

ADVANCING ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP IN NEW YORK STATE PARKS AND HISTORIC SITES

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Ninety state park and historic site managers were engaged in a cooperative problem-solving training exercise to identify what they suggest needs to be done to more effectively manage and protect the natural and cultural resources of the New York State Park System. The QtP (Quality-through-Participation) management process was used for this purpose, and proved effective in determining primary needs and action strategies to facilitate implementation of stewardship ideals and principles on a regional and/or park-specific basis.

Background

In 1993, the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) formally released a study on the condition of the park and recreation estate under its administrative jurisdiction. This study -- "Fostering Environmental Stewardship: A First Report on Managing and Protecting the Natural and Cultural Resources of the New York State Park System" (Cobb 1993) -- was initiated as a component of the "New York Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan" that is updated every five years under administrative and statutory provisions of the Land and Water Conservation Act of 1965 (PL88-578, as amended). It was also undertaken in response to a gubernatorial directive for a stewardship action plan that "... would do more today to assure proper preservation and maintenance of our State Park System" (Cuomo 1990).

The study defined "environmental stewardship" as those policies, programs and resource management functions which serve to inventory, assess, protect or enhance the natural, cultural, scenic and recreational resources of New York's system of state parks and historic sites.

Implicit to this definition is the recognition of outdoor recreation as a beneficiary of clean water, clean air, pleasing landscapes and healthy ecosystems; that the state parks and historic sites themselves are perceived as benchmarks and standards for environmental quality.

This treatise is a sequel to a paper (Cobb 1993) summarizing the key findings and recommendations of the Fostering Environmental Stewardship Report presented at the Northeastern Recreation Research (NERR) Symposium in 1993, and constitutes a needs assessment for advancing environmental stewardship as determined by state park and historic site managers.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of OPRHP's Environmental Stewardship Report was to provide a preliminary evaluation of problems and threats affecting the integrity of the New York State Park System as well as to provide management with a comprehensive set of recommendations and action strategies for advancing stewardship ideals. A further purpose was to establish a framework for additional dialogue and appropriate follow-up action on a regional and park-specific basis. The New York State Park System consists of 11 park regions encompassing 150 state parks and 35 historic sites exclusive of the Adirondack and Catskill Parks. These regional facilities constitute diverse and distinctive

natural and cultural features as well as demographic variations among the more than 60 million people who visit them each year.

Methodology

In order to enhance understanding and gain consensus in measures necessary for advancing environmental stewardship of the State Park System, 90 facility managers were enlisted to identify priority needs or issues that they felt were required to be addressed to more effectively manage and protect the natural and cultural resources of their respective parks or sites. The technique involved applying concepts learned in a three-day Quality-through-Participation, or "QtP" Management Training Program conducted at OPRHP's Facility Managers' Institute in the fall of 1993. QtP is based on a management philosophy that envisions a work environment where employees at all levels can make the most of their expertise and creativity, and make decisions that support improved service (Brass 1993). OPRHP is one of 12 prototype agencies in New York State government where the new concepts embodied in total quality management are being applied.

Participants in seven QtP training groups were given the opportunity to review the environmental stewardship report, and were briefed on its scope and purpose. This included a review of findings of OPRHP environmental audits as well as the results of a survey of facility managers conducted by the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government (NARIG 1993). The NARIG survey identified approximately 4,300 internal and external threats variously affecting the natural, scenic and cultural resources of state parks and historic sites. In general, the threats related to high levels of visitation; physical, chemical and biological intrusions; multiple, and often conflicting demands for use of park resources; incompatible adjacent land uses; the isolation of park ecosystems; and, the debasement of park scenery. Facility managers were also advised of comparable problems being experienced by other park administrations (Caneday 1991; Meyers and Reid 1986; PCAO 1987), including those specific to the states of California (DPR 1983) and Missouri (DNR 1992) as well as the US National Park System (US GAO 1987; US NPS 1981). Similarly, managers were informed of OPRHP's concern about stewardship issues at joint public hearings conducted by New York State Assembly and Senate oversight committees in October 1993 (Caccese 1993).

Findings

Table 1 is a compendium of what OPRHP facility managers suggest needs to be done to more effectively advance environmental stewardship of state parks and historic sites. As noted, the primary concern to managers is the need for adequate personnel and fiscal resources to properly maintain and operate facilities. Indeed, at the legislative hearings on stewardship, it was established that since 1975, the number of OPRHP's permanent employees had decreased by over 30 percent, park attendance had increased by 50 percent, and a myriad of new programs, mandates and facilities had been added to OPRHP administrative responsibilities. These additional responsibilities required the expenditure of over \$20 million, or 20 percent of the agency's total operating budget that was not required to be spent in 1972.

Table 1. Facility managers' determination of primary needs for enhancing the management and protection of the natural and cultural resources of New York State Parks and Historic Sites.

Need/Issue Area	Number of QtP Groups Recognizing "Need" as a "Top 3" Major Priority ^a	Number of QtP Groups Recognizing "Need" but not as "Top 3"	Total percent of Groups Identifying "Need"
Availability of sufficient funds, staff and expertise to do the job	7	--	100
Training and professional development	5	1	86
Ability to identify, assess and/or help mitigate problems and threats to park resources resulting from adjacent properties, despoilation of viewsheds, air and water pollution, soil erosion, vandalism, overuse, et al.	4	3	100
Developing and/or updating master plans for state parks and historic sites	3	4	100
Information (inventories, surveys and research) about the natural and cultural resources, and the people who use them	3	2	71
Building formal and informal partnerships with other governmental organizations interest groups and the private sector	2	5	100
Public relations and communication: increasing public awareness, support and/or involvement in the park management function	1	6	100
Placing more emphasis on environmental education and interpretive programs for both internal and external customers	1	5	86

^{a/} Note: Each of the seven groups was asked to prioritize the three major needs of those identified. (Major priority needs incorporate tied rankings.)

The second priority need identified by facility managers is for training and professional development in the area of natural and cultural resources management. Facility managers have an array of educational backgrounds and experience, but see an on-going need for broadening their expertise and improving skills applicable to a large and diverse number of resource conditions.

Consistent with training and staff development, managers recognize the further need to assume a more pro-active posture in addressing problems and threats to park resources. Of the some 4,300 threats identified in the NARIG survey, about 30 percent were considered major or extreme.

Fourth, facility managers want plans that establish a clear direction for management. Developing and/or updating master plans for state parks and historic sites is a requisite for advancing stewardship and monitoring the condition of these facilities.

Lack of scientific or technical information at the park or site level is a problem that can exacerbate existing conditions. As a fifth important need, managers point out that it is difficult to manage and protect resources that are not well understood. They suggest that natural and cultural resource inventories be conducted in a systematic and timely manner.

A sixth need is for OPRHP to strengthen formal and informal partnerships with other organizations including the National Park Service, the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation, research institutions, and citizen interest groups. Facility managers note that many of the challenges posed by environmental stewardship are too big, and the needs too essential for them to handle on their own.

The two remaining findings of managers were the related needs of increasing public awareness and support of the park management function as well as to enhance public understanding and appreciation of natural and cultural resources through expanded environmental education and interpretive programs.

Discussion

The 1993 Facility Managers' Institute provided a valuable opportunity to ascertain what park and site managers perceive, in a comprehensive manner, what is needed to uphold stewardship ideals and principles embodied in OPRHP mandates, mission and vision statements.

Based on feedback from the seven working groups, and the substantive nature of the needs assessment, QtP proved to be a productive use of this management style on an issue that impacts all OPRHP facilities, and which requires understanding and commitment at all levels of management. Additional feedback from the QtP groups points out, however, that more time is required to address what is properly characterized as a complicated issue. Such continuity is implicit to the action plan for advancing environmental stewardship of New York State parks and historic sites.

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