

Volunteers in the Park

Park Partners

The US National Parks Service VIP (Volunteers In The Park) Program

Lessons to be learnt in managing Australia's national parks based on the American experience

By John Sinclair

During April, 1993, Sinclair studied national park management in America's two most heavily visited natural area parks - Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

Golden Gate National Park Study

The most inspiring meeting I have had with anyone involved in national park management in recent years, came with a meeting with Brian O'Niell, Superintendent of the Golden Gate National Park and Greg Moore and some of his staff of the Golden Gate National Parks Association in San Francisco. The Golden Gate National Recreation Area is the most heavily used park in the whole of the American Parks system with more than 15 million visits annually.

What was so inspirational was the approach of the park to the use of volunteers and the cooperative partnership with the National Park Association. The partnership was mutually productive, encouraged by the U.S. Federal Government (which runs the US Parks Service) and was far more constructive than any relationship between an Australian national parks Service and any organization even the foundations established by the parks services themselves.

The American partnership aims at making the community more enthusiastic about protecting the park because their proprietorial rights are recognized. They are empowered.

The story of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area National Parks Association was as inspiring as the approach of parks management. This 8,000 member body has a \$7 million budget which is derived from a variety of sources but mainly through the Association's entrepreneurial activities within the park itself which are to a large extent fostered and assisted by the Parks Service which makes them truly Park partners.

The Superintendent reported: *"The average number of hours per volunteer per year increased by 6.53 hours each. Less volunteers contributing MORE time. The volunteer program of the combined areas ... benefitted from the equivalency of 58 work years in 1990, 64.46 work years in 1991, and 66.3 work years in 1992."*

In 1992, volunteers contributed 134,069 hours of service. The volunteers undertook a variety of tasks from guiding visitors on conducted tours and eliminating weeds, to staffing the retail outlets within the park and conducting a very exciting raptor observation program which is providing useful data on park management.

It is worth quoting here a brief extract from the 1991 Annual Report of the Conference of National Park Cooperating Associations (a national organization of more than 65 similar associations):

GOLDEN GATE NATIONAL PARK ASSOCIATION developed and opened the Golden Gate

Discovery Tour - an audio tour interpreting national parklands to ferry passengers touring San Francisco Bay. It restored the historic entry arch to Muir Woods in conjunction with the Association -sponsored new visitor center and achieved 10,000 hours of donated time for the Habitat Restoration Team, an Association sponsored volunteer education and conservation program.

"The Association also publishes new interpretive books on Alcatraz, Muir Woods and Fort Point, and provided design and exhibit planning for new visitor center in the Marin Headlands. Its educational programs and materials reached close to 2 million park visitors. Support for the park volunteer program resulted in nearly 4,000 people providing over 100,000 hours of volunteer time. The Association also provided a vital partnership role in the public awareness and interpretation of a significant new park site, the Presidio. Overall GGNPA contributions resulted in \$1.6 million of support for the National Parks Service."

Graph of Contributions to the Golden Gate National Recreation Area by the GGNPA from the 1992 Annual Report.

In all of these programs the volunteers share the duties and responsibilities with some of the Association's 120 professional staff in a harmonious cooperative way. It provides a model which more voluntary community based organizations in Australia should aspire to.

I was impressed in discussing the role of more than 2000 volunteers who work with only two staff in the raptor program. These volunteers track, catch and tag many of the 10,000 to 20,000 raptors (eagles, hawks, falcons and vultures) which converge in this narrow peninsula before crossing the turbulent Golden Gate waterway, an obstacle in their migrations between summer and winter territories. Some birds have travelled from here to as far as the Argentine Pampas and Alaska. Observers are dedicated field workers. Professionals merely coordinate the program to ensure consistency and reliability of data to ensure a credible scientific base which can be the basis for publication and further research.

These "heroes of the park" an honorary term bestowed on the people who turn up in their own time and at their own expense to restore the habitat of the park by eliminating weeds. In Queensland volunteers removing weeds is not condoned. However, these heroes are freeing other park workers for other duties and undertaking work which may otherwise be neglected.

The American Congress has long recognized the values of:

- * utilizing the goodwill that so many citizens have towards the park;
- * saving the drain on the public purse by expanding the bureaucracy to be the only source of staffing the parks; and
- * empowering people to take a more active role in protecting one of the most precious assets, their national parks.

In 1970, Congress enacted a law to establish the VIP Program which covered volunteers for *"tort liability, work injury compensation and reimbursement for out of pocket expenses."*

A Guideline (NPS 7) says: *"Volunteers can be utilized in any and all parts of the park management system. All levels and types of skills can be utilized and almost any kind of work can be performed as long as it is work that:*

- 1 *Would not be otherwise get done during a particular fiscal year because of funding or personnel limitations.or*
- 2 *Frees paid employees to accomplish work that would not otherwise get done during a particular fiscal year because of funding or personnel limitations.*
- 3 *Does not result in the displacement of any paid employees.*

A brochure produced by the National Parks Service lists the roles that VIPs perform in a sampling:

- * work at an information desk, answering visitors' questions and handing out written information
- * present living history demonstrations in period costumes
- * write or design brochures
- * serve as a campground host
- * drive a shuttle bus
- * build fences, paint buildings, and make cabinets
- * maintain a park library
- * take photographs or work in a darkroom
- * answer mail requests
- * give guided nature walks and evening campfire programs
- * assist with the preservation and treatment of museum artifacts
- * maintain trails
- * design computer programs for park use
- * answer telephones
- * conduct oral history interviews
- * give environmental education programs for children
- * patrol trails
- * demonstrate arts and skills
- * organize photograph and slide files
- * prepare and conduct special park events

- * pick up litter along roads, trails, seashores and rivers
- * inventory underwater resources such as shipwrecks on diving expeditions
- * assist resource managers and researchers by making wildlife counts, planting trees, and taking part in other projects

It seems that the only work that volunteers cannot participate in other than a few activities where their safety may be jeopardized are limited only by park managers imagination. In the Great Smokies, I saw part of a brilliant audio visual presentation on the wildflowers of the park which was prepared by a "VIP" (volunteer) who happened to be the outstanding expert and a professor of botany at a university. The same VIP conducted a Wildflower Spring Pilgrimage, a special event which attracted more people to the park but gave them all a far more meaningful experience.

The approach to gaining community cooperation to assist in managing the parks was the most gaping difference between the US Parks Service and most park managers in Australia. It is an area where Australian politicians could and should explore because it has so many benefits apart from enabling our parks to be better managed on their existing budgets provided that the right spirit of cooperation can be engendered.

Both Brian O'Niell and Greg Moore, were eulogistic on the mutual benefits which can ensue. For example, the public becomes far more proprietorial and protective of the park in every aspect from addressing the management issues within the park and ensuring that management outside the park is not able to needlessly intrude on the park itself. It recruits more advocates for the park and makes the public more willing to financially support the parks. It helps the protection. For example, signs appear in the park:

PARK WATCH

Report suspicious activities or hazards to local agencies. Phone ..."

The injunction works. It needs to. On "Earth Day", 22 April, a very big day for the environment in United States and the day when President Clinton announced that he would sign the Rio Declaration, the following graph appeared in a leading national newspaper, "USA Today":

Australians on the whole are no less enthusiastic about national parks than Americans. If most park users were to help protect the parks instead of creating new responsibilities for the professional protectors, then the parks would be in better shape.

The underlying philosophy in this incredibly successful approach to park management is the universal appreciation by both the park management team and the volunteers coordinating agency that there is a partnership in protecting the parks which involves the public as active participants rather than as simply clients or people to be consulted.

Great Smoky Mountains National Park

From 25 to 28 April, 1993, I visited the Great Smoky Mountains National Park World Heritage site to assess the impact of tourism on the most heavily visited national park in North America. This park annually attracts about 10 million visits or about 40 times more visitors than Fraser Island in 1992.

The Great Smoky Mountains National Park covers 500,000 acres (200,000 ha). This is only 25% larger than Fraser Island. It straddles the Tennessee - North Carolina. Its popularity is in part geographical and in part biological because it contains a rich bio-diversity which was once common in the eastern part of the continent but which has elsewhere been substantially lost. It is "within one and a half days drive of two thirds of America's population".

Like Fraser Island, the Great Smoky Mountains National Park is on the World Heritage List. It is also an International Biosphere Reserve. However, its World Heritage status is not as widely publicized as its status as a Biosphere Reserve.

Fraser Island and the Great Smokies share another property in common. They were both logged extensively. Prior to becoming a National Park in 1934, 6,000 land titles covered the mountains. Most titles were for logging and small farms. About 95% of the park is heavily forested. About 25% of this is virgin forest. A small area is retained as a modified environment to depict the mountain farming traditions of the hill-billy folk who sold their farms to make way for this park. The rest of the modified environment has been allowed to heal. During the last six decades the worst of the scars have healed with remarkable alacrity.

The Great Smoky Mountains National Park covers an outstanding area of bio-diversity. It has almost as many species of trees as all of Europe. With 1570 species of vascular plants it has almost twice as many as Fraser Island. Although it boasts 200 species of birds, (compared with Fraser Island's 400 plus species) populations are very small.

The Great Smoky Mountains contain the oldest land in all of the United States. They constituted an island when the Rockies had not yet begun to form and were submerged below the sea. As such these mountains represent an amazing area of bio-diversity and a refuge area for a very distinctive and diverse relic flora. To this extent it has much in common with Fraser Island which is also an ancient biological area, harbouring many primitive species. This also explains why there is so much more bio-diversity here than in the national parks on the western part of the continent.

The Great Smoky Mountains National Park problems though, are much more difficult than Fraser Island's because it is not an island and because the quality of the Australian air and water have not deteriorated as much as that of the United States.

The park forests were once dominated by two grand types of tree communities, the American chestnuts and the Douglas fir -spruce forests. The chestnuts are not extinct, yet but every large chestnut tree has succumbed to an insect which moved through the park with tragic consequences. Young plants struggle but none survive to maturity. Chestnuts are no longer the grandest trees of the park.

Another introduction advanced from near the Canadian border to inflict a similar disaster on the Douglas firs. As a result, these magnificent forests have now suffered the same fate as the chestnuts. The loss of the firs has been to the detriment of its companion plant, the spruce. It was a similar story with the great elm trees, obliterated by the infamous Dutch elm disease.

Now the impact of acid rain is a further potential disaster likely to afflict these ancient mountains. The mountains are situated down wind of the great industrial complexes of the Ohio valley and other emission producing centres. These are affecting the quality of air and rain over the mountains.

Surprisingly there was no alarm over feral cats. There is a major concern with exotic trout which have decimated the native fish population in most of the streams except the very upper reaches. The powerful horse riders lobby has been able to maintain access to some trails including only this section of the famous Appalachian Trail.

In addition to the larger intractable environmental issues there are many other issues such as servicing this heavily visited park. There is also the problem with bears, not dissimilar to the dingo problem on Fraser Island but there are problems of monitoring the changes. For example the salamanders appear to be suffering similarly to frogs, and the total population of birds is disappointing to an Australian.

To cope with this the Park has a permanent staff of about 300 and a casual staff which can be employed for a maximum of 180 days per annum. Most of the casual staff are employed in the peak season which begins in Spring and climaxes in summer and peaks again during the autumn period of October. In addition there is a further innovation which should be incorporated into more Australian national parks. This is the VIP program - Volunteers in the Park.

This latter scheme is only possible because the US Park Service has been more efficient at reviewing staff roles so that only a few have responsibility for control and regulation of park visitors and their duties are more accurately defined to ensure that rangers are not forced into the same range of diversity as they are in Australia, notably in Queensland. For example of the 300 permanent staff 50 are engaged in the Protection (enforcement) section, 15 are engaged in visitor services, a section which attracts many casuals and volunteers, 25 are engaged in administration. About 20 are engaged in the research and most of the rest in maintenance.

The creation of these five divisions by the US Parks Service assists the process of integrating volunteers into the system whereas the Australian insistence on making every park employee a generalist both frustrates park workers with special aptitudes and talents but also mitigates against utilizing the talents of volunteers.

The most important lesson for Fraser Island to be learnt from the Great Smoky Mountains is that every effort should be made to isolate it from the injurious agencies which could inadvertently degrade it. The next most important issue is the need to make much better use of volunteers.

Volunteers in Australian National Parks

The concept of volunteers working on conservation projects in Queensland and Australia is not new or unique. However, it is one which National Parks and Wildlife Services in Australia have been reluctant to utilize to its full potential in recent times

Eli Creek: The Fraser Island Defenders Organisation set a precedent for voluntary work in a World Heritage potential site in 1981. A hostile Queensland Government was determined to prove the point that tourists do more damage than exploiters such as mining companies. They deliberately failed to take any action to stop the unintentional degradation of Fraser Island by the rapidly expanding tourist traffic. FIDO, in the face of official opposition, undertook the then mammoth task of reversing this deliberate, official neglect. FIDO's first pioneering effort was constructing a board walk and other facilities at Eli Creek. The project involved eighteen weekends of voluntary working bees by between 15 and 30 workers to construct the boardwalk, a picnic shed and toilets. FIDO also closed the area to campers and began rehabilitating the area which had been degraded during a decade of laissez faire use. FIDO financed the project entirely. It almost sent the formerly financially secure organization broke.

FIDO's efforts achieved two essential purposes: It arrested the degradation that had occurred at Eli Creek. It also ultimately shamed the Bjelke-Petersen Government in Queensland into actively managing recreation on Fraser Island. It passed the Fraser Island Recreation Area Act in 1985. The new Board was anxious to obliterate any evidence that FIDO had been involved so it almost immediately demolished and replaced FIDO's Eli Creek boardwalk (which was in very good state of repair) at a cost more than \$350,000 to the Queensland public. It was a case of volunteers shaming government.

Fraser Island: Apart from the potential that FIDO has demonstrated there have been many other voluntary projects on Fraser Island. One installed a hot water system in a National Park camp ground which previously had only cold showers. Four wheel drive enthusiasts installed the first hardened by-pass tracks around rocky sections of the beach and built vehicular board ramps. Some misguided enthusiasts planted trees on the foredunes and even in some sand blows. Others established the new walking track to Wabby Lakes. There have been many clean up campaigns by schools and others. One volunteer group undertook some data collection near Coomboo Lakes. Volunteers have worked on quite an astonishing number of other projects. Yet despite this impressive contribution there is still no established means of harnessing and utilizing the goodwill and energy of volunteers in this most popular recreation area. Further, there is evidence that some well intentioned efforts of volunteers have been misdirected on Fraser Island.

Environmental Parks: Volunteers have been used in Queensland in rehabilitating many Environmental Parks. Volunteers' muscles were used to clean up some parks littered with old car bodies and sundry rubbish.

Nature Search: In 1991, the Queensland Department of Environment and Heritage established a project called "Nature Search 2001" to coopt volunteers to identify the

wildlife resources of South East Queensland. They were overwhelmed. Over 3000 volunteers enlisted and hundreds of thousands of records shed some exciting new light on the wildlife of the region.

Bush Regenerators: Probably the most significant show of strength in the area of volunteers though in Australia is the incredible energy exhibited by the growing band of mainly matrons who are ridding our run down urban bush parks of a plethora of weeds and assorted rubbish. They have succeeded in a spectacular way of bringing back the bush in areas which were previously so over-run by feral plants that they had daunted local authorities for decades.

Non-Nature Conservation Agencies: Australian zoos, museums and art galleries have long had well established mechanisms for recruiting and utilizing volunteers. Most of these institutions would be less well endowed today if they had not harnessed this potential. It is justifiable status symbol in being a gallery guide, etc. It requires training and expertise. This type of work is frequently done better by volunteers than paid staff.

Government Nature Conservation Agencies: What is significant is that there has never been a shortage of volunteers for park projects but each time the volunteers have been engaged for one off projects with no mechanisms existing for on-going permanent use of volunteers in national parks around Australia.

Many more people subscribing to conservation groups than to political parties in Australia. While the strength of volunteers and support for nature conservation is well recognized, government conservation agencies have been wary about utilizing this potential in the same way that the zoos, art galleries and museums have done. Not enough has been done to tap this great human resource. New South Wales and other states have established foundations to take what funds it can extract from the public. However, there is not any effort to extract "kind" rather than hard cash from supporter of the parks. There has not been enough done to involve the public in park management.

The American model provides an outstanding example of what can be achieved if government agencies develop a partnership with the voluntary conservation movement. It is time that the energies which have been demonstrated to be available in Australia for Nature Search, art galleries, museums and zoos was applied to national parks throughout the country.

While many may assume that this would only benefit parks in close proximity to large population centres this need not be the case. For example, if volunteers from Sydney are prepared to travel 3000 kilometres from Sydney to work for the University as volunteers in collecting fossils at Riversleigh, why would not volunteers be prepared to work for similar period at the nearby Lawn Hill Gorge under direction on a variety of projects to enhance the management of the park? If people are prepared to work in the hostile conditions at Riversleigh, why would they not be prepared to go to Cape York Peninsula or the Simpson Desert?

The scope for volunteers is almost as good as the imagination of the park managers. All that is needed is the imprimatur of the Government and the incentives to park managers to harness this great potential.