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# Renewing Our Education Mission

Report to the National Leadership Council  
June 2003

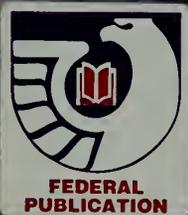


Photo Courtesy of Roy Hawk

*Park-based learning is powerful - and transformative. People more readily retain information, grasp meanings, and adopt new behaviors and values when directly involved with cultural and natural heritage resources and sites. Park Service education informs uniquely about the civic experience of our country and the complex, diverse ecology of our world. It encourages respect for our experience, as a nation, and invites stewardship. It is an organizational function that nurtures an aware citizenry, engaged to a greater extent in American public life. It is a mission of high national purpose. The National Park Service is committed to extend its leadership in education, to build on what is in place and to pursue new relationships and opportunities to make national parks even more meaningful in the life of the nation. Renewing our Education Mission lays out a course we will follow to achieve these goals.*

*Fran Mainella, Director, National Park Service*



# Renewing Our Education Mission

*When it comes to the education of our children...failure is not an option.*

*President George W. Bush*

In June 2002 the National Leadership Council (NLC) applied the knowledge and understanding gained from its yearlong seminar series on education to create a vision, guiding principles, and program goals to renew the Service's commitment to its education mission.

On July 9-10, 2002, a cross-section of park, program, and regional staff nominated by the NLC met in Washington, DC, to review and respond to the NLC recommendations. The two-day session provoked compelling discussions, highlighted the excellence that is already a hallmark of so many of our National Park Service (NPS) education programs, and demonstrated clear consensus on approach and priority actions. During this meeting there was a genuine appreciation for the NPS commitment to focus its time and energy on learning about education. They welcomed the leadership of the NPS to re-commit the Service as an organization to its unique and fundamental role in providing opportunities for learning. There was wide consensus that for the purpose of future discussions, we should define "education" very broadly. In this context, education means all kinds of learning opportunities for people of all ages including formal and informal programs, volunteer programs, life-long learning, publications, exhibits, films, the Internet, public outreach, and research.

## Vision

Interpretation and education is a primary organizational purpose of the National Park Service, essential to achieving our mission of protecting and preserving our nation's natural and cultural resources. We envision a national park system that is recognized as a significant resource for learning, where people and organizations collaborate on teaching and learning about the interconnections of human culture and nature, natural systems, the values of America's diverse heritage, and the principles of democracy. Parks are an integral part of the nation's educational system, providing unique and powerful individual learning experiences that help shape understanding and inspire personal values.

National Park Service  
June 20, 2002

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Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area

## Framework

### Guiding Principles

Our educational programs are designed to enrich lives and enhance learning, nurturing people's appreciation for parks and other special places, and therefore helping preserve America's heritage. To accomplish this, the National Park Service, will develop — and partner with others to create — interpretive and educational programs according to the following guiding principles:

***National Park Service programs are place-based—***

❖ Programs use national parks and other places as dynamic classrooms where people interact with real places, landscapes, historic structures, and other tangible resources that help them understand meanings, concepts, themes, stories, and relationships.

❖ Programs provide authentic, personally relevant, and inspiring learning opportunities and invite people to engage in stewardship.

***National Park Service programs are learner-centered—***

❖ Programs honor personal freedom and interests through a menu of life-long learning opportunities that serve a wide variety of learning styles, encourage personal inquiry, and provoke thought.

❖ Programs meet learners' needs and challenge them to explore ideas and test truths.

***National Park Service programs celebrate diversity—***

❖ Programs present multiple points of view and address controversial topics in a balanced manner.

❖ Programs are inclusive, tell a variety of stories, and celebrate the history of all Americans.

***National Park Service programs are widely accessible—***

❖ Programs provide learning opportunities, reflect and embrace different cultural backgrounds, ages, languages, abilities, and needs.

❖ Programs are delivered through a variety of means, including distance learning, to increase opportunities to connect with and learn from resources.

***National Park Service programs are based on sound scholarship content, methods, and audience analysis—***

❖ Programs are informed by the latest research related to natural and cultural heritage.

❖ Programs incorporate contemporary educational research and scholarship on effective interpretive and educational methods.

***National Park Service programs help people understand and participate in our civil democratic society—***

❖ Programs highlight the experiences, lessons, knowledge, and ideas embodied in America's national parks and other special places.

❖ Programs provide life-long opportunities to engage in civic dialogue, and take personal responsibility to care for each other and our communities through service learning, volunteerism, and civic engagement.

***National Park Service programs incorporate ongoing evaluation for continual program improvement and effectiveness—***

❖ Programs are regularly evaluated and improved to ensure that they meet program goals and audience needs.

❖ Programs for organized groups, such as curriculum-based programs, are designed with advice from potential participants.

***National Park Service programs are collaborative—***

❖ Programs are created in partnership with other agencies and institutions and reflect the National Park Service's dual role in delivering programs and enabling others to do so.

❖ Programs created in partnership are mutually beneficial and achieve common goals.

## Program Goals

### **Building Capacity**

Every employee has a role in education because we all interact, in some way, with the public. Whether on the phone or responding to a letter, in formal presentations or greeting park visitors, working with volunteers or partners, or talking with friends and neighbors, we have opportunities to share knowledge...to teach and learn. Recognizing and creating these opportunities is a skill we should each practice.

Through our relationships with the public we can invite them to join us in our mission. Public understanding and stewardship are paramount for success in our resource management and protection programs, and every employee can contribute to building that support.

### Organization

The National Park Service will bring strategic leadership to an organization-wide approach to education that results in renewed vigor, dia-

logue, and scholarship that embodies the principles of a learning organization.

### Employees

The National Park Service will attract and nurture diverse, highly professional, knowledgeable, and creative employees that understand and embrace their role as an essential educational resource.

### Research

The National Park Service will ensure that employees have access to the latest scholarship on preserving, managing, and interpreting natural and cultural resources as well as on educational methods and that this knowledge is reflected in its programs.

### Evaluation

The National Park Service will establish a system of evaluation focused on continually improving programs and sharing lessons learned and best practices Servicewide.

### **Creating Opportunities**

Throughout its history, the National Park Service has used its knowledge of resources — and passion for protecting them — to create rich and varied opportunities to engage the public. This has been sustained by the creativity, ingenuity, and dedication of employees in all disciplines and in collaboration with our equally committed volunteers and partners. These efforts extend beyond park boundaries to reach national park neighbors and those who may never visit a national park.

### Life-Long Learning

The National Park Service will provide quality resource-based experiences and opportunities for life-long learning that are relevant to diverse audiences.

### Children

The National Park Service will provide an opportunity for every child in America to have a memorable learning experience.

### Technology

The National Park Service will use new technologies to enhance programs and carry them to new audiences.

### Access

The National Park Service will create convenient access to its full offering of programs for teachers and parents.

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*Thank you for an outstanding resource for overworked, worn-out teachers.... This lesson is a perfect fit for my unit.*

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*California teacher comment on Teaching with Historic Places*

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### **Expanding Partnerships and Outreach**

Visitors to national parks have been the primary audience for National Park Service education programs. We must retain our commitment to developing and providing high quality in-park programs while growing our ability to reach visitors before they arrive, people who live in neighboring communities, and the many millions of others who may not currently visit. To become one of the premier education resources in the nation we must proactively identify ways to engage a public defined more broadly than park visitors.

### Reaching New Communities

The National Park Service will reflect our diverse society by providing unique opportunities for all people to understand, appreciate, and participate in preserving our natural and cultural heritage.

### Partnerships

The National Park Service will nurture existing and develop new partnerships with organizations with which we share a common vision. We will collaborate in developing and delivering excellent public programs that best use the strengths of each partner.

### Communication

The National Park Service will articulate its goals consistently – organization-wide. We will revitalize and refocus the entire array of National Park Service written, visual, audio, Internet, and other communication media to renew our education mission.

## National Strategic Actions

The following priority national issues and recommended actions developed by the NLC and the working groups can be taken in the short term to advance the renewal of our education mission. Unless otherwise indicated, it is assumed that the new Associate Director for Partnerships, Interpretation and Education, Volunteers, and Outdoor Recreation will coordinate these actions and they will be expanded on in discussions with the Education Council.

### **Asset Mapping**

**Issue:** The National Park Service has a wealth of educational “assets”; from talented and skilled employees, to dynamic programs, to extensive media, to well-attended education centers, to strong education partners.

While we know we have assets, we have not systematically collected this information and made it available across the Service. Since the key to getting where you want to go is knowing where you are, to effectively build the depth, breadth, and value of the National Park Service’s educational programs we must first identify our existing strengths and assets. This “asset mapping” will also surface potential linkages between programs and partners and identify gaps in our overall program.

**Action:** The Northeast and Pacific West Regions working with WASO Information Technology and the National Park Foundation will pilot asset mapping. The information gathered would be entered into an online education database that can grow to accommodate the future collection of Servicewide information.



Big Thicket National Preserve  
Golden Gate National Recreation Area



Boston National Historical Park



Constitution Gardens

## Priority National Action Items

The database will be accessible on InsideNPS for internal planning, evaluation, and other uses. It will also feed the development of products like the state compendiums of NPS education programs. The information from the pilot will also be analyzed in a “needs assessment” by outside experts working with NPS education subject matter specialists, the National Park Foundation and key leaders. The needs assessment will capture information on current Servicewide strengths and needs. This pilot will be evaluated and additional asset mapping conducted.

### Program Evaluation

Issue: The National Park Service devotes significant effort to developing educational and interpretive programs. More needs to be done to evaluate their effectiveness. Do they create opportunities for people to understand and make personal connections to places and stories? Can these programs be made more effective? Lessons learned from the Interpretive Development Program are helping create a methodology to evaluate park-based programs. A Servicewide evaluation strategy for National Park Service programs, including tools to help parks and programs conduct their own, scientifically valid, surveys, is called for. Evaluations will identify best practices, maximize investment of appropriated and donated funds, help managers understand the potential for interpretation and education and advance the work on a national level.

Action: Create an Education Evaluation Coordination Team to coordinate development of a Servicewide evaluation strategy. Members should be drawn from the Education Council, certifiers from the Interpretive Development Program, and respected researchers and experts in the field of evaluation. In addition:

- ❖ contract with an evaluation firm or university to develop an overall evaluation plan for existing interpretation and educational programs and tools.
- ❖ conduct a literature search for recent research on the effectiveness of interpretation and education in the national parks and national park programs and distribute the findings broadly.
- ❖ review existing Servicewide proposals in PMIS on evaluating interpretive and educational services to identify collaborative opportunities across parks and regions and avoid duplication of effort.

❖ create a variety of tools that can be used by parks and programs to evaluate and improve the success of their programs.

❖ evaluate the effectiveness of ParkNet in general and specifically as it relates to reaching new or under served/represented audiences.

### Comprehensive Interpretive Plans

Issue: Interpretation is about choices. We choose what stories to tell, whom to tell them to, and how to tell them. While these choices are rarely easy, an effective planning system can guide our decision-making. In 1995 the National Park Service adopted a unified planning system for interpretation and education. This system is Comprehensive Interpretive Planning (CIP). The CIP is the basic planning component for interpretation and education. The CIP is a tool for making choices. It helps parks decide what their objectives are, who their audiences are, and what mix of media and personal services to use. The product is not the plan, but an effective and efficient program that achieves management goals and provides appropriate services for our visitors. The responsibility for park interpretive planning now rests with the park superintendents. Many parks throughout the service have either started or completed their Comprehensive Interpretive Plans. Promoting and supporting the completion of a CIP at each park will provide a foundation for sound interpretive and education programming.

Action: Continue to support the completion of the Comprehensive Interpretive Plans to ensure park programming is based on sound scholarship with public input and defined visitor experiences.

### Interpretive Development Program

Issue: The Interpretive Development Program (IDP) is a field developed NPS mission-based training and development curriculum with ten outcome-based benchmark competencies based on NPS Ranger Careers position descriptions. The IDP is improving the quality of visitor experiences in national parks around the country. It is a learner-driven employee development program based on meeting peer-reviewed certification standards. The performance-based outcomes require interpreters to be able to provide opportunities for visitors to make personal connections to the meanings and significance of park resources. The IDP facilitates the stewardship philosophy that people will care for what they first care about. It is designed to foster accountability and professionalism in interpretation in the NPS and set a national standard for interpretive effectiveness that results in a higher level of public stewardship for park resources

Action: NPS establishes the long-term stability of the Interpretive Development Program in order to create a competent motivated interpretive workforce that is capable of meeting the challenges of the NPS mission now and in the future.

#### Identify Strategic Education Partners

Issue: The National Park Service has unparalleled “content” made unique by its inextricable link to the actual places that shaped the natural and human history of this land. We have spread the reach of this content beyond what we could ever do alone by working with cooperating associations, park institutes, and schools in gateway communities, to build a strong foundation of local partnerships. To become a premier national education resource, we must share this content with the broadest possible audiences by enhancing our existing partnerships and developing new strategic alliances with those who have professional expertise in creating and distributing content to mass and targeted audiences.

Action: Research potential education partners identifying their mission, goals, membership, other partners, activities, and note any current or previous involvement with the National Park Service. Ask current partners to identify other potential partners. The research will help identify those that best align with the needs and gaps surfaced by the asset mapping and business plan and who are most compatible with our overall mission, vision, and goals.

#### Design and Produce a Business Plan for Education

Issue: Information generated by the asset mapping, needs assessments, program evaluations, and identification of potential strategic

partners needs to be systematically analyzed into a coordinated set of recommendations for the renewal of our education mission.

Action: Create a “Business Plan for Education” to articulate the strategy for implementing education renewal – and how success will be measured. The plan should:

- ❖ analyze current and potential audiences
- ❖ survey other organizations doing similar work
- ❖ identify gaps between National Park Service needs and assets
- ❖ recommend priorities, workloads associated and resources to support those workloads
- ❖ describe challenges
- ❖ recommend opportunities for investments in our development
- ❖ identify potential strategic partnerships

This plan will make it clear that education is an integral part of the Service’s mission, help define our unique niche in the education community, provide a framework within which to make strategic decisions on staffing and funding, and measure success.

#### Recognize and Share Best Practices

Issue: The formal evaluation of programs will provide models to establish standards of excellence, provide opportunities for the Service to learn from itself, and recognize those whose work exemplifies the excellence for which we strive.

But beyond the results of formal evaluations, there are scores of examples in the Service of smart people doing smart things. The National Park Service has a proud tradition of offering

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*“Interpretation facilitates a connection between the interests of the visitor and the meanings of the resource.”*

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*Interpretation  
Training  
Curriculum*

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Cuyahoga Valley National Park



Big Thicket National Preserve

compelling interpretive and educational activities that increase the enjoyment of parks and the understanding of natural and cultural resources. The National Park Service is an internationally recognized leader in providing experiential educational programs that connect people to their heritage. We need to recognize our employees, the partners they work with, and widely share the innovations, creativity, and new approaches they have developed that help people learn.

**Action:** Each Associate and Regional Director should develop a program to recognize education best practices within their own spheres of responsibility through tools such as awards and case studies. These best practices will be shared Servicewide through the new education site on InsideNPS.

**Significantly Expand Use of the Internet**

**Issue:** The Internet has permanently changed the way we communicate. It is a tool with virtually unlimited potential. It provides instant, on-demand, global access to information. That being said, the NPS has been slow to take full advantage of the Internet's potential. Though NPS has isolated examples of excellent web initiatives, in totality, we are not meeting the needs of the public who would like access into the vast storehouse of information and material managed by the Service.

As with any other significant information technology initiative, web development must be driven by a comprehensive strategy that embraces the Park Service's mission and goals. Our web presence must be developed like any large-scale IT initiative. It must be well-planned, designed, implemented and maintained. And, most importantly, the Park Service must allocate sufficient resources to carry out this process.

Park education coordinators report that teachers have trouble finding and using park materials on the web. This is not surprising since the current web site (ParkNet) was developed many years ago and before many of the important concepts in web development, such as navigation techniques and standardized formats, had fully matured.

**Action:** The launch of Learn NPS, the National Park Service's Internet "portal" to search and access education materials, is an important first step. It must be followed by many more. We must develop a comprehensive proposal to use the entire range of the Internet's audio, visual, interactive, search, instant linking, and other

capabilities to support our education programs and partners, consistent with the "Business Plan for Education." We must ensure that the technical infrastructure is in place to meet the growing needs of an information-hungry public, 24 hours a day and seven days a week. We must ensure that this valuable asset is properly secured and that it affords flexibility for users with a wide-variety of equipment and processing capabilities. We must not forget that the National Park Service's websites are used by visitors from many countries and, where possible, material should be offered in other languages.

**Expand State NPS Education Program Guides**

**Issue:** Each State charts its own course in education policies and standards to teach its children. Linking NPS programs to state curricula makes it more useful and relevant to educators in classroom and home-school settings. The guides piloted by the Northeast Region for Massachusetts and Virginia describe curriculum-based programs and services at each national park in the state and their correlation with state standards. The compendiums have proven very effective for both educators and NPS staff. Organizing programs and materials by state also helps raise public awareness of national parks as centers for learning and facilitates the development of partnerships.

**Action:** Compile guides for every state. The Northeast Region is already improving its model and has developed web versions for Massachusetts and Virginia. Digital guides will be developed for New Jersey and New York. Going digital will allow wider distribution, both online and as CD-ROMs, save money, and allow the information to be more readily updated.

**Develop a Communications Strategy**

**Issue:** The NLC has spent the better part of a year grappling with the need for, and directions of, a renewal of the National Park Service education mission. Those in the field who have committed their careers to providing quality education opportunities – and succeeded – could be understandably wary of this "sudden" interest, where it came from, and what it means to their work. A mechanism must be developed to share the information that helped shape the NPS actions, identify who has been involved, encourage feedback, and provide updates. We also must include in the discussion our valued partners including the cooperating associations and park institutes. Their knowledge and experience will be invaluable in shaping a plan for education renewal.

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*...the Park Service is already doing a lot in education, but it's a matter of doing better what is already being done.*

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*Shirley Malcolm,  
NPS Advisory Board*

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*I cannot believe this is a Science class....Right now my science teacher is getting drenched with water and not getting angry. My mom and dad were shocked this weekend when I explained the workings of a turbine. ...If I could do this in every class, I might actually like school and who knows, get an A.*

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*8th grade student about Tsongas Industrial History Center*

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Outside the Service, we face a public who appreciates national parks, but other than a campfire talk or a visitor center exhibit, may not see the National Park Service as a resource for learning. The Alaska Region last year asked teachers what they thought about National Park Service education materials; 97% thought them credible, but didn't know they existed. Beyond raising our profile in the education community, the National Park Service has enormous challenges and opportunities to reach a broader public especially audiences that are new to the National Park Service or for whom the depth and breadth of the National Park Service mission is new. When we make opportunities – teachable moments – to explain what we are doing and why, we increase the likelihood that the public will “get it”, support it, and may even be moved to join us. Education is an invitation.

**Action:** Develop a comprehensive communications strategy to reach both internal and priority external audiences. Like all other plans, this is only as good as its execution, but it also must be carefully timed to ensure that we are ready. Its long-term development must track progress in asset mapping, program evaluation, and the development and approval of a business plan. Our goal is to be a premier national education resource – we won't get there just by saying it's so. To do so before it is true would seriously damage our credibility. That being said, we can get started in the following ways

**Internal Audiences:**

❖ Celebrate those who are doing well. Our employees have always been doing smart things. Show them we know this through a program of awards, commendations, and public and peer recognition.

❖ Identify audiences, needs, and ways to reach them.

❖ Make full use of InsideNPS. Create an education link at the highest level of the web page to learn about and offer feedback on the NPS education renewal. This could include the material gathered during the NLC seminar series; other relevant background, including academic research, reports, and updates on what is underway.

❖ 2003 Conference. Make the renewal of the education mission a key component of this conference. The National Park Service leadership can use this forum to emphasize its importance and the role that every employee and our partners are being asked to play.

**External Audiences:**

❖ Identify audiences. For example, national teacher associations, education writers, K-12 students, seniors, African Americans, Hispanics, visitors, and existing or potential channels to reach each.

❖ Establish priorities. We can't do everything at once, so where will efforts and resources have the maximum impact? The business plan will help us guide this effort.

❖ Showcase success. There is a veritable gold mine of National Park Service programs underway on any given day – which most people don't know about. Every program has an educational component. Find it. Showcase it. Recognize those responsible in public ways.

❖ Review NPS media. Do our publications, periodicals, films, exhibits, and websites, reach their intended audience? Is information presented in the right form, format/medium, and context? Can it be more broadly distributed? Can it be re-purposed to distribute via a different channel? Can we make more thematic or geographic connections for the user? Does it meet user needs? Does it create or add to the desired knowledge?

❖ Market & Expand Partnerships. Meet with the park institutes, field schools, and other partners that run educational programs in parks and identify how we can promote existing programs and expand them, where appropriate.

❖ Internet, Internet, Internet – There is no other medium that has as large and diverse an audience and where the content is totally under our control. The communications plan must include a strategic vision for the short- and long-term future of not only LearnNPS but also the entire the National Park Service presence on the Internet. Our website, nps.gov, must be recognized as a primary and unmatched method of communicating with the general public. We must take full advantage of its multi-media capabilities and its inherent ability to reach targeted audiences with specific information.

# National Park Service Education Council



## Charter

The Education Council will serve as an interdisciplinary advisory forum, a leader in advocating the renewal of the education mission nationally and in the field, and will coordinate with national education partners within the service in order to build capacity, create additional opportunities for learning and expanded partnerships.

## Purpose

The Council will advise and make recommendations to the Associate Director for Partnerships, Interpretation and Education, Volunteers, and Outdoor Recreation.

The Council will work in cooperation and consultation with the National Park System Advisory Board Education Committee.

The Council will formulate short and long term strategies to achieve the vision for education as articulated by the National Leadership Council

The Council will identify emerging issues and opportunities to unify and support the educational efforts of the agency

The Council will facilitate communication with the field, regions, directorate, the National Park System Advisory Board and the National Park Foundation, other foundations, cooperating associations and other partners

## Representation

The Council will consist of 15 to 24 members representing the broad range of talent, expertise and experience found in the Service including:

Superintendents (representing small, medium and large parks)

Education and interpretation subject matter experts/practitioners (representing interpretive program development, asset mapping, program

evaluation, community outreach, chiefs of interpretation, education specialists and interpretive planning).

One member appointed from the National Park Foundation

One member appointed from the National Park System Advisory Board Education Committee

One ex officio member: the NPS Comptroller

One Regional Director, one Deputy Regional Director, one Associate Director and one representative from the NIAC will serve as liaisons to the Council

## Responsibilities of Members

To regularly attend meetings

To serve as a liaison between their parks, programs, organizations, regional directors, or regions and the Council, bringing input, issues and ideas to the Council, and taking information back to the regions for consideration.

## Governance

The Associate Director will serve as co-chair.

The second co-chair will be elected by the Council membership.

*The nomination and final selection of Council members:*

Regional and Associate Directors will solicit self nominations and may also make nominations of their own. Each Regional and Associate Director will present the Associate Director for Partnerships, Interpretation and Education, Volunteers, and Outdoor Recreation with a slate of up to five nominees.

Final selection will be made by the Associate Director for Partnerships, Interpretation and Education, Volunteers, and Outdoor Recreation.

## Terms

Initial members will serve 2 or 3 year staggered terms (terms determined by the co-chairs and the members) to ensure continuity.

Subsequent members will have 3 year terms.

## Meetings

The Education Council will meet at least 2 times a year in person, once in the East and once in the West. Meetings will be facilitated and the facilitator will prepare notes of the meeting. To further communications, there will be conference calls every other month on the same day and the same time. It is expected that work will be done between Council meetings by working committees.

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*The President hopes to improve the educational value of park experiences by making sure all citizens are aware of opportunities to participate in conservation and restoration partnerships.*

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*Gale Norton,  
Secretary of the Interior*

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