

Developing Additional Capacity for Wilderness Management: An International Exchange Program Between South Africa and United States Wilderness Rangers

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Abstract—Wilderness managers have limited time to initiate international exchanges. Additionally, the benefits to developing capacity for wilderness management around the globe are not significant enough to make the effort cost-effective. International assistance, including wilderness management exchange programs, is critical to protecting wild areas around the globe. Former Chief of the Forest Service, Jack Ward Thomas, stated, “our mission is to provide international technical assistance and scientific exchanges to sustain and enhance global resources and to encourage quality land management. By helping others take care of the ecosystems they have, we help take care of the ecosystems we have been entrusted to steward for future generations” (Thomas 1994).

Developing Additional Capacity _____

One way to develop additional wilderness management capacity is to link on-the-ground protected area managers with managers of the United States (U.S.) National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS). In the Forest Service (FS) alone, there are over 300 on-the-ground, experienced wilderness managers and wilderness rangers that apply stewardship principles to areas they administer in their daily work. This amounts to a vast pool of experience, knowledge and skill that can be tapped and applied when requested by protected area managers around the globe. International assistance generally focuses on upper level managers such as planners and administrators, but misses the direct on-the-ground rangers who must deal with site specific problems in their every day work (Olwyler 2000, U.S. Forest Service Internal Report, *Manager to manager: field based training for protected areas workers around the globe*).

In 1998, the 6th World Wilderness Congress in Bagalore, India, passed Resolution 21, entitled, “The Need For Training In The Techniques And Science Of Wilderness Management For Management Staff, And Others With A Specific Interest In Wilderness Conservation.” Resolution 21 addresses the need to stimulate inter-country and inter-agency pollination

of ideas and work techniques for on-the-ground wilderness rangers.

A goal and challenge for U.S. wilderness administrators should therefore be to reduce the environmental impacts to protected areas within developing countries and in wilderness areas in the United States, while improving the experience of nature based tourism and the recreating public, and encouraging environmentally sustainable economic alternatives for the welfare and benefit of local people.

According to Olwyler (2000, U.S. Forest Service Internal Report, *Manager to manager: Field based training for protected areas workers around the globe*), the development of an international exchange program for managers can foster a dialogue between field-based protected area workers, managers from developing countries and from the Forest Service, and other U.S. Federal agency wilderness managers. In addition, international exchange programs can provide an experiential learning opportunity for both partners.

Benefits of such a program commonly include:

1. Linking field-based managers from various regions so they can experience alternate systems of work and management and adapt what would be useful to them in their home country situation.
2. Sharing experiences of workers in protected areas in developing countries through direct technical training and on-the-ground assistance from managers in the NWPS.

Wilderness managers and rangers from the NWPS will learn about issues that are relevant to the management of areas in developing countries. These may include issues such as the association of local people and cultures with protected areas; the current methods that are being used to integrate the community in the management objectives of protected areas; and how to maintain and improve the quality of life for local people through environmentally sustainable development and nature based tourism.

Managers from developing countries will gain first-hand experience of management and work systems used in recreation and tourism in wilderness areas of the United States. They can then adapt their experience to fit their particular home country protected area management situation.

An international exchange program can provide direct technical assistance, training, work exchanges, and consultancies for field-based workers, managers, and first line supervisors who work for national parks, wildlife preserves, recreation areas, wildernesses, and other protected areas throughout the world.

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This will include, but not be restricted to, efforts such as:

- Providing training, either in the United States or in the host country, for trail layout, trail surveys, trail maintenance, ecosystem restoration methods, statistics collection, and their application for management purposes.
- Hosting managers from developing countries at wilderness areas, national parks and preserves in the United States so they could observe and experience first-hand, systems and methods of management of the NWPS that they could then adapt and use in their home countries.
- U.S. wilderness managers making site visits to developing country protected areas that request assistance.
- Organizing work groups of U.S. managers to travel to host countries to work on specific projects, such as assisting with wildlife inventories, collecting visitor use statistics of foreign tourists, creating interpretive plans and materials, and working on trail construction and maintenance.
- Providing other examples and training of management plans, wildlife sighting record forms, research papers, advice on visitor permit management, how to perform trail surveys, and how to develop protected area manager expertise.

On-the-ground rangers throughout the world maintain protected areas with, in some cases, little or no support, experience or understanding of the impacts that will be caused by tourism or their own management practices. They may want additional information and a broader perspective from which to make their management decisions or accomplish work projects, but do not know how to connect with those who could provide it.

Exchange Program Is Born

In November 2001, the Forest Service Office of International Programs sponsored a team of wilderness managers to attend the 7th World Wilderness Conference in Port Elizabeth, South Africa (SA). During this event, SA managers initiated the idea of an educational visit to FS wilderness managers, and an exchange idea was born. Six months later, in May 2002, three SA wilderness rangers arrived in Denver and were the first to pilot-test an international exchange program hosted by the FS Rocky Mountain Region.

These three SA wilderness rangers attended a 5-day wilderness training academy in Aspen, Colorado to learn from managers of congressionally designated areas in the Rocky Mountain Region of the United States. The international exposure brought great insights and rewards for the SA rangers and the U.S. wilderness rangers gained a tremendous amount of knowledge about the challenges of managing wild places in the Western Cape Province of SA. It was during presentations at this academy and the interaction with "on-the-ground" wilderness rangers that a volunteer program for U.S. rangers in SA wilderness areas germinated. Both groups realized that experts from the United States could lend a hand to help SA's wilderness managers.

In December 2002, three FS seasonal wilderness rangers that had ended their summer-seasonal jobs, traveled to SA to volunteer their expertise at Boosmansbos Wilderness and other protected areas. Because of critical shortages in funding and manpower, the leading conservation agency in the Western Cape Province of SA, Cape Nature Conservation has a huge need for trained and experienced rangers to assist in managing their wild and protected areas. Now 3 years later, close to 20 U.S. wilderness rangers have volunteered their talents to trail maintenance, rehabilitation, Leave No Trace (LNT) training and education in SA protected areas. In return, the U.S. wilderness rangers have been rewarded with awe-inspiring, fynbos-clad mountains of the Western Cape that appear even more striking than the rugged Rocky Mountains. Additionally, they have learned that the management issues, problems and challenges are very similar to the concerns found in most U.S. wildernesses, including lack of field staffing.

Since the start of this international volunteer program, support has been given by the WILD Foundation (U.S.A.) and the Wilderness Foundation (South Africa). An announcement in the *International Journal of Wilderness* (2003) read:

SOUTH AFRICA WILDERNESS SEEKS VOLUNTEERS:

Exciting opportunities exist for experienced wilderness rangers and professionals to become active in South Africa. Host to the smallest of the six plant kingdoms—the Cape Floral Kingdom—the conservation authority, Western Cape Nature Conservation Board invites volunteers to become involved in the identification, management and educational aspects of their WILDERNESS. Support is needed to start identifying potential wilderness from the fast disappearing pieces of "unspoiled" land with its abundant diversity. Skills required include path maintenance, rehabilitation, and eradication of non-native species, zonation, staff training, public education and fundraising. The program promotes international exchanges between wilderness professionals and is viewed as an innovative approach to the challenges facing these reserves.

Vance Martin, president of the WILD Foundation, remarked the following:

You have started something important, necessary, and an initiative which can serve as a model around the world. The WILD Foundation has worked in Southern Africa for almost 30 years. One of the many things we do is try to strengthen the professional ties between the United States (and other countries) and SA. Because we are modestly-sized and need to target our resources carefully, we specialize in assisting and leveraging the work of highly motivated individuals who care about wilderness and wildlands and commit themselves to their well-being. This volunteer initiative is a great example of important benefits accruing from individual commitment rather than significant expenditure. I've already received comments from several of the American rangers who went to South Africa and more are lining up to go. This will certainly spread within the United States, but could also do so to other countries. This not only helps some of your work get done at ground level, but it also expands the horizons of the critically important field staff, increases their knowledge and self-confidence, and leads to further contacts for other types of assistance, funding and training (Martin 2003, personal correspondence).

Conclusion

With a well developed international exchange program, managers of protected areas in developing countries will be better able to achieve their own management objectives while reducing undesirable impacts to their local ecosystems. U.S. wilderness managers will better understand the relationships of wilderness areas in the NWPS to protected areas around the globe and how local communities and local economies can be integrated into the management of wilderness areas in the United States. By linking managers to managers, a valuable step will be taken toward the goal of maintaining the environmental quality of protected areas around the globe, benefits to people within and surrounding protected areas will be enhanced, and the U.S. Forest Service will make strides toward its goal of being a world leader in ecosystems management (Olwyler 2000, U.S. Forest Service Internal Report, *Manager to manager: field based training for protected areas workers around the globe*).

Although the current U.S. ranger volunteer program to SA is slowly expanding, the steady yearly flow of five or more Americans to SA is solid proof that financial and bureaucratic difficulties do not hamper the commitment and passion of rangers to become involved with wilderness stewardship abroad. All the volunteers who participated up to now have had an immense life enriching experience, and through first-hand exposure to conservation issues in another country, have gained ability and professionalism for their future careers. In return, the local staff received support and much needed exposure to wilderness training. The passion for wilderness conservation is strengthened, and a local volunteer culture, which is totally undeveloped in SA, is created. The unselfish effort of the volunteers helps to elevate the need for professional wilderness management in SA. The skill and knowledge of all are enriched and critical work is being accomplished in some of the most wild and scenic places in SA.

The continuation of efforts between wilderness managers from the United States and SA, to structure a partnership, to build on the successes so far achieved, to attract more volunteers for wilderness tasks, and to create international opportunities for training and exchanges, is strongly encouraged. Because of overwhelming work responsibilities, very few managers are currently involved with the coordination of these fruitful efforts, and relatively low support and capacity need to be addressed. With the necessary support, wider marketing and expansion of the volunteer program and exchange opportunities will be realized, and funding opportunities will be created. This is only a small step away from the development of a fully integrated international exchange program.

Wilderness managers and rangers with an adventurous and travel spirit will always find a creative way to enrich their lives and fulfill their ambition. As long as committed professionals can keep up with their efforts in creating the opportunities, these managers and rangers will grab the chance to see and experience another country, and by living out their passion, contribute to protecting ecosystems around the globe. In October 2005, another three American rangers will arrive in the Western Cape Province of SA to do their part in wilderness stewardship during a 4-week visit. They will be members of a growing team of professionals that have learned that by helping others to take care of their ecosystems they have helped to take care of the ecosystems they have been entrusted to steward for future generations. The benefits far out-weigh the cost. [By August 2007 this program is still running and the aim is to have a yearly increase in the number of international volunteers visiting the Western Cape Province of SA.]

References

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