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Standards for Tourism Management Success: U.S. National Park Managers

Abstract

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Keywords

Robert O'Halloran, Tourism

Standards for Tourism Management Success: U.S. National Park Managers

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National park managers are the subjects in the fifth segment of a study examining the skills and abilities needed to be successful tourism managers. The authors discuss these skills and their impact on successful tourism management.

A unique set of skills and abilities are needed by tourism managers, those employed in such diverse venues as government agencies, amusement parks, rental agencies, outfitters, tours, airlines and many other careers under the umbrella of tourism. Unfortunately, many professionals do not view themselves as tourism managers or have a basic understanding of the field. Many of these individuals have worked their way through the ranks of their organizations to reach the management level. Few of these individuals have had any formal education in tourism and have basically "fallen" into their tourism careers. National park managers may be the exceptions to this trend.

As part of an ongoing investigation identifying the key skills and abilities of tourism managers, a survey was conducted to identify the skills and abilities of United States national park managers. Previously, state tourism directors, convention and visitor bureau directors, ski area operators, and theme park managers were studied. Tourism managers have a unique relationship with hotels and restaurants. They are often the conduit through which potential guests will pass. The quality of service and general treatment that a guest receives from tourism managers and their organizations will influence a guest's decision to return and utilize the accommodation, food service, and other facilities available. National park managers must work cooperatively with the managers of hotels, restaurants, and other concessions in a park to best meet the needs of the visitors to these tourism attractions.

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“Ever since the National Park Service was founded its administrators have wrestled with the problem of safeguarding the public interest yet attracting sufficient private capital to provide facilities Congress and the public seem to want in the national parks.”¹ Congress stated that “the preservation of park values requires that such public accommodations, facilities and services as have to be provided within these areas should be provided only under carefully controlled safeguards against unregulated and indiscriminant use, so that development of such facilities can best be limited to locations where the least damage will be caused.”² Those who manage the parks as tourism attractions must seek to balance the need for infrastructure with their mandate for preservation. This charge calls for a manager with a balance of technical, human relation, communication, and political skills. Many park managers view themselves as recreation managers and/or natural resource conservationists. The identification of national parks as tourism attractions and, therefore, park managers as tourism managers is a relatively new phenomenon.

National Park Managers Have Broad Responsibilities

There is little attention paid to national park managers in the literature. Most publications on national parks focus on economic influences on park operations, market studies, financial reports and management plans, concessions, fee structures, visitor use, photographic illustrations, or government hearings on budget cuts and other economic issues. Little has been written concerning those managing these areas except in career publications developed by the National Park Service.

By National Park Service definition, park rangers supervise, manage, and perform work in the conservation and use of resources in national parks.³ National park managers not only have these responsibilities, but have additional administrative, supervisory, and management duties. Park management positions are identified in grades, with park manager grades at GS-11 and above.⁴ Those at larger and internationally known parks have specific job descriptions. Not all tourism management groups have defined the qualifications of their managers as clearly as the National Park Service, though some studies of tourism managers have been completed.

A European study was recently commissioned to examine the specific education and training needs of the travel and tourism industry in Europe.⁵ In the study, key jobs in management, both supervisory and line, were examined. Tourism management positions from hotels, resorts, retail travel agents, tour operations, national tourist offices, information centers, airlines, railways, car rental companies, and shipping lines were examined.⁶ Skills identified as important for tourism managers were team leadership, strong technical and financial skills, training, and guest and staff relations. Flexibility and an appreciation for multi-cultural approaches to business were also considered important. In specific functional areas,

marketing and sales were identified as increasingly important in today's competitive environment.⁷

The study concluded that there was an inadequacy of formal education and training, a lack of practical training, no industry-wide recognized qualifications, little coordination between the tourism industry and educators, a lack of investment in education and training, and insufficient training and education needs analysis.⁸ Additional studies on tourism managers have been completed, surveying all state and U.S. territory tourism directors with 54 responses, convention and visitor bureau directors of cities with a population of at least 283,000 (major markets) with 56 responses, and ski area operators of 114 U.S. ski areas with 60 responses.

Data collected from these groups illustrated diverse educational backgrounds among tourism manager groups. Convention and visitor bureau directors listed 11 different academic majors in college, state tourism directors listed 17 majors, and ski area operators listed 26.⁹ Additionally, educational backgrounds of convention and visitor bureau directors focused on business and management skills; state tourism directors were more diverse, but had a communication skills theme. Ski area operators were the least similar in educational backgrounds, with operators listing concentrations from accounting to English to fine arts to hotel and restaurant management.¹⁰ Previous career positions in tourism for these management groups relied heavily on human relations and communication skills. Ski area operators listed 73 different positions prior to managing ski areas.¹¹ The key skills for tourism managers noted were leadership, employee relations, marketing, public relations, and organizational skills. People, time, money, and information were the key management resources utilized by these managers.¹² Overall, research on tourism managers has helped to confirm that tourism management education lacks any consistent infrastructure. This, in turn, has led to a continuing poor industry image.

The National Park Service manages approximately 355 parks, memorials, historic areas, monuments, and preserves, covering more than 80 million acres. According to the nomenclature of park system areas, "a national park generally contains a variety of resources and encompasses large land or water areas to help provide adequate protection of the resources." With a total of 47,436,577.18 acres, national parks account for more than 50 percent of park system areas' land mass.¹³ For the purposes of this study only national park managers were examined to focus on the highest level of achievement for managers in the National Park Service.

A total of 50 questionnaires were mailed to all U.S. national park managers; of these, 39 or 78 percent of the questionnaires were returned. Results were examined with the use of simple statistical measures, including raw scores, frequency, mean scores, and standard deviations. The survey examined manager perceptions of the key knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to be a successful tourism

manager using a five-point rating scale, most important to least important. Additionally, demographic data were collected in conjunction with qualitative responses focusing on career paths. Blank replies were omitted from calculations.

Demographics Show Similarities

Almost all (96 percent) respondents are more than 40 years of age and have worked for more than 11 years in the tourism industry; 92 percent of the respondents are male and 89.5 percent earn salaries of \$45,000 or more.

Of the 39 respondents, 37 or 94.5 percent worked for more than 11 years in the tourism industry; the other two had 5 to 11 years of tourism experience. Respondents were also asked to indicate the five previous positions held before becoming national park managers. The list of positions was limited to operational positions within the National Park Service as follows: assistant superintendent, associate regional director of operation, chief ranger, chief park naturalist, chief of visitor services, chief of park maintenance, concession management specialist, deputy regional director, district manager, district ranger, ecologist, historian, intake trainee, outdoor recreation planner, park ranger, park ranger supervisor, program officer, regional trail planner, resource management specialist, seasonal ranger, site manager, state director, planning/ development, sub-district ranger, sub-district manager, superintendent, training instructor/coordinator.

The concentration of positions within the park service is indicative of a relationship between career planning and career paths of respondents. It is apparent that many, if not all, of the respondents originally harbored aspirations for careers in the field of ecological conservation and management. This also indicates that perhaps the only way to become a national park manager is to begin a career with the National Park Service and stay with the agency.

A traditional career path in the National Park Service has been from dispatch or entrance gate duties to protection or interpretive ranger, to supervisory or lead ranger, to subdistrict ranger/district staff, to district ranger/park staff, to division chief/regional office staff, to assistant manager to general manager.¹⁴ Alternative paths have been developed that reflect concentration in specific areas and transferability from one concentration to another. An example of such a career path is ranger generalist to cultural resources to protection to natural resources, leading to supervisor and management in each of these areas to park management.¹⁵ These career paths emphasize education and training in multiple areas in order to progress to park manager. The traditional career path has changed in the National Park Service, perhaps due to the demands of the visiting public, changes in the economic and societal requirements for public agencies, and pressures placed on park managers that balance preservation and conservation with development.

Table 1
Importance of Management Skills

	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Leadership	1.21	0.52
Public relations	1.24	0.70
Employee relations	1.28	0.78
Organizational	1.43	0.55
Staffing/evaluation	1.74	0.90
Strategic planning	1.72	0.68
Development planning	1.77	0.66
Forecasting	1.90	0.71
Training	1.92	0.76
Operational	1.95	0.75
Marketing	2.36	1.19
Technical	2.40	0.77
Research	2.49	0.67

Leadership Is Ranked Highest

National park managers were asked to rate the importance of a variety of management skills and activities. These skills are based on management skills outlined for traditional hospitality managers such as planning, organizing, directing and controlling, and management skills discussed by Henry Mintzberg in his work on managerial role theory.¹⁶ The ratings of these skills are displayed in Table 1, based on a scale of 1 (very important) to 5 (least important).

These rankings are indicative of the perceived importance of general management skills to national park managers. The low standard deviations imply a high level of agreement on the importance of these skills among the respondents. Marketing, despite having a significantly higher standard deviation, was rated as one of the least important skills, along with technical and research skills. Perhaps this is due to the fact that marketing is primarily conducted on a regional basis and therefore is generally beyond the park managers' immediate scope of control.

Besides managerial skills and activities, respondents rated a list of management resources according to their importance to successful park management (See Table 2).

Low standard deviations in this category indicate a high level of consensus among respondents on the relative importance of the resources. Human resources were rated the most critical to the success of park management. Money, information, and time were also deemed to be very important.

Table 2
Importance of Management Resources

	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
People	1.10	0.49
Money	1.26	0.63
Information	1.41	0.71
Time	1.44	0.67
Facilities	1.85	0.77
Equipment	2.00	0.71
Procedures	2.23	0.86
Energy	2.24	0.93
Inventory	2.54	0.81

Managers Hold College Degrees

In comparison to earlier profile studies of other tourism professionals, park managers as a group reached the highest educational levels. Of the 39 respondents, 9 or 23.7 percent completed postgraduate studies at the master's level and all hold bachelor's degrees. This is a marked difference from some tourism management groups that may or may not have education beyond high school.

Besides high educational levels, college majors were concentrated in natural resources and sciences. Majors listed included anthropology, biology, conservation biology, ecology, forest management, forest recreation, forestry, geology, natural resources management, park management, physical geography, wildlife management, and zoology. In the National Park Service application procedures suggested fields of major study are natural resource management, earth science, history, archeology, anthropology, park and recreation management, law enforcement, social or behavioral sciences, museum sciences, and business or public administration.¹⁷ It is notable for this group that, despite the fact that park managers manage significant tourist attractions, none indicated a management or business degree. Some majors indicated are management oriented, but business skills would be very useful.

Having determined respondents' educational levels and preferences, park managers were asked to rate the perceived importance of academic and practical education for better park management (See Table 3).

Bearing in mind that all 39 respondents hold at least a bachelor's degree, it is not unusual that college education was rated most important, followed by previous experience, which in earlier studies, including that for ski area managers, was deemed the most important. Graduate education was rated of lesser importance than other levels of

Table 3
Importance of Education and Previous Experience

	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
College education	1.45	0.78
Previous experience	1.97	0.74
Continuing education	2.19	0.77
Graduate education	2.59	0.68

education. It could be argued that few graduate tourism programs have historically been available, few were available to individuals currently in park manager roles, or few park managers would have considered them relevant to their chosen field at the time they were in college.

Community and Government Also Have Impact

Respondents were also asked to rate the degree of impact national parks have on the communities in which they are located (See Table 4).

It can be argued that these ratings also reflect priorities for management in the national parks. Given that many park managers are environmentally oriented, the rational for environmental impact being rated equal to economic impact is clear. In addition to environmental and economic impacts, national parks were also seen as having significant influence over the social and cultural developments of the communities. Knowledge of these impacts could influence the education or training required for successful park management. The interaction of people-oriented activities, both public and private in a park setting, i.e., concessionaires, local government, local business and suppliers, local population, and the demand generated by visitors, makes knowledge of these impacts necessary for the park manager.

To further expand on the importance of community interaction, park managers were also asked to rate the importance of interaction with different levels of the government (See Table 5). Government interaction is significant because every park manager must interact in the political arena. As part of a federal agency and a member of the local community, part of the park manager's job specification should address political savvy. Most regulations governing the management of national parks are decided at the federal level and circulated through the Department of the Interior. Therefore, for a federal agency, interaction is most important at the state level. Nevertheless, interaction with county and city governments was rated only moderately important in the day-to-day operations of the parks.

Finally, national park managers were asked to rank the importance of five tourism infrastructure components to the success of

Table 4
Importance of Community Interaction

	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Environmental	1.56	0.98
Economic	1.56	0.95
Social	1.82	0.83
Cultural	1.98	0.90
Psychological	2.10	0.93
Political	2.15	0.98
Legal	2.44	0.78
Energy	2.68	0.95

park management: retailing, security, transportation, accommodation, and food and beverage. Park managers must create and/or work with existing infrastructures. Security, ranked highest, has become a major concern in the management of national park areas, and rangers now specialize in police work.

Transportation, another key issue, is related to park conservation, preservation, and pollution concerns. Some park manager job descriptions specifically detail management responsibility for pollution. Therefore, it appears logical for transportation to be considered an important infrastructure issue for successful management of wilderness attractions.

The National Park Service and its parks are dependent on concessionaires for other infrastructure components: retailing, accommodation, and food and beverage services. The relationship between national park managers and concession operators has historically been somewhat adversarial, thus requiring significant managerial skills to work with these varied constituencies.

It should be noted that the standard deviations calculated in this category are larger than for other topics, thus indicating some disparity of opinion concerning the importance of infrastructure components.

In previous studies job specifications have been suggested for tourism managers;¹⁸ however, tourism managers were not homogeneous in that they did not work for the same organization or within the same business structure. The National Park Service, a federal agency, has rules and regulations for grade and rank that specify qualifications and career path progression. Career plans as defined by the National Park Service are formal or informal employee personal plans that consider long-range goals, expectations, and options in achieving a full and rewarding career.¹⁹ Career management involves broadly defined policies which attempt to systematize the immediate

Table 5
Importance of Government Interaction

	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
State government	1.49	0.67
Federal government	1.54	0.78
County government	2.08	1.12
City government	2.35	1.34

and long-range development of employee skills and abilities to the mission of the service. Personnel management systems are used to plan and organize developmental and advancement opportunities to meet the service's needs and employees' career goals.²⁰ These definitions are unique to the National Park Service but address the goals of this study and other studies of tourism managers.

National park managers are a unique group of tourism managers who operate in a very structured management environment with some of the key tourism attractions in the country. Yet ecosystem management has traditionally received more attention than tourism management. In defining tourism, respondents indicated a recognition of the area as a service business with cultural, environmental, and economic impacts. Therefore, while a park manager may not have started out to be a tourism manager, experience has provided them with a understanding of tourism as a business.

Job Descriptions Vary

Job descriptions for park managers have common themes, but vary depending on specific sites. Review of these descriptions reveal that a park manager needs knowledge of National Park Service regulations and policies, the specific park, concession policies, land protection policies, federal and state regulations, government interactions, and the ability to work with external groups, direct park maintenance, work with the local community, and communicate orally and in writing.²¹ More specifically, park managers must develop and execute plans and operate the park for the benefit of visitors and the public at large.²² Each of these job descriptions addresses responsibilities, delegation, operational decision making, direction of staff, administration, resource management, visitor services, and research and science programs. Additionally, specific park requirements might include natural resource protection, monitoring of air quality, or protection of archeological sites.²³ The duties and responsibilities that are highlighted in the national park manager job descriptions are indicative of the ratings of management skills and abilities in this and previous studies of tourism managers.

Table 6
Importance of Infrastructure

	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Security	1.02	2.08
Transportation	1.09	2.00
Retailing	1.13	2.51
Accommodation	1.16	2.23
Food and beverage	1.21	2.36

The key management tasks and activities and the levels of importance of resources were rated similarly among the different tourism managers surveyed.²⁴ This indicates that, despite the lack of a consistent background, the orientation of tourism professionals is similar. A national park manager might not have set out to be in the tourism industry, but in natural resource management or wildlife management. However, outdoor recreation, the environment, and tourism are inevitably linked. A review of park manager job descriptions indicates an emphasis on effective management principles for park management. Therefore, national park managers could and should be an outstanding tourism manager leadership group for individuals interested in tourism management careers. Based on the results of this study, key skills for tourism managers can be summarized as organizational, human relations, and communication. A tourism manager in this very structured segment of the industry will need a college degree with a balance of natural resource management, business, and technical education.

It is noteworthy that while information was rated the third most important resource, research as a managerial skill is considered the least important. This suggests that the information necessary for effective planning and control is collected at the regional and/or national levels and is seen as a commodity obtainable without actual research work. The relationship between information and the methods of obtaining research are not strong among tourism managers. Park managers see the need for high quality information to make decisions, but are also provided a significantly large amount of research information from their division of socio-economic studies. Therefore, research may not be a key characteristic itself for park managers, but information interpretation may be the skill that is needed. In this way, the park manager will know what questions to ask about information before using it to make decisions. Additionally, marketing is rated low by national park managers; this could be attributed to regional marketing efforts of the service, making this a less necessary skill for unit managers. This is much like chain operations that have corporate support staffs to provide unit managers with the tools to make decisions.

National park managers will also require a strong understanding of the political nature of the relationships that exist between the parks, the visitors, the concessions, and the host community. Interaction with local and county governments was rated of lesser importance than state and federal interaction. These responses could represent situations between federally owned and managed attractions, host governments, and local community residents.

Managers Can Evaluate Their Own Skills

National park managers can use the data from this study to evaluate their skills. Based on their personal evaluations, park managers can review variances between their perceptions, National Park Service standards and job descriptions, and the results of the study. Their own future development and continuing education efforts can be guided by these reviews. Newer managers or managers at smaller parks or monuments may also want to review these skills to plot out their own career paths and the training and/or education they might need for future promotion. Park rangers and managers can also rely on internal training centers which focus on training for duties that are unique to the park service. These centers are the Horace M. Albright Training Center at Grand Canyon National Park and the Stephen T. Mather Training Center at Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. The service also uses federal law enforcement training facilities for its rangers.²⁵ Men predominantly hold the top tourism management positions in most tourism groups studied. The one exception was state tourism directors, where the number of men and women was fairly evenly distributed.²⁶ These figures could prove discouraging for women seeking tourism manager positions. However, the growing number of women in the workforce in general and the rising number of female managers and college students increases the likelihood that this distribution will change.

To continue to improve the educational infrastructure of tourism management, tourism programs should focus on the needs of specific tourism management groups. As indicated in the research results of the European Institute of Education and Social Policy Study, better needs analyses are required to identify the education and training needed. Recommendations included factors such as promotion and advertising of tourism careers, a clear definition of career paths (careers not jobs), alternative labor sources, and better coordination with educators.²⁷

Educational background is a key difference between national park managers and other tourism management groups. Ski area managers, for example, come from a more diverse number of majors than do state tourism directors and convention and visitor bureau directors. Conversely, national park managers are most similar in their major fields of study. Despite this educational diversity, the focus of tourism manager groups is generally consistent in terms of management perceptions. Therefore, it may be very appropriate that a common educational background with a required internship or work experience to

develop technical expertise could best develop the tourism professionals of the future in either the public or the private sector.

This study, like the European study, examines the skills and abilities of tourism managers. These efforts should assist in identifying skill areas that could be enhanced through continuing education programs for park managers and other specific tourism management groups. Ultimately the coordination and cooperation of tourism industry groups and the tourism education community will achieve the goal of developing better tourism management.

There are many diverse management positions in the tourism industry. Though the actual position of tourism manager may vary from public to private sector, natural to man-made attraction or event, the knowledge, skills, and abilities to succeed as a manager in tourism are similar and can be developed into a common body of knowledge for the tourism industry. National park managers are a key group in setting the standards for professional tourism management.

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