



Briefing Paper
Cooperating Associations and the National Park Service
APPL-NPS Forum
January 18, 2006, Washington, DC

Cooperating Associations and the National Park Service

- 64 cooperating association partners operate over 1,000 outlets within 325 units of the National Park Service. These mission-driven nonprofit organizations are some of the longest established partners to NPS, providing interpretive products, sales and services to visitors.
- In 2004 alone, cooperating associations generated revenues totaling more than \$119 million dollars, returning more than \$28.6 million in aid to their NPS partners.
- Cooperating association models of operation have evolved in the 80 years since the first association was established in Yosemite National Park:
 - Associations range in revenues from under \$100,000 to more than \$28,000,000 annually
 - Some associations serve a single park unit, while others serve multiple park units over one or more regions
 - 31% of NPS cooperating associations also serve other agencies
 - 36% of NPS cooperating associations conduct educational programs, field institutes, or manage educational centers
 - 39% of NPS cooperating associations have volunteer programs
 - 70% of NPS cooperating associations have membership programs or do fundraising, including capital campaigns
- Cooperating associations serve visitors and build constituents for NPS, strengthening the public's understanding and connection with the parks through their products, programs, and activities.

Topics of Importance for Discussion between NPS and Cooperating Associations

- Just as cooperating associations have evolved, so too has NPS policy and decision making related to partnerships in the parks. While APPL is pleased with the growing emphasis by NPS on partnerships and collaboration, inconsistencies in how policies are understood and applied throughout the various NPS regions of the country and within parks often cause confusion for cooperating association partners, expensive delays in approval processes, and resulting lack of services to visitors.
- One example of new policies is the background investigation process for partner staff and volunteers with access to park buildings or network computers, which has the potential to cost cooperating association partners tens of thousands of dollars in security screening or in lost hiring potential – resulting in reduced contributions by these associations to NPS. Communication to cooperating associations about the impact, expectations, or anticipated implementation schedule to meet these new requirements is unclear and decentralized.
- New models for visitor center operations, such as those being piloted in the northeast with private foundations, alter how interpretive sales and services are to be delivered, and bring into question the viability of cooperating associations to serve smaller park sites if sales opportunities at larger park

sites are no longer available. Consistency of visitor experience throughout the National Park Service can be affected if the scope of interpretive products and services is no longer governed in the same manner as are cooperating association sales.

- Language and processes, such as “commercial services planning,” have the potential to move cooperating association operations further toward being viewed as business relationships and cost centers rather than mission-based partnerships that aid NPS in achieving its educational, interpretive, and research missions.
- Questions have been raised regarding the selection process for new or vacant cooperating association operations, and there is movement within some bureaus of the Department of Interior to view cooperating association operations under grants and procurement. “Bidding out” or competing cooperating association opportunities through an RFP process likewise places these partnerships more in the vein of business or contractual relationships. Instead, these opportunities can be posted through NPS or APPL, and superintendents informed and encouraged to define their partnership needs and discuss them with interested associations.
- There is often a lack of understanding among NPS employees at all levels as to the value, scope, rationale and governing authorities for cooperating association partnerships. How can we work together to heighten this awareness and understanding?
- APPL appreciates the opportunity to provide input and comment to help inform NPS policy such as DO #21 and the revised NPS Management policies. APPL has provided written comment to NPS on DO #21 and looks forward to additional information and feedback as these policies are again reviewed and refined.

About the Association of Partners for Public Lands (APPL)

- APPL, through its member organizations and its partnership with public lands agencies, is dedicated to public understanding, appreciation and stewardship of America’s natural and cultural heritage.
- APPL has 80 not-for-profit member organizations, 80% of which serve NPS sites.
- APPL fosters stewardship and appreciation of public lands and historic sites through effective partnerships. This is achieved through five functional areas of focus that include:
 - Capacity Building
 - Collective Representation
 - Information Sharing and Dialogue
 - Marketing and Public Awareness
 - Membership, Operations and Governance
- The parks and associations share a mutual goal - an educated and engaged visitor. Collectively, APPL members represent the outpouring of support – through time, talent, and treasure – of the American public for national parks and other public lands.