



Partnership Case Studies

Department of the Interior

International Volunteer-in-Parks Program of the National Park Service

The national park concept has been described as "America's best idea." The National Park Service (NPS) has embraced this concept and, as a result, it is recognized throughout the world as being at the forefront of protected area management. The International Volunteer-in-Parks Program (IVIP) helps the National Park Service fulfill its international role.

The NPS mission reads as follows: "The National Park Service preserves unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the national park system for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations. The Park Service cooperates with partners to extend the benefits of natural and cultural resource conservation and outdoor recreation throughout this country and the world."

The U.S. national park system faces many of the same problems as its international counterparts. Global phenomena like climate change, invasive species, air pollution, and certain diseases - such as the West Nile virus - affect protected areas in all countries. To address some of these concerns, the IVIP coordinates short-term training projects in U.S. national parks for foreign park management professionals, educators, and students. Each year about 150 individuals from some 40 countries volunteer with the National Park Service to gain training and experience that will aid in their efforts to protect parks in their home countries and will further the goals of biodiversity conservation and sustainable development.

A Model of Success

In a recent survey of National Park Service sites that have hosted IVIP volunteers, 86 percent of the respondents indicated that they would participate again. The program gives enormous benefits to NPS, the volunteers, and the environment. For example:

- The program offers opportunities for NPS employees to sharpen their professional skills through interaction with international volunteer counterparts. NPS employees, for example, have learned new resource management procedures and technologies from volunteers with professional park backgrounds in game capture, fire management, and invasive species eradication.
- International volunteers provide badly needed manpower. In fiscal year 2004 alone, international volunteers contributed over 69,760 hours of service to national parks across the United States. Without IVIP volunteers, some important park projects would simply be left undone.
- The program leads to the development of a growing corps of conservationists better able to protect parks throughout the world.

Through these multicultural learning experiences, IVIP volunteers gain more knowledge about the United States and its governing processes while NPS employees gain valuable cross-cultural experiences that assist them in their interactions with the growing numbers of foreign tourists visiting U.S. national parks each year.

The program facilitates the development of solutions to resource challenges that cross over park boundaries as well as international borders.

By placing international volunteers in U.S. national parks, the NPS facilitates an exchange of best practices on shared resource challenges.

An added bonus of the program is its low cost to the federal government. International volunteers pay their own expenses, including transportation and medical insurance, which total about \$2,000 – 3,000 per person. In addition, most national parks have housing facilities on site, making it possible for

participants to reside in the national park where they are assigned.

Even recruitment costs are low. Living and training in a national park has proven to be such a rewarding experience for the volunteers that many of them spread the word about the program to their colleagues when they return home. Thus, the program's alumni not only serve as a source of free advertisement, they also help ensure a steady stream of interested applicants.

"Sister park" relationships have strengthened common bonds. Many national parks have developed a Sister Park relationship with parks in other countries. The parks enter into these relationships for various reasons including, for example, a similarity of protected resources/ecosystems or a mutual interest in a common set of park management issues. A sister park relationship usually consists of exchanges of technical information and, if practicable, short-term personnel exchanges.

Many national parks use their contacts at their sister parks to find IVIP candidates. Often NPS units utilize IVIPs from their sister parks to assist them with joint park projects and to facilitate exchanges of information. During fiscal year 2004, Fossil Butte National Monument in Wyoming incorporated two Russian IVIPs into its sister park project with Russia's Khvalynsk National Park. The Russian IVIPs received training in interpretation and also developed their interpretive writing skills, while working on an electronic interpretation system that will be used in both national parks. Russian IVIP Masha Martyshina worked with Fossil Butte's American volunteers on the first part of the sister park project to develop an "electronic ranger" for Fossil Butte. "The electronic ranger," a touch screen computer program, informs visitors about the park's resources, programs, logistical matters, safety concerns, and volunteer opportunities.

Managing the Program

The program is managed within the NPS Office of International Affairs (OIA), headquartered in Washington, D.C. Among its mandates, this office evaluates opportunities and coordinates responses involving the National Park Service in international programs, projects, and activities. OIA aims to provide leadership in the fulfillment of U.S. foreign policy objectives through the implementation of treaty obligations and other agreements. The staff utilizes its broad network of

contacts to optimize the efficiency, responsiveness, and accountability of NPS in its collaborations with international partners.

Two international cooperation specialists manage the IVIP program and provide training and guidance to park volunteer coordinators in each U.S. national park. In order to admit international visitors to the program, IVIP managers work with the State Department's Exchange Visitor Program staff to receive J-1 visa sponsorship authority and stay current with exchange visa policies and regulations. IVIP program managers develop national guidelines and coordinate with NPS domestic volunteer program managers who implement policies for NPS Director's Order for Volunteer Management. Regular policy updates are provided to the field through training sessions and Internet exchanges. Program managers maintain an NPS internal website, which they use to post volunteer reports. They also provide direct support to national park personnel regarding specific inquiries from potential international volunteers.

The Volunteer Pool

As mentioned earlier, many program volunteers learn about available positions through returned participants; others learn about the program from information posted on two IVIP websites at <http://www.nps.gov> and at <http://www.nps.gov/oia/topics/ivip.htm>. The sites are linked to ensure that potential international volunteers are well-informed on program requirements and qualifications. Some potential international volunteers contact a specific national park directly. The individual park-volunteer manager, in turn, notifies IVIP managers to facilitate the exchange and assist a potential volunteer in his or her pursuit of the required J-1 visa for acceptance and entry into the U.S. program. Also, the IVIP manager works with third-party nongovernmental organizations, such as the Student Conservation Association, to recruit international volunteers. The IVIP staff has many international partners in other countries who request opportunities for their employees to receive training via the program.

Volunteers are selected based on the needs of individual U.S. national parks. Generally, international volunteers must possess the requisite educational background or practical experience specifically required by a particular park. Most volunteers are college students majoring in park management or another environmental field or are students on semester break. They want to gain park

experience and practical field training. NPS also receives requests from park professionals who want to observe and participate in NPS natural- and cultural-resource management procedures.

The IVIP program has recently begun involving international volunteers from countries with which NPS has a bilateral agreement. In those cases, the program falls under the work plan activities that are designed to fulfill the objectives of the bilateral agreement. Chile's National Forest Agency, for example, has sent a total of nine of its park managers to three different U.S. national parks over the last four years, as part of its bilateral agreement with NPS.

Volunteer Experiences and Their Accomplishments

In December through March 2004, park manager Shadrack Ngene from Nairobi National Park in Kenya participated in a volunteer program at Gateway National Recreation Area in the northern New Jersey/New York City metropolitan area. Nairobi National Park lies outside Nairobi's city limits. Placing Ngene at Gateway gave the international volunteer an opportunity to observe and participate in natural resource management field work and conduct research at an urban American national park that has similar threats to resources as those experienced in Nairobi National Park. The World Wildlife Fund financed Ngene's training program and was so impressed with his work that they are offering to fund five more African resource managers for volunteer programs with the NPS in 2005.

Many parks found the language skills of their international volunteers helpful in reaching out to local communities. IVIP Javier Ocho from Mexico assisted with educational outreach programs, interpretive projects, and resource management fire monitoring projects at Guadalupe Mountains National Park in Texas. Ocho also participated in the park's Chamizal Educational Program that is designed to help people better understand not only other cultures, but their own cultural roots as well. He visited seven schools over a four-day period and helped 1,120 students learn how to be creative about recycling and reusing materials. He put his Spanish skills to good use.

Increased training opportunities for IVIPs benefit volunteers, the host parks, and park visitors. IVIP Maria Frolinka from Russia, for example, was hosted by

Colonial National Historic Park in Virginia, where she attended TEL (Technology Enhanced Learning) interpretation courses. TEL courses provide international volunteers with opportunities to train for specific competencies and to interact with experienced park personnel and instructors. Colonial National Historic Park has offered many of its international volunteers professional interpretive training and unique opportunities to learn more about early American history and, in turn, share it with park visitors.

In FY 2004, two Australian indigenous rangers had the opportunity to observe NPS management at Canyon de Chelly National Monument in Arizona. This park has a number of Native American staff and currently is developing joint management processes with the Navajo Indian tribe. Rangers Elizabeth Dargin of New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service and Beryl Smith of Kakadu National Park had unique qualifications to participate in Canyon de Chelly's outreach activities. Having experience with indigenous communities and park management processes back home in Australia, the rangers applied their skills and shared their knowledge with park personnel to tackle the tasks at hand. In turn, Dargin and Smith gained firsthand knowledge of NPS methods for developing cooperative management arrangements with local Native American tribes, which they will share with indigenous World Heritage managers in Australia.

In his final report regarding his assignment at Olympic National Park in Washington, IVIP Timothy Robertson wrote: "I've learned that one person can make a difference. In the approximately 60 days I've been working in the Park...I estimate that I have influenced at least 20 backcountry visitors each day on best-practice methods. If each one returns on their next trip, this time with a bear canister or a correctly completed permit, then that will be 1,200 visitors who will have a greater appreciation for, and understanding of, camping in the coastal wilderness."

Robertson's experience reinforces the value of the IVIP program and serves as a positive indicator that IVIPs are making a difference in the National Park Service, and ultimately to the world as a whole, as they bring the NPS mission back to their home countries.

Confronting Challenges

The number one challenge facing the IVIP program is getting volunteers from less prosperous countries to participate. NPS believes that talented individuals from these countries could benefit from the training offered. Unfortunately, many cannot afford to participate. The majority of volunteers come from Western Europe and other developed countries. In fiscal year 2004, for example, over 50 percent of the volunteers came from five of the 34 countries represented: Canada (16), Germany (23), Japan (9), Russia (8), and the United Kingdom (8).

As noted earlier, the approximate cost for one IVIP participant is \$2,000 - \$3,000. NPS encourages partnerships to help cost-share the program so that volunteers from less developed countries will be able to participate. Funds from Park Flight, for example, enabled volunteers from Guatemala, El Salvador, Panama, Mexico, and Nicaragua to take part in the program. (The National Park Service established the Park Flight program to protect shared migratory bird species and their habitats in both U.S. and Latin American national parks and protected areas. Park Flight is a partnership between the NPS, the National Park Foundation, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and American Airlines.

Although an IVIP program costs the federal government very little in monetary terms, it does demand a significant commitment of time and resources. Arranging an IVIP program requires extensive planning and coordination. The Park Service tailors individual training programs for each of the international park volunteers. Participating parks must integrate the volunteers into park activities. Park personnel provide training sessions to the volunteers to familiarize them with American culture. They also arrange field trips for the volunteers to increase their knowledge of American natural and cultural history. Parks also typically pair the visitor with a mentor to assist in the adjustment process. All in all, it is a very labor-intensive process. Unfortunately, most park personnel cannot dedicate the amount of resources required to host an IVIP program. Consequently, the number of international volunteer opportunities is limited; however, by selecting highly qualified candidates, NPS will continue to maximize the benefits of these exchanges. IVIPs with strong educational backgrounds and experience will come prepared to build on their skill levels and ready to immerse themselves in field projects.