emphasized the effectiveness of place-based learning to better understand the issues faced by the NPS. During Park Break, students conversed with resource managers about case studies related to their Park Break theme that personified the challenges at each park. The student participants served as a focus group to explore varying issues and perspectives. This technique was engaging because it encouraged them to share individual insights on how parks could potentially solve specific challenges. An overall theme within all Park Break sessions was consideration of how parks and protected areas will remain relevant for the next generation. Reflecting on how to grapple with the challenges of resource management, one student said, "We saw how the idea of conservation was manifested at a particular park and learned how managers apply the theories we've learned about in classroom settings."

One of the main goals of the panel discussion was to recruit potential park hosts and share this opportunity with other students at the George Wright Society meeting. Several park superintendents and staff expressed interest in hosting Park Break students in the future. Employees and collaborators from 2008 Park Break sessions also attended the panel discussion to share their insights into the program. A number of audience members were

2009 Park Break fellows and hosts, held the following weeks at the Delaware Water Gap, North Coast and Cascade Network parks, and Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve.

Panelists reflected on the atmosphere surrounding the Park Break experience. The host park managers were enthusiastic about students selecting their protected area as a destination for spring break, as such, providing a welcoming environment and excellent accommodations. The student participants felt respected and engaged by the park employees. One student joked, “We were treated like royalty at these parks; normally as graduate students we’re on the low end of the totem pole.” At Delaware Water Gap for example, the superintendent and assistant superintendent attended the majority of the session, sending a clear message to their park staff that the perspectives of the Park Break participants were important to consider. At Indiana Dunes, staff from both the NPS and USGS trickled in and out of the presentations all week. Each day, more and more employees showed up to listen to the discussions as word spread about the Park Break program. At Acadia, the chief of resource management attended all sessions and facilitated a wealth of speakers from many of Acadia’s active partners, both governmental and non-governmental to demonstrate and discuss the importance of civic engagement in the success of Acadia.

The panelists also discussed the procedural aspects of the program such as the preparation material. Students felt sufficiently prepared, because a priori they were provided with seminal pieces of literature selected by the host parks to ensure that they would have a basic understanding of each area. This material taught students about key points in history that have influenced how conservation evolved, exposed them to the natural history that serves as a backdrop for addressing conservation, and covered the major challenges facing parks today. Their discussions ranged from small-scale topics, such as invasive species management, to bigger-picture issues, such as integrating social and ecological goals in NPS decision-making.

For some participants, Park Break significantly influenced and shaped their graduate research. For one of the students, it demonstrated a new avenue of research that she could pursue. As a student previously trained in the biophysical sciences, she was removed from the realm of social science research, yet always had a desire to work in outreach and extension. By the week’s end, she learned that civic engagement is legitimate scientific research. Her experience at Park Break shifted the focus of her dissertation research to the theme of how civic engagement techniques could be used to better achieve conservation goals.

Park Break served as an important networking opportunity, as students connected with other professionals they may continue to interact with throughout their careers. One student in particular, took advantage of this opportunity to secure a summer position working with Acadia National Park on visitor use issues. After lengthy conversations with park staff, the experience also provided the student with a dissertation topic. The connections students made with the broad swath of speakers at each respective Park Break site will be invaluable to propel them forward in their future careers. In an interview with a local newspaper that reported on the Park Break session at the Delaware Water Gap, one student emphasized the importance of networking with the variety of speakers and panelists, as well as the bright group of graduate student participants.²

The Park Break program exemplified the need for collaborations as an integral part of

effective park management. For example, the Indiana Dunes Park Break session had eight students from eight different universities spanning California, Missouri, Texas, North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, Vermont, and Michigan. Programs of study varied just as greatly, with roughly half the students holding strong training and experience in the social sciences, and half with a background in the biophysical sciences. Stated as a major gain of the program, the opportunity to work collaboratively with such a diversity of students is uncommon in many degree programs today. Students were able to foster these relationships by working together on student-led papers to be published in a special edition of *The George Wright Forum* or a similar outlet. Student participants have communicated by email and phone to develop and combine their ideas into critical thoughts for publication. Thus, the networking among Park Break students will greatly contribute to their future careers, as well as future management of parks and protected areas.

Potential areas of improvement

While the 2008 Park Break Program was highly successful in its objective to expose graduate student to the challenges faced by resource managers, there were several areas in need of improvement as identified by the panelists. First, no active recruitment took place at the parks despite the existence of multiple programs such as the Student Temporary Employment Program (STEP), the Student Career Experience Program (SCEP), and similar initiatives designed to help students transition from academia into professional careers. Students should also be aware of funding opportunities such as the Canon Scholarship or similar efforts that may be developed in its absence. Along a similar vein, discussions about how students' research interests align with different branches of the NPS could help to bring in 'green blood' and encourage students to envision how they can contribute to particular aspects of NPS management. Engaging students in conversations about these resources and teaching them about the stepping stones that are currently in place, will ensure that the new generation of young scholars are prepared to move into resource management positions in the future. Panelists also stated that it is essential for the students attending Park Break to get as much time engaged with the resource as possible. The program at Acadia was primarily held inside and there was very little time to get out into the park, mainly due to the rough winter weather on the coast of Maine. When considering future Park Break sites, location should be strongly taken into consideration to maximize time students can interact with the resource. Student participants also identified the potential benefits in diversifying the Park Break program to include cultural and historical units within the NPS.

Conclusion

As student participants of the 2008 Park Break program, it is our hope that Park Break may continue into the future. Improving our understanding of management challenges and agency operations, and developing skills in collaborative thinking are critical to our growth as students interested in park and protected area management. We, the student participants, appreciate the effort required to facilitate this program and hope that similar experiences will be available to help us, and our colleagues, become better conservation professionals. Additionally, we feel that managers and scientists involved at host NPS units would benefit from

the Park Break program through the fresh perspectives and enthusiasm offered by each group. A comment from a participating scientist at Acadia stated the discussions were “beneficial for the professionals who volunteered their time to participate. I think it was fantastic that the students were highly engaged in their work. Their questions showed their high knowledge base. So it was a great discussion because it gave the students direct access to the professionals (in the trenches).” Agencies involved with the Park Break program stand to gain from recruiting students interested in careers in land management, and by passing along their knowledge, thus better preparing the students for the complex challenges land management can pose.

In the forthcoming 100 years, changing social, political, and physical climates will require the best and brightest of the next generation entering the workforce. With recruitment and development programs like Park Break in operation, the NPS and other land management agencies will be able to actively prepare incoming employees to best serve their respective missions and recruit students who may otherwise be unaware of the opportunities that exist in participating agencies. The purpose of this panel discussion was to highlight the successes of the 2008 Park Break program thereby encouraging managers, GWS board members, and students to become involved and offer support. By outlining how Park Break can and will benefit managers into the future, we hope to have shown the importance of the program’s persistence and perhaps encouraged the birth of similar programs.

Endnotes

1. Dirk Kempthorne, “The Future of America’s National Parks: A report to the President of the United States.” (2007), www.nps.gov/2016.
2. Nick Troiano, “Future managers hear issues in running a park.” *Pike County Courier* (2008), March 27.