

From “Wreck-reation” to Recreation Area

A Superintendent’s Perspective

Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area (NRA) is a special place visitors enjoy nearly five million times a year.

Opportunities for recreation, the park’s main attraction, abound. There is boating on the river, technical climbing on the escarpments, hunting and fishing on lands and streams, swimming in lakes and rivers, camping on both islands and shore, and hiking, biking, horseback riding, and cross country skiing on many miles of trails. That said, the most popular activity is simply enjoying the scenery that surrounds the river.

The Delaware River is indisputably the park’s focal point. It offers some of the best canoeing, rafting, tubing, and fishing experiences to be found in the East. Its waters are of exceptional quality and provide very clean drinking water to 10 percent of our nation’s population. Of this we are extremely proud. Yet accomplishing Congress’s initial mandate to “provide for public enjoyment of such lands and water” has been a tumultuous experience. Today’s park visitors were in fact preceded in the 1960s by demolition teams, causing local residents to coin the term “Wreck-reation Area.”

In preparation for damming the Delaware River, the Army Corps of Engineers purchased and removed hundreds of buildings from within the area to be inundated. Delaware Water Gap NRA was conceived in 1965 as a recreation area adjoining the reservoir’s waters. Through a series of events discussed elsewhere in this issue of CRM, local residents strongly protested and the dam was never constructed. The national recreation area, however, prevailed, leaving the National Park Service to manage what is truly one of the region’s richest examples of natural and cultural heritage.

How best to manage these resources has been an ongoing struggle when the cold reality is that there will never be enough money for everything. One solution has been “conservation through cooperation.” Today dozens of historic structures are adaptively reused and conserved by such part-

ners as the Millbrook Village Society, the Montague Association for the Restoration of Community History, the Pahaquarry Foundation, the Peters Valley Craft Education Center, and the Walpack Historical Society, just to name a few. In addition, long-term traditional uses continue at the Montague Grange and a few churches. But saving individual buildings is not enough — we must also preserve their context and surrounding rural landscape. Farmers help maintain open space and the rural countryside by cultivating crops and mowing fields. Without such dedicated partners it would be impossible to preserve the cultural history of the park.

Huge challenges remain. We need to find even more partners to adaptively reuse many vacant buildings and care for the adjacent lands — for only with use will there be protection. We need to learn more about our cultural landscape and how to manage it. We need to learn more about the plants and animals and natural systems in the park. The areas surrounding Delaware Water Gap NRA are among the fastest growing counties (by percentage) in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. With this inevitable growth outside the park, the rural landscape inside the park will become more and more valuable as a “window” into a more rural, agrarian past. We need to recognize growth outside the park and work with communities to support planned growth and the preservation of park resources.

The National Park Service is committed to protecting and preserving these national treasures for all times — so that our grandchildren and their grandchildren can enjoy and learn from them. Often there is a conflict between preserving resources and enjoying them at the same time — making sure they are not “used up” but not “locking them up” either. We seek to carefully balance recreation uses with conservation of resources so that these resources will be here in the future.

Bill Laitner is superintendent of Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area.