

If Not Us, Who? If Not Now, When?

By Will LaPage



Interpreting pride in our national heritage sites becomes a major challenge when their integrity is compromised by decades of deferred maintenance.

Following my interpretive intuition, I begin with a story—one from my visit to Tucson in fall 2000. My seatmate on the return flight to Chicago happened to have attended the same workshop, and, though we didn't know each other, we shared our respective enthusiasm about the sessions, the attendees, and the exciting directions in which our profession was moving.

In the course of our discussion, I

learned that this was his first National Interpreters Workshop and that he had been sent to Tucson by his park agency as a retirement gift. I suspect you are experiencing that very same knot in your stomach that I felt at the time—a mixture of pleasure that he had had the experience at least once before retiring and of the outrage toward an organization that has a practice of rewarding loyal employees with a gift of training that will never be fully used!

I suppose that my colleague's employers believed that they were doing a sensitive and generous thing for a long-time employee. But what I saw was an appalling lack of understanding of what professionalism is all about, combined with a total absence of a training ethic, zero concern for accountability, no understanding of the concepts of investment and reinvestment, and an ignorance of stewardship that must cut across all of the agency's resources. In short, that little



The combined deferred maintenance at federal and state sites is estimated at close to \$10 billion.

comment revealed an organization with some serious shortages beyond dollars. I don't know how common is the practice of rewarding soon-to-be retirees with their first professional development opportunity, but I do know that far too many of our public park agencies are equally short of training funds and equally bereft of "best management practices."

My message to you today is simply that we can change this situation, if we wish to. And I suspect your immediate reaction is, Why us? The "why" is easy; the "how" will take me a little longer to explain.

If Not Us, Who?

Why us? Because we are professionals. Part of being a professional is the need to profess something. We have standards and principles of interpretation that we profess. We have standards and principles of training that make us who we are.

Why us? Because we care. We care about heritage, about legacy, about our environment, about our cultural assets. And that caring forces us to become advocates, voices, for those things that have

no voice. Our allegiance is to values that transcend the agencies that manage them, like open space and sense of place, like saving a piece of yesterday for tomorrow, like keeping wild things wild.

Why us? Because we are the ones who will have to interpret the failures of the agencies as well as our own failures to be strong advocates for those very values. If not us, who will tell the essential story behind the story? Who will build the cadre of appreciative clientele for our parks and protected places if we don't? The ethical responsibility of stewardship is not limited to resource managers. Some would argue that it falls more heavily on the resource interpreters whose ethical responsibility is to the resources first and to the agency only a distant second. Who will demand the standards and the principles if we do not? Those principles are like our muscles—if we fail to use them, they will atrophy.

As an aspiring poet, I make it a point to visit any park that commemorates poets whenever I am near one. Some years ago, I visited the Henry Wadsworth Longfellow home in Cambridge and was treated to

an excellent interpretive tour of the mansion. I received a wonderful history lesson, learned the national significance of the site, and maybe even felt a little bit of the inspiration the home lent to its second-most-famous resident (George Washington was an earlier resident). What I didn't learn, and what nobody in the tour group learned, was the declining condition of the mansion and the unusable carriage house in the rear with its leaking roof, rotting sills, and broken windows. Here was a group of people who might have made a difference—if they only knew the story behind the story. And I wondered whatever became of holism as a principle of interpretation. Had it atrophied, or was it simply sacrificed on the altar of agency loyalty? Isn't there an ethical responsibility for interpretation not to be candy-coated?

The pervasiveness of the deferred maintenance problem in U.S. public parks, natural areas, and historic sites has reached the point of national disgrace. The National Park Service estimates it at \$4.9 billion, the USDA Forest Service at around \$1 billion, and I have estimated the combined total of deferrals in the

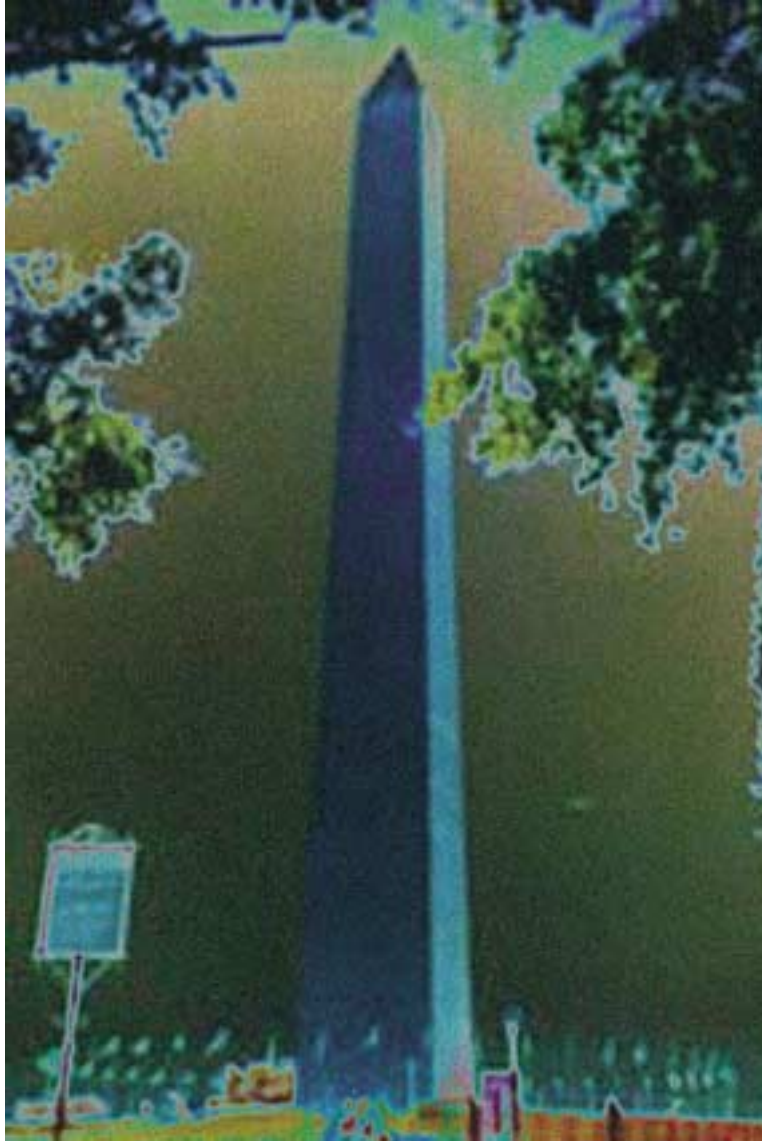
fifty state-park systems at \$3.1 billion. All of this is happening on lands where the unequivocal mandate is to “preserve and protect!” Why this has happened is a deceptively easy question to answer. There hasn’t been enough money appropriated to do the job. But that’s not the complete answer. Why hasn’t the money been budgeted? It isn’t as though park conditions have been kept secret. It isn’t because park administrators haven’t had the courage to request larger budgets.

The public budgeting process is no mystery. It is a competition between constituencies resulting in a set of social priorities. To win at that game obviously requires an organized constituency. Creating that constituency is a matter of building the public’s trust. That trust is based on two distinct elements: (a) that the job needs doing and (b) that you can do the job. I suggest that our failures in park stewardship do not come from the appropriations process but, rather, from the trust-building process. This is an interpretive challenge of the highest order. If we fail to tell the world about the condition of these priceless assets, we fail to convince them that the job needs doing. How is it that we can consistently fail to convince the same people who set these assets aside, for their preservation, that they are still at risk? That answer is embedded in the second step. To convince the public that we can do

the job requires explaining why we can do it now, when we previously allowed these assets to diminish. And that means an admission that past practices were inadequate and that we have adopted not just new practices but certainly “best management practices.”

Nero Only Fiddled, He Didn't Fan the Flames.

Can it work? Let me share another story with you. When I took over the New Hampshire state park system in 1984, it was described by my predecessor as tired, worn out, stagnant, and staffed by the disheartened and discouraged. Within the first two years, we went



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from an agency that had long embraced deferred maintenance to one that had a sizable accelerated maintenance fund, along with the respect of the legislature and a rapidly growing program of partnerships. That change came about by admitting the enormity of past failures,

by having a partnership plan for the future, and by expanding accountability from dollars alone to the condition and trend of the resources. It also came about by interpreting parks to the legislature as something more than recreation and heritage—interpreting them as public health investments, as anti-crime investments, as economic engines for tourism, and as state pride.

Had we not reversed the downward spiral of stewardship at New Hampshire state parks, let me share with you where it was headed. When there is no money for years on end to care for resources, they begin to disappear rapidly. My predecessors had a list of park buildings that were slated for burning. We had already lost one of the biggest barns in the state, at Coleman state park. A historic summit house and ranger cabin on Mt. Monadnock had been burned at the orders of the director. A house dated from the American Revolution, at Rhododendron State Park, was slated for demolition, as was a set of log cabins at Crawford Notch State Park that may well have been one of America’s first motor courts. The practice of getting rid of resources that we

can’t maintain is not unique to any one park system. The practice of reducing the size of the estate to match the size of the available budget may be less blatant elsewhere, but accompanied by a wink and a smirk, this is a story that is retold by preservation agencies all across

America. When the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service inherited the nineteenth-century summer estate of former Secretary of State John Hay, its plan was to bulldoze the mansion. A refocused and reenergized New Hampshire state park agency led the charge to save it. If ever there is an argument for ethical responsibility in park stewardship, this is it—and the time is now!

So, what are the “best management practices” that will get us out of the downward course of stewardship? They are exactly what I’ve been talking about:

Complete accountability: An accurate and honest periodic reporting of the conditions and trend of all the assets and resources entrusted to our collective stewardship. It can’t be done without complete inventories and monitoring systems, which require...

Building partnerships: Coalitions, collaborators, cooperators, constituencies, friends, neighbors, and volunteers, all with a stake in the successful outcome of park stewardship. It’s impossible to build that winning team without...

Building pride: A demonstrated commitment to the idea that pride in heritage is an essential building block of park protection. In fact, heritage appreciation may be the only truly effective tool in an era of government downsizing. “Demonstrated” simply means advocacy and activism on behalf of those resources, assets, and future owners that, except for us, would have no voice.

If Not Now, When?

At what point in the multibillion-dollar deficit tally do we begin to speak up? Our activist predecessors, such as Enos Mills and Freeman Tilden, would say, “Long before now!” At what point does an increasingly involved and concerned society say “enough” and initiate class-action lawsuits demanding real accountability? At what point do we declare another “crisis” in our parklands, appoint yet another blue-ribbon commission to study the failures, and once again recommend the very things we already know need doing? At what point does the crisis mentality take over and demand that every available dollar, including the scarce

interpretive dollars, be used to correct the situation? At what point do the local economies rebel and say that mismanagement is hurting them? And at what point does the movement toward best management practices—in all professions—become a dictate from above rather than a grassroots movement from within?

I would argue that we are playing a dangerous game of brinkmanship right now with every one of these scenarios. And if they are allowed to play out, we will run the obvious risk of becoming the profession that failed to profess. And that would mean being relegated to the continuing role of a bit player on the park preservation scene. It could even mean being discredited as heritage advocates for denying our own professional legacy of activism.

We can continue to dance around the issue of whose responsibility this is. We can protest that we are not the stewards, that we are the specialists in building heritage understanding and appreciation. But I for one cannot separate the two. And I don’t think that you really want to, either.

So, if the time is now and the responsibility is ours, what must we do? What is a reasonable plan of action? I suggest that there are three elements to that plan:

- **Professional commitment to telling the whole story**—to being accountable in all of our interpretive programs to telling the bad news as well as the good. And do this as part of...
- **Adopting and implementing a code of ethics for interpretation** that clearly and fully states the interpreter’s ethical responsibilities to the resources, to the future, to the owners, and to their agents. That code requires...
- **Adopting of accepted best management practices** by our heritage preservation organizations and agencies. Certification is probably the most professional way to accelerate that adoption process.

Not one of these things could reasonably be labeled as drastic action on the part of park professionals. But they all might be “too little, too late.” Throughout history, endless campaigns have been lost by those who could have won, and often should have won, because of the

“too little, too late” syndrome. Do not doubt for a minute that there is a continuing battle over the preservation of our cultural and natural heritage. One major campaign of that battle is the budget. And that campaign is won or lost by the size of the constituency and the level of trust in those who profess to be qualified to do the job.

For More Information

LaPage, W.F. “Best Management Practices: It’s Time to Certify Our Public Parks, Natural Areas, and Historic Sites.” *Legacy* 12(1):10–12. Fort Collins, CO: National Association for Interpretation.

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