

Muriel (Miki) Crespi

Raising Muted Voices and Identifying Invisible Resources

Heritage resource programs are being challenged worldwide to acknowledge the rich contributions of diverse peoples and cultures. At home, the National Park Service (NPS) is addressing inclusiveness in several ways. Two decades ago, the NPS established the applied ethnography program. Since then, the concepts, data, and strategies of cultural anthropology, or ethnography, as the NPS calls it, have helped the agency hear and see what had been typically unheard and unseen. By giving voices to communities and indigenous peoples, and visibility to the resources they value, the discipline has enriched our understanding of heritage by illuminating the places and concerns that have been unknown, but knowable.

What is Ethnography?

Ethnography actually has several meanings. It is part of cultural anthropology, a social science addressing people in social contexts including communities or tribes, the ways they structure their lives and use their resources, and their responses as often-unwitting players in processes such as tourism, development, nationalization, and globalization. Applied ethnography studies add problem-solving suggestions such as consultation strategies, policy formulation, interpreting potentially discrediting and divisive pasts, and

bringing traditional knowledge and stakeholders into heritage programs.

Perhaps more often, ethnography is considered a bundle of methods and concepts.¹ Quantitative methods are important, but “ethnography” implies qualitative methods, including interviewing, observation and community participation.² One uniquely defining feature is the researchers’ continuing engagement with community members. This facilitates the collection of otherwise unavailable data, a result that Fiske³ calls ethnography’s “ground-truthing” effect. For example, ethnically-mixed public meetings often discourage frank discussions, but participants will raise sensitive issues in small homogeneous groups or person-to-person meetings. Separately interviewing African Americans and Creoles of color, for example, about inter-ethnic relations and resource uses at the plantation park, Cane River Creole National Historical Park, Louisiana, encouraged openness about themselves and each other.⁴

“Ethnographies” are also research products, and the NPS has numerous analyses of American Indian, African American, and other peoples and heritage resources. These works have multiple beneficiaries, including park planners, managers and interpreters. Communities themselves gain by making their preferences known about information to share or withhold from the public. At Cane River Creole, for example, both African Americans and French Creoles resist seeing slavery become an exclusive interpretive theme.

Ethnographic data also supports compliance with local and congressional mandates, including the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, National Environmental Policy Act, National Historic Preservation Act, and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. Indeed, an essential driver for, and outcome of, ethnographic work is culturally informed compliance and decision-making that meets not only the letter of the law, but the spirit too.

The “Big House” at Oakland Plantation, Cane River Creole National Historical Park. Occupied until recently by French Creole descendants of the 18th-century owners, and served by African-Americans and Creoles of color.





In the background, site of the now-leveled but legendary AME Church near Cane River Creole National Historical Park. It still serves local residents as a place marker; an ethnographic resource, in NPS parlance.

Brick cabin(s) at Magnolia Plantation, Cane River Creole National Historical Park, constructed in the 1800s to house enslaved black people and later occupied by free African-American workers until the 1960s.

Sites, structures, objects, and landscapes can be called “ethnographic” if people consider them traditionally and uniquely associated with their heritage. Some ethnographic resources are eligible for the National Register of Historic Places, others are not. “Ethnographic resources” were conceived because certain park resources lacked the integrity or other criteria needed for Register listing, but deserved attention because

they were vital to tribal or community cultures.⁵ Presently, the NPS is computerizing an inventory of these resources.

Even no longer extant physical structures or town landscapes can remain pivotal to the identity of entire communities, whether Japanese-American former internees, relocated American Indians and African Americans, or American Indians linked to the lands of internment camps. Universally, invisible or barely recognizable vestiges of human communities on sunken U.S. warships or at Nazi concentration camps and elsewhere, can elicit powerful responses.

Formerly standing churches, for example, pepper Louisiana’s Cane River National Heritage Area. Although outsiders might see only “rubble heaps,” or no surface clues at all, these seemingly invisible structures still configure the local geography perceived by traditional residents. Outsiders seeking directions to some rural locale might be told to drive toward “the church,” meaning the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME). It was demolished three decades ago, but remains a place marker, an intrinsic part of the conceptual map and storied landscape. Similarly, riverside baptismal sites without physical markings are known to local residents as places of spiritual cleansing and community renewal, but, despite their heritage importance, remain invisible to cultural outsiders.

Stakeholders, Including Traditionally-Associated Peoples

Many people have stakes in the outcomes of decisions about heritage resources. Stakeholders include site neighbors, and community gardeners in certain national parks. Others are government agencies, history re-enactors, or bikers on annual pilgrimages to the Vietnam Memorial. Some represent preservation or tourism interests, or belong to churches listed on the National Register. Many are indigenous peoples, or others whose former homelands or subsistence resources now are protected areas. Together, the stakeholder category includes various peoples with at least one common element, interest in resource-related decisions.

One major kind of stakeholder is “traditionally-associated peoples.” Unlike casual visitors, they have long-term interests in particular resources, reflecting actual, historic, and legendary ties. For at least two generations, and even before a heritage site might have been established, they perceived the resources as crucial to their cultural genesis and identity.⁶ They are indigenous people who once used, or might still use, the subsistence and ceremonial areas incorporated into parks. Others are descendants of enslaved people who once served in elegant plantation “big houses,” or are French Creole descendants who have owned and maintained the mansions. They know the meanings of resources.

Consulting traditionally-associated peoples is essential, especially when individuals or institutions plan to protect resources expressing other peoples’ heritages. Contacting peoples might entail interviewing neighbors, or senior citizens and church members, involving tribal officials in government-to-government discussions, and reviewing research and maps, including Indian Land Area maps.



The more inclusive the search, the likelier the success in identifying associated peoples and other stakeholders. Establishing productive working relationships with them is imperative, I would argue, if we expect to enhance our knowledge of diverse heritages, incorporate traditional knowledge into management, and raise the visibility of the resources, people, and processes that have contributed to nation-building. Hopefully, this *CRM* issue will illustrate the contribution Ethnography makes to the American people.

Notes

- 1 R.F. Ellen, ed. *Ethnographic Research: A Guide to General Conduct* (London, Orlando, San Diego: Academic Press, 1984).
- 2 Jean J. Schensul and Margaret D. LeCompte, eds. *Ethnographer's Toolkit* (Walnut Creek, London, New Delhi: Altamira Press 1999).
- 3 Shirley J. Fiske. "The Value of Ground Truth: Sustaining America's Fishing Communities," *Common Ground* (Winter 1998/Spring 1999) 29.
- 4 Muriel (Miki) Crespi, "Draft Brief Ethnography of Magnolia Plantation: Planning for Cane River Creole National Historical Park," January 1999.

- 5 cf. Muriel Crespi, "Inventorying Ethnographic Resources Servicewide," *CRM Bulletin* 10:4 (1987) 3-5.
- 6 See National Park Service *Management Policies 2001*, Chapter 5:48 for complete definition of "traditionally-associated" entities.

Muriel (Miki) Crespi, Ph.D., Anthropology, is the National Coordinator for the NPS Applied Ethnography Program, National Park Service, Washington, DC. She is guest editor of this issue of CRM and can be reached at <miki_crespi@nps.gov>.

Photos by the author.

The title of this article comes from the symposium I organized in December 2000 for the National Park Service Conference in Santa Fe, Cultural Resources 2000: Managing for The Future. The full title of the symposium was Seeking a More Inclusive System: Raising Muted Voices and Identifying Invisible Resources. The problem of formal preservation programs that, however inadvertently, made certain people and resources invisible players has concerned me for decades.

Oral History and Technology Workshop

Oral history is a mainstay of ethnographic research. A strategy for understanding the dynamics of communities, events, and resource uses, it helps satisfy compliance, planning, and interpretive needs. History and other programs find it essential, too. Inexpensive and widely available electronic recording technology is increasingly encouraging federal, community, state, and tribal program managers to collect, store, and make public vast amounts of cultural data. Yet, they have had no formal ethnographic, administrative history, or archival experience, or training in confidentiality and copyright issues.

Effective oral history work requires certain basic training. This includes knowing when and how to conduct culturally-appropriate ethnographic and administrative history interviews in different situations and with different peoples. In an era of advanced electronic recording, it is important to know current techniques to capture, transcribe, index, store, and preserve new types of media, and salvage old recordings for use with current digital technology. Knowing the best practices for alerting scholars to available oral and video histories and sound recordings; for identifying and transferring materials to repositories; and for managing outdated formats and deteriorating media is essential. Finally, given the often culturally-sensitive information in oral histories, and its potentially wide public distribution through electronic media, it is imperative to address legal protections for sensitive data, and issues of confidentiality, informed consent, intellectual property rights, copyright, and privacy.

These pressing needs have led the National Park Service and Canyonlands Natural History Association to sponsor a three-day oral history workshop, September 18-20, 2001, in Moab, Utah, for community organizations, tribes, and local, state, and federal agencies with cultural and natural resource responsibilities.

For more information, a workshop schedule, list of speakers, or to register for the course, contact Eric Brunnemann at Canyonlands National Park, 435-719-2134, <eric_brunnemann@nps.gov>. Tuition for the course is funded by NPS and Canyonlands Natural History Association. Park Service participants will use the benefiting account to pay their travel and per diem.