

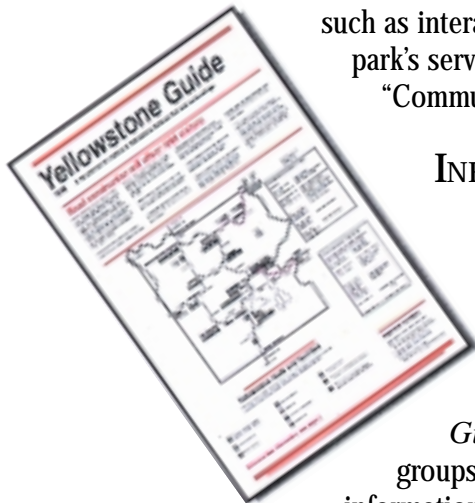


Preserving the Park Through Interpretation and Education

Educating visitors about Yellowstone’s natural and cultural features is an essential part of providing for their enjoyment “in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” Ideally, interpretation begins before a visitor arrives and has an influence that lasts long after the visit ends, enabling each visitor to experience Yellowstone in a personal way while meeting the park’s goals for resource preservation and support.

All NPS, Yellowstone Association, and concessioner employees who talk with visitors contribute to this learning process. Thousands of written requests, phone calls, faxes, and electronic mail messages asking for everything from employment advice to help with student homework are referred to staff throughout the park. But the

primary responsibility for using interpretation to enhance visitor experiences and protect park resources is met by Yellowstone’s interpretive staff—22 permanent and an average of 60 seasonal employees. Their mission is to increase public understanding and appreciation of park values and resources through a variety of formal and informal personal contacts, indoor and outdoor exhibits, publications, and audiovisual media. During 1998, 189,909 people attended interpretive programs and more than twice that many visited the park’s official website. An interpretive specialist has been assigned to enhance this website through “virtual tours” of park attractions, interactive maps, and information retrieval on a wide range of park topics. The use of this technology and others such as interactive computer kiosks holds great promise for broadening the park’s services to more non-traditional and diverse audiences. (See “Communications Systems,” page 5–16.)



INFORMATION AND ORIENTATION

Before arriving. Thousands of people contact the park or its website in advance of a planned trip, requesting maps and information about weather, where to stay, and what to do. Each year park staff in several offices answer more than 29,000 phone calls, mail the *Yellowstone Guide*, a vacation planner, to more than 40,000 individuals and groups, and send 9,000 letters in response to specific requests for information.

INTERPRETING NATIONAL PARKS

Persons unfamiliar with NPS culture may ask interpretive rangers “Which foreign language do you speak?” As Freeman Tilden, often called “the father of interpretation,” wrote in 1957, “Interpretation is more than just information: it is an art which combines many arts, the chief aim of which is not instruction but provocation...Any interpretation that does not somehow relate...to something within the personality of experience of the visitor will be sterile.”



Thus park rangers are still taught the maxim: “Through interpretation, *understanding*; through understanding, *appreciation*; through appreciation, *protection*.”

At park borders. Outside the park entrance in West Yellowstone, Montana, an interagency visitor center opened in 1994 with staff provided by Yellowstone, the Gallatin National Forest, and the local chamber of commerce. The presence of professional interpreters would better prepare people for their park visits, but funding has been insufficient to permit regular staffing. A similar facility in Jackson, Wyoming, south of Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks, is not currently staffed by any Yellowstone employees, although most people coming into the center plan to visit the park.

Staff at the five entrance stations hand out the park newspaper (updated four times a year) and a park map and brochure. During most of the year, they cannot take the time to answer detailed visitor questions without causing traffic jams and irritation among those waiting in line. Limited translations of critical safety and resource protection information are available in French, German, Spanish, and Japanese, but translations into additional languages and a greater extent of translated information are needed.

Park visitor centers. From late May through early October, visitors can receive basic information about the park’s features, regulations, and activities and obtain permits for fishing, boating, and backcountry camping at the five major visitor centers (Mammoth, Canyon Village, Fishing Bridge, Grant Village, and Old Faithful), at four ranger stations (Lake, Bridge Bay, Tower Junction, and the South Entrance), and at three smaller contact stations (Norris Geyser Basin, Madison Junction, and West Thumb).

The nine major visitor contact facilities, which range in age from 30 to nearly 100 years old, are shabby and too small to even provide adequate restrooms for the more than two million people who pass through them each year. Insufficient staff and space at information desks make it impossible to serve more than a few visitors at a time, causing long lines to form and frustration to flare as people wait 20 minutes or more for assistance. The tiny lobby at Old Faithful has no space for exhibits and is often so jammed with visitors that most give up before receiving the information they want; until 1999 it showed a 30-year-old film in a cramped auditorium on a rickety projection system. Fortunately, contributions from the Yellowstone Association, have provided funding to develop two new films at Old Faithful, and the first \$1.25 million donation toward a new visitor center there has been pledged by Unilever Home & Personal Care - USA. The Yellowstone Foundation (see page 8-5) is seeking other donors to contribute the remainder of the estimated \$18 million that will be needed to construct and equip the facility. Using fee demonstration funds, the park plans to revamp the Canyon Visitor Center by 2004.

During the winter season, only the Mammoth and Old Faithful visitor centers are open. Park staff are also stationed at four warming huts that provide oversnow visitors with information about travel conditions and a brief respite from the cold. The dangers of Yellowstone in winter make this service especially important, but limited staff and space at the huts compromise the services that can be offered. (See "Winter Use," page 6-38).



Walks, talks, and demonstrations. During 1998, in addition to the 189,900 visitors who participated in guided walks, talks, and programs, an estimated 271,530 were contacted informally on boardwalks, at overlooks and at wildlife viewing areas. However, declining budgets have resulted in an increasing focus on those activities that serve the greatest number of people—staffing visitor centers and the most popular attractions such as the canyon rims and geyser basins during peak periods of visitor use.

Nightly slide programs on a variety of topics are offered at the seven major campgrounds during the summer season, but talks can only be given sporadically, if at all, at the four other campgrounds. Daytime activities during the peak season include short talks and guided walks near major attractions such as Old Faithful and Mammoth Hot Springs. Longer guided hikes to areas like Specimen Ridge, Mount Washburn, and Pocket Basin, although popular, have had to be eliminated because they require relatively large amounts of staff time for relatively small numbers of visitors. Almost no scheduled activities are offered during spring and fall, a situation that brings many visitor complaints.

Audiovisual presentations.

Although audiovisual presentations are often the most effective way to present complex ideas such as geologic history, only four of the park's visitor centers still show films or automated slide presentations, and the programs are outdated. These facilities also need new projection systems, screens, sound systems, acoustic treatments and seats; the equipment is so antiquated that repairs are becoming impossible because replacement parts are no longer made. Two new films about Yellowstone's geothermal features and their microscopic ecosystems are being developed with funding from non-profit organizations, but the park lacks even a basic visitor orientation videotape, and none of the existing presentations meet accessibility requirements for audiences with hearing and visual impairments.

Indoor exhibits. Well-designed exhibits can contribute significantly to visitor understanding and enjoyment of the park. Yet exhibits at seven of the nine visitor facilities are either non-existent or from 20 to 60 years old. Exhibits are needed on the park's geology, wildlife, and human history that make use of technologies such as interactive computer kiosks to effectively communicate with media-savvy audiences. The relatively new exhibits at the Norris Geyser Basin Museum and the Canyon Visitor Center, which were made possible through partnerships with private organizations, were intended to be only temporary.



Outdoor exhibits. Roadside and trailside exhibits can provide vital safety and regulatory information 24 hours a day. The park also has 12 self-guiding nature trails in popular areas such as the Upper Geyser Basin, Fountain Paint Pots, and the rims of the Grand Canyon. Most visitors learn about these and other park features on their own, using either trailside exhibits or self-guiding publications. However, more self-guiding trails are needed in popular areas, and only a fraction of the exhibits that need to be replaced each year because of severe weather, geothermal deposits, and vandalism receive any atten-

VISITORS STAMPEDE TO NEW EXHIBIT



An exhibit on the history of Yellowstone's bison and the controversies surrounding their management has been on display at the Canyon Visitor Center since August 1997. Created through a partnership with the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming, the exhibit features two large dioramas of bison. Visitation at the center nearly doubled after the exhibit opened.

tion because of insufficient funds. Starting in 1991, the park began installing a new generation of more durable exhibits made of porcelain enamel; 120 are now in place. Of the additional 600 needed, about 100 have been funded and are in production.



JUNIOR RANGERS

Each summer, about 13,000 children from the ages of 5 to 12 learn about park resources and safety precautions through a specially designed newspaper, *Yellowstone's Nature*. Each child who successfully completes the series of activities, as recorded by a park ranger, is awarded his or her "Junior Ranger" patch—accompanied by a ceremonial announcement in a park visitor center.

The Sakier Foundation has provided \$6,500 in support, which the park supplements by charging each participant a small fee.



Environmental education.

Since 1985, nearly 10,000 students and their teachers have completed *Expedition: Yellowstone!*— a program based at the historic Buffalo Ranch bunkhouse in Lamar Valley where students learn about park resources and environmental issues. About 80 percent of the participants come from schools in Montana, Idaho, or Wyoming; the rest travel from across the nation. In 1995, the park began charging schools a small fee per student to help pay for the four seasonal interpreters and the supplies and materials used during the program.

Park staff also go to schools to present educational programs, develop park-related curricula for teachers, and organize special events such as Earth Day activities. Under a 1999 pilot program targeted at West Yellowstone, high school students will have the opportunity to assist with the Junior Ranger Program while receiving on-the-job training. Over time, this program to strengthen the ties between the park and its neighbors may be extended to other gateway communities.

Publications. Each year the park produces about 60 publications about Yellowstone for both the visiting and non-visiting public, including four park newspapers, of which about 850,000 are distributed to vehicles entering the park; over 750,000 copies of seven self-guiding trail publications; the Junior Ranger newspaper; brochures on activities such as skiing, hiking, bicycling, boating, fishing, and horseback riding; and the quarterly magazine, *Yellowstone Science* (see “Sharing Scientific Results,” page 5–4).

With support from the Yellowstone Association, the park’s primary partner in education and interpretation, sales of publications in Yellowstone’s visitor centers generate funds to meet a wide array of needs (see page 8–3). For example, a special grant enabled park staff to develop foreign language translations of the park map and guide, and a condensed version of the park newspaper in French, German, Spanish, and Japanese.

Special initiatives and outreach. Park staff from a variety of offices represent the park at public meetings and speak to congenial or hostile people, providing information and explaining the park’s position on controversial topics. On average, interpreters and resource specialists make 160 such presentations each year, reaching more than 11,000 people. In 1998, 50 requests for programs had to be declined due to lack of staff. In 1999, the Division of Interpretation launched an outreach program in which supervisory staff attend community meetings on a regular basis to provide a conduit for information between local residents and the park.

Radio and television broadcasts. As they drive through the park entrances, visitors can dial 1610 AM on their radios to receive a brief recorded message with basic information and regulations, but few use the system. With updated equipment and additional staff time devoted to it, the radio broadcast could advise visitors of road closures, construction delays, the weather forecast, and the availability of such services as campgrounds and lodging. A local cable channel, previously used as a community bulletin board, also offers added potential for spreading visitor information in the electronic age.

Accessible interpretation. Most visitor facilities are at least partially accessible by persons with physical disabilities, and additional retrofitting is being done where necessary. However, many of the interpretive media offered at visitor centers need to be redesigned to meet accessibility requirements. The park’s first fully accessible self-guiding nature trail, “The Forces of the Northern Range Trail,” is nearly complete.



Program Needs

- **SURVEYING THE PUBLIC.** Anecdotal data and comment forms which the park has from a small segment of the public provide at best an incomplete understanding of the views of the full range of park visitors and the general public. Opinion surveys would help us assess where to focus our resources to most effectively achieve our goals for public education and resource protection.
- **VISITOR CENTERS.** A backlog of more than \$100 million dollars in capital improvements has been identified to update the park's visitor centers to acceptable standards of accessibility and safety, and to equip them with appropriate exhibits and audiovisual presentations. More advanced technologies, such as digital monitoring and relay of geyser prediction information, are important if both the resources and visitors are to be well served. In addition to better staffing of the interagency facilities in West Yellowstone, Montana, and Jackson, Wyoming, visitor centers are needed in other gateway communities.
- **SELF-GUIDING TRAILS.** The 12 existing trails require upgraded or additional trailside exhibits and booklets to adequately explain park features and issues. At least four more self-guiding trails are needed (Firehole Lake, Mount Washburn, Artist Paint Pot, and Natural Bridge) to facilitate safe visitor access and resource protection.
- **RESTORING IN-DEPTH PROGRAMS.** Many parks have begun to charge for guided walks and other activities. At Yellowstone, some specialized programs could be maintained as pay-if-you-go activities. This would enable the park to restore some educational activities for that segment of the public who is willing to pay for them.
- **ADDITIONAL STAFF.** Staffing remains at less than half of what is needed to provide information at the park's visitor centers and major attractions throughout the year at levels appropriate to visitation patterns and trends. Visitor surveys have shown that 26 percent of the respondents are strongly interested in personal interpretive services, yet the staff were able to reach only 6 percent of visitors with such programs in 1998. Additional staff is also needed to provide "nonpersonal" interpretive services—publications, exhibits, audiovisual media, and website management—to meet the park's goals for outreach to nontraditional audiences and the general public.
- **UPGRADE EQUIPMENT.** Developing kiosks and a website with interactive capabilities, and using the park's radio and television infrastructure to their full potential would breach many gaps in interpretive services both inside and outside the park. More than ever, these tools can bring the meaning, value and significance of Yellowstone National Park to audiences who may never have the opportunity to visit Yellowstone in person, but who nonetheless can benefit from and support the park.



INTERPRETIVE PROGRAM

STEWARDSHIP GOALS



Professional staff keep abreast of critical issues and use innovative skills and techniques to help the public understand and appreciate the park's primary mission, values, and resources.



Visitor centers have well-designed and up-to-date exhibits and sufficient staff to operate at convenient locations and times to meet visitor demand.



Yellowstone provides a broad range of high-quality interpretive and educational programs that enhance visitor experiences while addressing the park's mission of resource conservation.



Advanced interpretive technologies, publications, and outreach activities are proactively used to inform diverse audiences in and outside the park.



Interpretive services, products, and facilities promote public safety and resource conservation through both the information provided and the way in which it is presented.

CURRENT STATUS OF RESOURCES/PROGRAM



Neither the permanent nor seasonal staff receive adequate training to develop the skills needed for their positions.



Facilities are outdated and too small and/or poorly located to provide the services expected by the public: a fund-raising campaign is underway to construct a new visitor center at Old Faithful through donations.



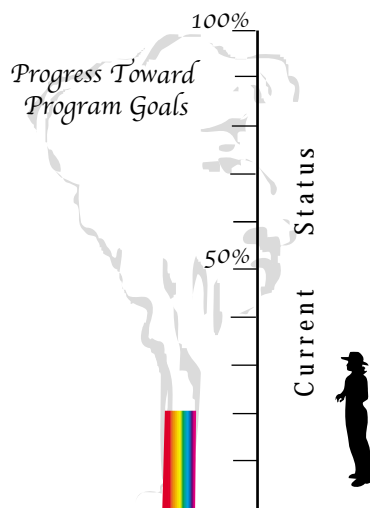
Summer campfire programs and walks are well-attended, but few programs are offered during the rest of the year. The popularity of new exhibits and the Junior Ranger program indicate an interest in greater program variety.



The demand for books, newspapers, web sites, other printed information and off-site programs outstrips the park's ability to provide the variety and quality needed.



Traditional programs are conducted with minimal impact on other visitors, and convey messages that promote visitor safety and conservation of natural and cultural resources.



1998 FUNDING AND STAFF

Recurring Funds	
Yellowstone N.P. Base Budget	\$ 1,317,000
Cost Recovery/Special Use Fees	\$ 114,700
Non-Recurring Funds	
One-time Projects	\$ 134,600
Staff	37.4 FTE

The human resources and funding necessary to professionally and effectively manage the park to stewardship levels will be identified in the park business plan.