Stewards of the Human Landscape

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Cultural anthropology has proven to be an excellent fit with the mission of the National Park Service. The NPS applied ethnography program focuses on the array of communities and other groups who, because of their intimate relationship to place, have a stake in the agency's resource and development decisions. Through consultation and research, the program makes their voices more audible and the resources they traditionally value more visible in decision-making.

The program got a modest start in 1981, building the necessary policy foundations.[1] Later, external partners added their support, with the Society for Applied Anthropology and the American Anthropological Association taking prominent roles in the Congressional arena. Informal teamwork paid off in a small contract research fund and additional staff. The program expanded to include regional offices in Seattle, Sante Fe, Denver, and then Boston and Atlanta. Offices in the Great Lakes, the Great Plains, and Alaska expanded the group with their own regional anthropologists.

The program's main goal is to further democratize decision-making in park planning, resource management, and interpretation. This is accomplished through multiple strategies. One is to use ethnographic methods to identify communities, tribes, and other stakeholders. Some interest groups readily express their views in writing and at public meetings, and the law compels consultation with Native American groups. But people inexperienced with the language and process of federal planning often keep their concerns muted, do not come forward when opportunities arise, or reject involvement with bureaucratic protocol when they find it culturally incompatible with their own way of making decisions. Rigid deadlines and large-scale public meetings satisfy bureaucratic needs but rarely consider those of the community. Under the program's aegis, ethnographic field research reaches out to these constituents, meeting the dictates of the National Environmental Policy Act in the process.

The introduction of Rapid Ethnographic Assessment Procedures addressed the need for local voices early in planning. NPS planners necessarily tend to focus on visitors from afar and on nationally significant resources. Rapid assessments shine more local spotlights, revealing community concerns and the meanings assigned to places that sometimes diverge from, yet enrich, national values.

Although still experimental, rapid assessments have already reaped benefits. In Philadelphia, Setha Low and her team highlighted the importance of the Liberty Bell-largely seen as a Euro-American symbol of independence-to the history of neighboring African Americans as well as to more recent Caribbean immigrants.[2] In Washington D.C., Brett Williams and her team demonstrated the significance of urban national parks as neighborhood places where African American communities host homecomings, Hispanic teams play soccer on weekends, and urban denizens of many backgrounds cultivate gardens.[3] Community-building is a consequence of all these activities.

Through ethnography, local groups participate in the social construction of their own pasts. Parks shift from presenting an outsider's view to one that incorporates the perceptions of those whose lives and histories are being interpreted. Clearly, park visitors benefit from multiple, if sometimes conflicting, interpretations that convey real complexities instead of unidimensional, homogenized stories.

Interpreting plantation parks is a particular challenge. The tendency to interpret controversial pasts from the official record can mask the proud and painful experiences of African Americans and other minorities. Change is underway thanks partly to ethnographic work at the plantations of Louisiana's Cane River Creole National Historical Park. My work at Magnolia Plantation[4] and later interviewing at Oakland Plantation with Sherri Ann Lawson-Clark, Allison Peña, and Larry Van Horn[5] dramatized the strong, often divergent views of slavery among current descendants of enslaved people and their owners. What was a rational business system for some was an inhumane institution for others. Enslaved people developed strategies to counter slavery's pernicious effects: resistance movements, forms of public mimicry to ingratiate themselves to their owners, songs and dances to symbolize private resentments, and ways to

undermine the success of the plantation. Sharing these perspectives with visitors-southern and northern, national and international, as well as with the local people whose ancestral ways are the focus-confronts the park with difficult choices. Not doing so, however, abrogates our responsibilities as stewards of the nation's past and future. Cane River's superintendent agrees, saying that ethnographic assessments are extremely useful for understanding the complex cultural systems that NPS works with on the local level.[6]

Ethnography adds dimension to places ordinarily seen as having fixed, objectively defined boundaries, places categorized as archeological sites, historic structures, or cultural landscapes. Other characteristics emerge from the perspectives of people whose ethnic history and identity are traditionally associated with these resources and whose cultural survival depends, to some extent, on their continued use. The articles in this issue give a range of examples; others are baptismal sites, the churches at San Antonio Missions, the Sweet Auburn community of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Ellis Island buildings memorialized in myths about cultural passages from the old world to the new. We call them "ethnographic resources."[7] Because culturally informed management requires readily available information on these resources, the people who value them, and whose views must be considered, NPS has begun a computerized Ethnographic Resources Inventory that promises to become an important management tool.

National parks and the diverse peoples linked to them are members of the same ecosystem, bound by different yet joint interests to the same body of resources. Ethnography makes these links apparent.

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Footnotes

1. In 1981, Douglas H. Scovill, then Chief Anthropologist at the National Park Service, hired me to work with him in developing the program. Supporting the effort were the former Associate Director of Cultural Resources, Jerry L. Rogers, and the Deputy Associate Director of Cultural Resources, Rowland T. Bowers. In 1990, once the program foundations were built and NPS funded a limited pilot project, Hal Vreeland (later joined by Charley Cheney) of the Society for Applied Anthropology and Judith Lisansky and Lisa Jacobson of the American Anthropological Association began to educate Congress on the program's importance and the need for funding.

2. Low, Setha, Rapid Ethnographic Assessment: Independence National Park, NPS Denver Service Center, 1995.

3. Williams, Brett, et al., Rapid Ethnographic Assessment of Civil War Defenses of Washington and Anacostia Park Management Plans, NPS Denver Service Center, 1998.

4. Crespi, Muriel, A Brief Ethnography of Magnolia Plantation: Planning for Cane River Creole National Historical Park (draft), NPS Denver Service Center, 1999.

5. Crespi, Muriel, Sherri Ann Lawson-Clark, Allison Peña, and Larry Van Horn, A Brief Ethnography of Oakland Plantation (draft), NPS Denver Service Center, 1998.

6. Thanks to Superintendent Soulliere of Cane River Creole NHP and Cultural Resources Manager Fanelli of Independence NHP for their thoughtful comments.

7. Crespi, Muriel, "Inventorying Ethnographic Resources Servicewide," CRM, 10:4 (1987).