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Parks Stewardship Forum

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8b01j7vv>

Journal

Parks Stewardship Forum, 42(3)

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Publication Date

2026-09-14

DOI

10.5070/P5.69184

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RISE DECLARATIONS

Sharing the experience & insights of Recent Involuntarily Separated Employees working in place-based conservation

JONATHAN PUTNAM ACTING CHIEF, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE OFFICE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

“I know that my career has directly benefited the American people as well as thousands of international colleagues”

Describe your career trajectory from your education to your last position held.

Since I was a teenager, my two real interests have been nature conservation and international affairs. Almost incredibly, by following these as my North Star(s), I somehow managed to carve out a career which allowed me to combine my interests over the last 40 years. Having studied political science/international relations at Amherst College, I thought about going into law, but a season as a Student Conservation Association intern ranger at Great Sand Dunes National Monument (now National Park and Preserve) fundamentally changed my career trajectory. I went on to the University of Michigan’s School of Natural Resources with the intent of working either for the National Park Service (NPS) or in foreign affairs. After Michigan, my wife and I served as Peace Corps volunteers in Swaziland (now Eswatini), Africa, a truly transformative experience. In Swaziland, I worked on a variety of protected area and related conservation projects, including a mammal survey of the country.

Returning from the Peace Corps, the NPS once again provided an opportunity with my first permanent position as a ranger at Fire Island National Seashore. After two years there, I returned to the international arena as a Foreign Service officer/environment specialist with the US Agency for International Development (USAID). It was while at USAID that I first connected with the NPS Office of International Affairs (OIA) on a detail assignment. Again amazingly (considering how rarely jobs were announced at OIA), after my detail a permanent job opportunity opened up at OIA and I moved on from USAID back to the NPS (for the third time, this time for good)!

My nearly 25 years at OIA were to a large extent a blessing—I know I had what in many ways was the perfect job for me and I think my OIA colleagues would agree that we had some of the best jobs in the NPS, if not the entire US government. I worked on a huge array of topics and initiatives in dozens of countries around the world. I got to travel to some of the most amazing places on the globe, from remote New Zealand to China to Patagonia, as well as taking international colleagues to show off “America’s Best Idea” on study tours of the US national parks and other protected areas. Indeed, the fact that OIA allowed us to work on both domestic park and conservation issues as well as global ones made it a uniquely fascinating experience—it’s no wonder most of us never wanted another job! My work included helping to manage the World Heritage program (nominations, conservation reporting, etc.), technical assistance and exchange activities, study tours, interagency agreements and so much more. My last position was as acting chief of the office, in line to take on the role permanently if the 2024 election results had been different. Unfortunately, I was among the many thousands of NPS staff essentially pushed out of federal service

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by DOGE (the so-called Department of Government Efficiency), and thus unable to complete my dream of reviving OIA to a semblance of its former glory.

What do you consider to be the most important achievements of your career (including through partnerships across and outside government)? Why?

A few career highlights include:

Peace Corps

As a Peace Corps volunteer in Eswatini, Africa, I helped with the first-ever mammal survey of the country, documenting some new species and confirming the presence of the last free-ranging elephants in the country (more difficult than one may imagine!). We also planted thousands of indigenous as well as fruit trees—being able to return to the country 20 years later and seeing these trees full grown was a very tangible example of Peace Corps’ impact.

At OIA, I was privileged to work with some of the most dedicated people in the NPS and the US government, and with so many park and protected area colleagues from around the world. In these often gloomy times, I remember Fred Rogers’ (“Mr. Rogers”) advice in an emergency: “Find the helpers.” I view my government and non-government colleagues as real-world “helpers” doing all they can to protect and restore the world’s greatest natural and cultural heritage for all of humanity’s benefit—often at great personal risk. Ultimately, nothing is more important than this work.

Park Flight

I spent much of my time with OIA working to help NPS leadership, staff, and the public better understand and appreciate how our national parks and other protected areas, no matter how large, are inextricably linked to the larger land- and seascapes that surround them—or even across hemispheres. If even the

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ENTIRE state of Alaska were one big national park, it would *still* not fully protect all the wildlife that lives there, as numerous species of migratory birds, caribou, marine mammals, and fish travel hundreds or thousands of miles away each year from parks in which they breed or rest. US national parks must consider what happens to “our” wildlife when it leaves park boundaries. For most of NPS’s history, as a former NPS leader put it to me once, we have “relied on the kindness of strangers” to ensure full life-cycle conservation of NPS wildlife. The Park Flight Migratory Bird Program was among the most important NPS activities to address the issue of migratory connectivity. Through a partnership of NPS, the National Park Foundation, and American Airlines, Park Flight provided bird conservation specialists and students from Latin America with funding and travel support to spend up to four months working in US national parks on bird monitoring, research, conservation and education programs. Nearly all of the Park Flight participants have gone on to become leaders in the bird conservation community in Latin America. Meanwhile, NPS also benefited from both the conservation work conducted by Park Flight participants and their extensive education and outreach efforts to park visitors and neighbors.

World Heritage successes

I am proud to have helped the US and NPS revive its World Heritage program, which had gone into a hibernation of sorts in the 1990s. We successfully campaigned for and served on the World Heritage Committee from 2006–2009, revised our Tentative List twice (resulting in a huge upswell of interest in the program), and successfully nominated seven new US sites to the World Heritage List over 20 years. I was particularly proud to have helped inscribe the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument to the World Heritage List, representing both spectacular biodiversity and Native Hawaiian culture—the first “mixed” site in the US, as well as Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, the culmination of a decade-long effort.

We were also successful in leveraging the World Heritage Convention to help protect NPS sites from some serious potential threats. Most notable was our work with Canada in 2010 to ensure the long-term protection of the transboundary Waterton–Glacier International Peace Park from proposed massive energy and mining projects in

the Flathead Valley, just outside park boundaries. Our efforts led to an agreement between Montana and British Columbia to protect the Flathead permanently.

Similarly, we were able to get NPS and Department of the Interior (DOI) leadership in the 2010s to work with their counterparts in the US Department of Agriculture Forest Service to protect some key Forest Service lands just outside Grand Canyon National Park.

Due to the nature of our work, it often takes years if not decades to see the direct benefits, but I frequently heard from colleagues around the world how their time with NPS was truly transformative, enabling and inspiring them to do critical conservation work. I've also heard from so many NPS colleagues that the highlight of their careers was the international experiences they had through OIA.

3. What were the greatest challenges you faced? How did you overcome them, or not? If you weren't able to overcome them, why not?

From outside the NPS, skepticism was perhaps understandable—why does the “NATIONAL” park service have an international office?? This despite the fact that OIA was likely the very first official program of the US government focused on international conservation and that sharing “America’s Best Idea” around the world is among the most impactful things the United States has done over the last century to promote conservation and historic preservation (now nearly every country on earth has their own national parks).

It's a running joke among my family, friends, and neighbors that I clearly must actually work for the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency)—as there's no way the NPS would be sending staff around the world, right? I've always found this both funny and a bit depressing, as it's somehow much easier to believe that I'm working as spy or on some nefarious activity overseas rather than working to advance the cause of conservation of our shared natural and cultural heritage.

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Speaking of depressing, it was frequently the case that some of our most ardent skeptics were within NPS and DOI leadership itself. We were continuously justifying our existence and NPS's international work, both to new leadership (perhaps not surprising) and to career staff who believed that working internationally detracted from the “core mission” of managing parks (even though international cooperation is literally included in the NPS Mission Statement!). Fortunately, most of our political leadership over time came to at least lukewarmly support OIA, though others put up whatever roadblocks they could, including an extremely “thorough” (onerous) international travel approval process, which frequently cost more money in the amount of staff time reviewing the proposal than the travel itself!

As an aside, I'd say this represents a larger issue for NPS and its leadership—the desire to be “popular” (which is achieved in their eyes by offering as much “fun” as possible in national parks) often overrides its ultimate mission to conserve the values of the National Park System and carry out conservation in general for current and future generations, when it could be using that very popularity to help educate the public about how conservation is essential to all of us (this of course still happens, but in my view not nearly to the extent that it could or should).

Similarly, there was (is?) a general lack of understanding and appreciation of how the world outside national parks directly impacts the parks themselves, both through shared migratory species and other ecological connections and the fact that NPS can learn and has learned a huge amount from other countries.

We worked to overcome these challenges—with varying degrees of success—through a variety of means. Relative to size, we produced a huge amount of publications, social media, etc. on the work being done by NPS around the world.

We worked extensively with both US government and other partners to finance NPS international assistance and share their support of this work with NPS and DOI leadership.

After more than 20 years with OIA, I'd say our record of dealing with these challenges was mixed. On one hand, we were not successful in significantly increasing our budget or staff or resuming some of our flagship programs. On the other hand, though, and largely through partnerships, we *were* able (on a truly minimal budget) to do some impactful work around the world and the NPS, including some of the successes I mentioned above. And—until DOGE—we were able to keep the program running despite some very significant headwinds!

4. What are your views on how your career served the public, the environment, our cultural heritage, or the greater good, as applicable? Do you feel proud of what you accomplished, or frustrated, or both?

I am both amazed about how lucky I've been in my career and proud of the impact that I—always working with partners—have had as part of a global community of protected area and conservation specialists.

I have spent essentially my entire career working to serve the United States in one capacity or another—as a park ranger, US Army soldier, Peace Corps volunteer, and with USAID Foreign Service and the NPS Office of International Affairs. During my nearly 40 years of service to this country, I have served both on the front lines of conservation and protected area management, as well in the halls of power in Washington, DC, and around the globe. I know that my career has directly benefited the American people as well as thousands of international colleagues who were able to better protect places under their management thanks to our work. This work promoted American values overseas, while also bringing new ideas and energy to our shores from our counterparts overseas.

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I faced many challenges and doubts about our work over the years and of course ultimately the government I served for decades essentially told me and thousands of others that we were no longer valued—this was and remains a very difficult pill to swallow.

Someone once told a colleague that “you may love the NPS, but it will never love you back.” I certainly understand that sentiment, and after last year's experience, it feels all too relevant. On the other hand, I can never forget that the US government and in particular the National Park Service has provided me with some of the most amazing opportunities anyone could ask for, and while my love for NPS may be unrequited, I will be forever grateful.

5. What's the coolest thing that you've seen a government (local, state, federal, or another country) do for place-based conservation that you'd want to replicate or expand? What would make it easy to implement? How hard would it be to achieve?

From my vantage point at OIA, I was provided with so many opportunities to see what other countries were doing with their conservation programs—it is difficult to select one “coolest thing.”

But I will mention an idea that for whatever reason sprang first to mind—in Colombia, the park agency there will entirely close Tayrona National Park (one of their most popular parks) to all visitation for at least one month each year to provide a “rest” to the park and its wildlife and other resources. This despite the fact that they clearly lose some revenue from entrance fees and perhaps risk some loss of “popularity” with park visitors. I'm not even necessarily advocating this idea in the US, as I'm not sure of the scientific evidence for how this benefits the park itself; it's more a matter that in Colombia they are clearly trying to emphasize park protection over visitation.

At a larger level, NPS could do so much more if it truly lived up to its mission beyond focusing on park visitors (nothing wrong with that, but it's really just the beginning). Aldo Leopold wrote, “*There are two things that interest me: the relation of people to each other, and the relation of people to land.*” At its core, I see this in NPS's mission, which I

would say could be summarized as (1) connecting Americans (and others) to the natural world, and (2) connecting them to fellow Americans through a shared history.

Other countries face very similar challenges of (re-)connecting to nature and to each other. In an ideal world, the NPS and our global partners will address these challenges together.

6. What advice would you give to successors in positions you've held? What perspectives have been important to you in your career, and which can be passed on to young people contemplating a career in public service or academia?

I wrote at the beginning of this RISE statement about the importance of having a “North Star” to guide and motivate you through your life and career. I certainly didn’t set out to work someday in the NPS Office of International Affairs—I simply wanted three things:

1. Public Service—particularly to the US government and American people;
2. Adventure—particularly through traveling and living in interesting places around the world;
3. Work related to nature conservation.

I know I could have found (and did find) opportunities that included all these interests in a great variety of organizations. Having more general interests (rather than a specific agency or position) makes it much more likely to find a position and career you will find to be truly satisfying!

I struggle now on how to advise someone who wants to work in public service. On the one hand, it is undeniably a very difficult time to be working for much of the federal government. On the other, the US government needs (and will need) good people now more than ever. Of course, there are many other ways one can provide public service—through state and local government, NGOs (non-governmental organizations), etc. Ultimately, I have to say follow that North Star and enjoy the ride!