Diversifying the Workforce: A Question of Survival

As of September 30, 2008, almost three-quarters (72.7%) of the total NPS workforce in the IMR remained white. Blacks represented 10.5% of the workforce, Hispanics1 10.7%, Asians 3.6%, Native American & Native Hawaiians 0.8%, and multi-race, 1.7%.2 With these figures, the IMR has acknowledged that Black, Hispanic, Asian and multi-race populations continue to be under-represented, and in some cases grossly, in today’s workforce. In the “new” America, such discrepancies are not only unacceptable but also dangerous, as they place the whole of the national parks system at risk.

“Communities,” for purposes of engagement in an ever more culturally diverse society, are identified here as traditionally underserved urban and ethnic communities. For instance, including input and leadership from our progressively more urban society, as a whole, can contribute to providing solutions supporting the resources the NPS is mandated to protect, and enable a greater feeling of being heard and attachment through feeling more welcome. This would indisputably contribute to constructive change.

National parks that seek continued success into the 21st Century must swiftly and unambiguously diversify their workforce in order to build their capacity for diversifying tomorrow’s park constituencies.3 Park units that face these new demographic trends with optimism, seeing opportunity rather than obligation, will see their recruiting and retention efforts pay off. Success, however, will require that the NPS reframe priorities and strategically strengthen organizational culture in preparation for a new and diverse cadre of committed and qualified employees.

In addition to possessing basic job skills requirements, these new NPS employees are increasingly fluent across multiple languages, cultures and geographies. Through distinct perspectives and life experiences, these diversity-savvy professionals have the knowledge, and therefore the potential, to inform necessary changes in key park functions, including facilities design, law enforcement protocol, interpretive displays and guided programs, and community engagement. These same employees are also uniquely qualified to serve on the front lines of parks’ community engagement activities. By elevating the cultural competency of national parks through the retention of a new generation of “green and grey,” national parks will be making a critical investment in their future, leading to increased survival of parks.

What do we know? Where are we going?
People are talking about the “new” demographics all over this country. Ethnic minorities are projected to assume majority status, nationwide, by the middle of this century and have already reached this milestone in many states, including two states in the Intermountain Region (Texas and New Mexico). In this era of rapid change, national parks in general, and those specifically in the IMR, have been challenged to keep pace. This Briefing is the second of three prepared for the NPS Intermountain Region (IMR) with the first relating to overall demographics of the U.S., racial/ethnic groups for regional focus, and community engagement strategies. The third relates to building a business case for relevance and building new hope for tomorrow.

(1) Business Case for Diversity, Briefing #2 of 3
While law and regulation must be adhered to, it cannot be emphasized enough that the ways in which, in the past, the NPS has related to, and created an audience from a relatively homogenous (mostly white, middle class) user base will no longer produce desired results and must be set aside. The NPS can and must learn from past practices yet the time is now to begin a critical transition. In their place, parks must invent, invest in, test, and refine new approaches and experiences to keep pace with rapidly expanding populations. This will not be easy and traditional park employees are likely to find themselves in increasingly unfamiliar territory. However, these unprecedented demographic shifts are as much opportunities as they are challenges and the parks need only to commit fully to these changes to manifest them.

This briefing focuses on workforce diversity (i.e., racial/ethnic) and how the very survival of the National Park Service depends on its ability to recruit and retain a new generation of professionals savvy and competent in issues of diversity and, yes, social justice. That is, "social justice" may have varying contexts yet—at a very fundamental level for national parks—this means all people are entitled to the same rights and services. These rights have been difficult to achieve for ethnic minorities because of a history of both governmental and societal racism and social injustice. Consequently, without recognition that tomorrow’s park users look differently than today’s and without an understanding that many communities have been, or continue to be denied access to the benefits of America’s special places, national parks will surely fail in their bid to authentically represent the nation.

In the pages that follow, the most compelling reasons for diversifying the NPS employee base are described.

- Diversity in organizations, like biodiversity in ecosystems, has been proven to promote long-term organizational survival.
- Diversity among the ranks also means that intended constituencies will see themselves in parks and, at the same time, be seen by parks.
- Through customizing the park experience for new user groups, national parks position themselves well to gain the competitive edge and earn the loyalty of expanding demographics.
- A diverse workforce promotes creativity and innovation, allowing parks to continually re-invent themselves on the cutting edge, sustaining the interest of new park constituents.
- Working alongside colleagues who are different from oneself directly benefits traditional Park Service employees by encouraging the development of cross-cultural competencies.

With the sharpening of such skills, the current workplace becomes more productive and satisfying while existing employees add new 21st century credentials to their profile. Finally, the status of the National Park Service as a tax dollar-funded government agency, as well as a litany of federal laws enacted by and for the people of this nation, demand that the NPS reflect the people it claims to represent.

For all of these reasons, the IMR (and all regions) must recognize that its relevance to a changing America, and indeed its very survival, depend in large part on its commitment to attract and retain a diverse and representative workforce into the future. This is not a cliché; it is a serious reality.

**Why diversify the workforce of our national parks?**

**Argument 1: Promotes Survival of the NPS and the Resources that the NPS Protects**

As the stewards of wild, scenic, historical and cultural places, the NPS is already attuned to the role that diversity plays in an ecosystem. On a scientific level, we know that the more variation there is in a system, the more that system can, in a desperate moment, find a surviving strategy within its bounds. Though biodiversity is usually discussed in terms of inter-species diversity, workplace diversity is distinct in that it consists of “intra-species” diversity. Nonetheless, there is plenty of evidence that even differences among a single species promote survival. For example, research done in the 1990s by Harvard scholar John Kotter suggests that “adaptive (organizational) cultures,” in learning to manage the diverse needs of both customers and employees, dramatically out-perform “non-adaptive (organizational) cultures” across a variety of indicators. This argument encourages parks to recognize the link between a diverse workforce and their own long term survival.
Argument 2: Allows for a More Customized Park Experience for New Constituencies

By learning, teaching, and employing NPS focused cultural competencies, national parks can develop intimate cultural and/or linguistic knowledge of new constituencies of interest. Ethnically diverse park employees can play a significant role in this process; they are well positioned to anticipate the values and habits of new park users and help inform the design of customized park experiences and services that speak directly to new preferences.

These employees are also likely to be the most effective deliverers of such services to new user groups. Envision the difference this would make:

- Interpretive rangers would create immediate goodwill by effectively incorporating the stories of diverse cultures into their curricula (either more so, or at all);
- Law enforcement rangers would anticipate the unwritten rules of cultural conduct without compromising community trust; and
- Park management would work with concessionaires to provide more adequate and culturally recognizable food service and accommodations that actually make new park guests feel like they're “at home.”

In so doing, parks succeed in offering new user groups a top quality experience where they feel recognized and understood. By leveraging the skills and backgrounds of existing park staff, parks will see their visitor base both increase and diversify (because this will happen anyway), bringing in more entrance fees, for instance, while bringing parks a step closer to ensuring their continued existence in a new era of change.

Known as “niche marketing” in the business world, this approach is all about survival. By customizing and expanding picnic areas for larger, multi-generational Latino families or visitor center exhibits for African American travelers, for example, parks can gain a competitive edge in new and expanding 21st century markets. These markets represent the next frontier of visitation and public support for national parks anyway, so why not keep up, rather than get left behind?

Argument 3: Diversity Powers a New Era of Community Engagement

A park that maintains diversity expertise within employee ranks will have the capacity to design and more effectively deliver community engagement activities that purposefully meet the needs of new user groups. Through a customized approach to themes, messages, and values, National Park representatives are more likely to gain the trust of community leaders and experience early success in community-park collaborations. Such community engagement successes will, if sustained, translate into more visitors, more supporters and more pro-park voters down the line. Change is imminent so why not ensure it is constructive?

Worth mentioning is the fact many historically marginalized communities have deep roots in the practice of community organizing and can effectively “get out the vote” on issues they perceive to be of importance to their people. By starting with hiring the right individuals and positioning them smartly to engage with communities of interest, parks have the potential to reinvent themselves as 21st Century leaders in the movement to reconnect people and their parks.

Argument 4: Promotes Increased Creativity and Innovation of Employees

To stay relevant amidst rapidly changing demographics, national parks must rethink every aspect of the ‘park experience,’ from how new users hear about, get to, and move through the parks, to how parks staff become allies with emerging communities. Such a reinvention will require bold new thinking from every division, from law enforcement and operations to science, interpretation, and education. With a diverse employee base, parks will be much better positioned to break through old patterns to define new, and, in many cases, less expensive, operating norms. It has been well documented that groups with a diversity of perspectives are associated with more creativity and innovation. This occurs through consideration and inclusion of a wider range
of perspectives and possibilities which, in turn, lead to more high quality solutions. Attracting the smartest and most diverse thinkers to the brainstorming table must be a high priority for 21st Century parks; indisputably, it is this diversity of perspectives that will allow parks to swim, and not sink, into the next century.

**Argument 5: Gives Traditional Park Employees a Competitive Edge**

The 21st Century workplace demands that park employees who embrace tradition (which is acceptable and often desirable) must also develop new skills and competencies that will ultimately benefit them both inside and outside of their NPS employment.

As the nation and workforce change, some individuals will choose to resist, while others will choose to embrace the change. Those who object and dissent, asserting that “Parks have no business marketing” to specific demographic groups or that these populations “don’t care about the outdoors,” are automatically proving their irrelevance to the 21st Century job market.

Those in avoidance are likely to see fewer promotions within park ranks and will ultimately be less marketable if and when they seek positions outside of parks.

In contrast, the early adopters, who authentically embrace both the challenges and opportunities represented by a diverse workforce, will not only be more effective in their jobs (and therefore more satisfied) but will also be more likely to enjoy a competitive edge in the workforce (and thus greater financial security).

It goes without saying, therefore, that these same individuals will also find themselves better equipped to deal with everyday life, from gyms to schools to grocery stores, in a changing society.

The fact is diversity benefits us all and those who refuse to accept this reality make things more difficult for themselves, their co-workers, park visitors, and the NPS overall.

**Argument 6: Government Agencies Have a Special and Obligatory Responsibility to Reflect a Diverse Society**

As representatives of the U.S. Government diversity of the IMR and all park units is not just the “right thing to do,” it is the publicly-mandated thing to do. Flowing from every American household, tax dollars are stretched to fund a variety of essentials including park salaries, uniforms, vehicles, recycling bins, and interpretive displays. Government bureaus must ensure that the benefits of these tax dollars flow equally to all Americans. Unfortunately, the current lack of racial and ethnic diversity in park user groups suggests that parks have struggled to find common ground with those it is mandated to serve. The changing demographics, however, are forcing this issue. Parks must either work hard to close their relevance gap or risk losing the very support they need to stay afloat. By suiting up and showing up for these new demographic challenges, the NPS can promote a vision of government that is truly responsive and reflective of America’s evolving needs.

**Argument 7: Diversity in Ranks, It’s a Civil Right**

Current employees who attempt to defy the changing tide will eventually get on board, forced by the laws of the land. For example, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 requires federal agencies to engage in Affirmative Employment Programs and report on their diversity hiring practices. Similarly, the preferential procurement policies, rooted in the Small Business Administration’s 8(a) program, support the development of minority-owned businesses through the awarding of federal contracts. Further, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prohibits federal agencies from discriminating based on disability. As the population shifts, these Acts will be seen less as “requirements” and more viewed as essential survival strategies.

Agencies that underestimate the importance of reflecting the American people will increasingly be subject to court challenges. The U.S. Forest Service is intimately familiar with such a challenge,
“Today’s National Park Service aims to reflect the Nation’s diversity – the face of America – in the staffing of every park and office.”
– Mary Bomar, Former NPS Director

Consider for a moment the following questions: 12
When your park advertises a job opening in your professional and/or community network, who is included and not included in that network?

What type of people would find working at your park appealing or not appealing?

When you think of your ideal co-worker, who do you think of? Why?

In what ways might the organizational culture of your park encourage or discourage a more diverse workforce?

What is your park’s track record in hiring and retaining a diverse staff?

“We see ourselves as progressive people in a progressive organization, but our numbers suggest that in most areas, we are well behind the power curve… We have a responsibility to tackle these issues in ways we have not in the past.”
– Michael Snyder, IMR Regional Director 13

“The seasoned federal employee has significant latitude in choosing how to respond to both the opportunities and challenges presented by a changing workforce. The IMR is obviously part of this equation.

One option is to ignore the problem though it would certainly not go away. To the contrary, avoiding such changes will eventually prolong and intensify a painful backlash. Individuals and parks that refuse to accept diversity would eventually be forced, through costly lawsuits or smear campaigns, to “get with the program.” Consider this: those individuals who drag their feet will only fall further and further behind, professionally, financially and socially, in an increasingly diversity-savvy workforce.

Parks that half-heartedly fulfill the minimum required for compliance may eventually end up spending exorbitant sums on external consultants to do their diversity work for them. Results, if initially positive, would unlikely be sustained without in-house commitment. Such parks would be more likely to turn off potential applicants and further alienate the very communities they’re trying to engage.

And word travels fast in close-knit minority communities! Once established that national parks are not for ‘people like them,’ potential park users will likely turn elsewhere for their outdoor experience and/or other recreational opportunities. With them, you can bet they’d take their pro-environment values, increasing leisure time, and fortified buying and voting power. National parks would then be forced to fall back on
replicating their status quo and serving a dwindling white minority. In such circumstances, it would be easy for the media to amplify accusations that national parks are “elitist” and increasingly “obsolete,” thereby threatening the whole of the NPS legacy. Parks that expect to thrive into the next century cannot afford to make these mistakes. With the “Second Century” efforts and plans now in progress, are these the risks the IMR (and NPS as a whole) are willing to take?

**The Benefits: Growth and Abundance**

The benefits of a sincere effort to diversify park ranks are limitless. A proactive, responsive, business-savvy, and diverse park staff would engage new communities in the next chapter of connection between wild lands and urban centers. New kinds of equity-based partnerships and collaborations with growing communities would rightfully become the new norm. Through increased familiarity with growing populations, parks would be capable of a new gold standard of customer service. Communities never before connected to national parks would buzz with excitement and seek additional opportunities to engage in the parks. Additional money would flow in through new, as well as repeat, visitors.

This is predestined, if the IMR cares at all. These unprecedented successes would, in turn, attract better and more diverse applicants and serve to increase the retention of park staff. Ultimately, as friends to all of America’s communities, parks would enjoy long-lasting public support through an increasingly diverse workforce and an increasingly diverse voter and taxpayer base.

**ENDNOTES**

1. The term “Latino” is generally used throughout this briefing, except in cases where the original sources (including the U.S. Census and other government agencies) use the term “Hispanic.”
8. Context for concessionaires relates to sites who manage these amenities.