

COMMUNICATING THE MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF INTERNATIONAL BIOSPHERE RESERVES TO NATIONAL PARK VISITORS

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ABSTRACT

Those Biosphere Reserves which are also national parks have an advantage in having an established clientele of visitors. This audience is often more supportive of park and Biosphere objectives after participating in public programs conducted by the staff. Yellowstone National Park and Everglades National Park are discussed in terms of objectives and methods used to involve visitors with park resources in interpretive, educational activities.

1. INTRODUCTION

Many International Biosphere Reserves in the world were first established as national parks by the nations in which they are located. These actions set aside areas of outstanding natural or cultural resources which are protected and managed to minimize human impacts. As development of adjoining lands progresses, the rarity of undisturbed lands becomes much more apparent. Through the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Man and the Biosphere program, several governments have nominated one or more of their national parks, as well as other significant natural areas, as Biosphere Reserves. When this status is granted by an organization of the United Nations, the reserves receive greatly increased recognition and stature from the world community as well as from their own governments.

2. DISCUSSION

The designation of a Biosphere Reserve may not result in many headlines in newspapers or cause a great swell of public excitement, yet having a reserve in one's country is good news, important to all citizens as a measure of the health and significance of their environment. Reserves which are also national parks with established visitor use often have a decided advantage over reserves which have limited access or recognition by the general public. Even though reserves may have strong protection under the laws of the nation, the success of these protective measures will vary. As public awareness of the value of a reserve grows, so also grows public support for its integrity and well-being. I submit that public concern and interest are vital to long-range protection of Biosphere Reserves and that such support can be earned through active programs of education and visitor services.

Both Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho, and Everglades National Park in Florida, became International Biosphere Reserves in 1976 as well as equally important World Heritage Sites in 1979. Each park has ongoing programs of

interpretive activities designed to involve visitors with park resources for enjoyable, educational experiences. A description of the purpose of some of these activities may suggest ways in which the resources of Biosphere Reserves are benefitted, as well as the participants.

It is a general policy of the United States Government to offer federally funded interpretive services for national park visitors as part of a legislative mandate from the Congress. The 1916 Act creating the National Park Service directed the agency "To conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same by such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."

Yellowstone, established in 1872 as the world's first National Park, has had over 80 million visits since that time and has become very well known throughout the world. Its 2.2-million acres of wilderness are an ideal reserve where ecological relationships are nearly as they were hundreds of years ago. Yet, more than two million visitors tour the park each summer using the 2% of the park developed for roads and services. Over one million of these visitors makes personal contact with park rangers or devotes some of their time to a guided walk or other interpretive activity. They do so to learn more about geysers, hot springs, bears, and other animals, usually the best-known features of the park. From this starting point, new interests often develop under the guidance of a skilled interpreter who introduces concepts which relate in some way to the background or experience of each participant. More than half the activities in Yellowstone deal with wildlife and ecology, which lead to discussion about the value and rarity of large natural areas in the modern world. In most of these situations, it is the natural time to reveal that such areas are important to all nations and that Yellowstone is now a Biosphere Reserve. Put into context at the opportune moment, the idea of a reserve as a world-class conservation effort is received with approval. This receptive and supportive attitude is the best possible souvenir of an enjoyable visit to a reserve. Examples of visitor services in Yellowstone are typical of many national parks in the United States. There is a wide selection of naturalist-guided walks to points of interest such as geyser basins, canyon rims, lake shores, mountain tops and even a vacant bear den. Visitors have opportunities to attend evening slide programs on a wide range of topics and are encouraged to try new experiences either with a naturalist or on their own. Demonstrations of modern camping techniques or catch-and-release fishing give people the opportunity to observe and learn skills for using and enjoying natural resources without damaging or consuming them. Portrayals of early periods of the national park as through "living history" help visitors understand the philosophies that guided the development of present management policies.

Visitor centers contain exhibits and often an auditorium for audiovisual programs. Publications sold through non-profit cooperating associations are selected to provide authoritative and educational materials for further reading. Posters and special displays are used to focus special attention on subjects such as the significance and purpose of Biosphere Reserves.

Those persons who seek more opportunity to learn about the scientific and cultural resources of Yellowstone National Park can enroll in the Yellowstone Institute for courses taught by qualified instructors. During the six-day courses, students live and learn in and from the park itself.

A recurring theme of park interpretation in Yellowstone and elsewhere is that parks are not sufficient in themselves to protect habitats and wildlife species. Their conservation is a worldwide concern and responsibility.

In the totally different environment of Everglades National Park, similar services are offered in terms of guided walks, evening programs, and visitor centers, but there are important differences from Yellowstone. Here, it is more of a challenge to help

people experience the Everglades firsthand. There is a natural interest to see alligators and birds, yet there is often a general lack of understanding of the real nature of ecosystems in which they live. Naturalists invite visitors on "wet walks" through flooded sawgrass prairies to hardwood tree islands, called hammocks, or in canoes to see what lives in estuaries. On trips such as these, visitors begin to appreciate the complexity of life and its extreme sensitivity to degradation of water or air. The proximity of the 1.2-million acre Everglades National Park and Biosphere Reserve to the metropolitan area of Miami means that very strong measures on both sides of the park boundary have to be taken for its protection, especially so that the sheet flow of water across the glades follows as normal a cycle as possible.

For the last ten years, Dade County and Miami schools have made the Everglades a part of their regular curriculum in cooperation with the National Park Service. Park naturalists conduct workshops for teachers who then return with their classes for one to five days of environmental learning. Over 25,000 teachers and students participate each year. There is a continuum of Everglades experiences for students from fourth grade through high school. Reaching youth at a receptive age has proved to be one of the most effective means for the National Park Service to build bridges between city dwellers and the natural world that supports them.

3. CONCLUSION

It is essential that the public supports the concept of Biosphere Reserves if they are to be protected from threats to their resources. Activities for visitors to reserves, including students and local residents, build support through a succession of steps beginning with understanding. Ideally, understanding leads to appreciation, appreciation to concern, concern to protection.

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