

Connections, an e-communication of the National Park Service

(reprinted with permission)

Rick Potts, Chief, NPS Conservation & Outdoor Recreation Division



You cannot love a park to death.

When a special place has a constituency of people who personally know and experience it, their love of that place rises up to protect it when it is threatened. When people know and love a place, they protect it. For all their importance, physical connections between parks and the land or communities near them are not enough to protect the parks. Parks also need deep connections with the hearts of people all around them.

Although love cannot kill a wild area, apathy and irrelevance surely can. Advocates for natural places in the 21st Century need to develop and employ new skills to reach and engage new generations of culturally and ethnically diverse Americans, many of whom have never had that all-important first outdoor adventure.

Randy Jones, the late Deputy Director of the National Park Service, was asked, “What is the most profound change you have seen in the management of national parks during the last 40 years?” His answer came quickly. “Forty years ago a manager’s job was to manage the park from the boundary in; while today, the manager must focus most on issues originating outside the boundary.”

The implications of this are enormous, and require new thinking and retooling for park managers as well as our partners and advocates. We face a litany of ecological challenges to preserving the nation’s protected areas and the lands across their boundaries, such as climate change, air and water pollution, interruption of migration routes, and invasion of nonnative species. Ultimately, though, the greatest threat to the long-term preservation of these lands comes from public apathy.

We must reframe our thinking about the relationship of people and the land. Today’s generation of activists, advocates, and professionals in the land preservation business largely share formative experiences they gained 20, 30, 50 years ago, when we backpacked, canoed, skied, and climbed all over the American land. But despite an increase in US population, overnight use of the backcountry has decreased more than 25% since the mid-1970s. So we cannot assume that today’s generation thinks or feels the same about the land, because many of them are not having the same close experiences with land that we had when we were growing up.

The danger to protected and boundary areas is not from recreationists who are visiting, but from the vast majority of Americans who are not. This will seem, at first, a radical notion. So, let me put an extra-fine point on the argument for the sake of lively discussion: You cannot love a park to death. When an area has a large constituency who

has come to personally know and experience a place, their love of that place rises up to protect it when impacts become unacceptable. When people know and love a place, they protect it.

Although love cannot kill a wild area, apathy and irrelevance surely can. The 21st-century land advocate will need to develop and employ new skills to reach out and engage new generations of culturally and ethnically diverse Americans who have not had that all-important first outdoor adventure. Many of the early advocates and promoters of landscape protection were mostly white, male, and, increasingly now, dead. Suffice it to say, this is not a formula for a sustainable constituency.

Protected areas are set aside for people to enjoy. Enjoyment leads to valuing a place; valuing a place leads to a constituency who will defend it against threats. Simply put: We—advocates, partners, and land managers—will never be capable of preserving these special areas without the help and active support of the majority of the American public. It is ultimately naive to speak of preserving something or some place for the benefit of future generations, if the current generation cannot appreciate the value. With our partner organizations, the community assistance and civic engagement programs of the National Park Service create the matrix across the nation to connect parks with communities and the American public. These linkages are vital for reconnecting the people with the land in a meaningful way.

Rick Potts, Chief,

NPS Recreation and Conservation Programs

Rick Potts is a member of the Equine Land Conservation Resource's Advisory Council
