

Communicating Climate Change in a National Park

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A Crater Lake park ranger's first-hand learning curve on communicating with tourists offers valuable climate change do's and don'ts, along with five valuable lessons learned.

National parks, with their exceptional beauty, provide fascinating and challenging venues for showing and discussing impacts of climate change.

Twenty years of work as a naturalist ranger in Crater Lake National Park in Oregon have provided me first-hand witness to those effects ... and to the challenges in discussing them with park visitors.

Over those two decades, I have witnessed climate change effects ranging from diminishing snowpack to wildly changing weather at Crater Lake. Over time, park visitors would ask more and more questions about impacts of climate change, leading me to immerse myself in climate change reading starting around 1999.

Overcoming Anxieties of Speaking Out

For years, I longed to mention climate change in my official ranger presentations, but I never felt comfortable doing it until this past summer.



*Crater Lake Park Service Ranger
Brian Ettling*

My hesitation stemmed from anxieties over perhaps not knowing enough about climate change to adequately and responsibly inform others, notwithstanding having read countless books and articles on the subject over the years.

Even more, it is scary to think that park visitors might heckle me when they disagree, since climate change has turned into such a sensitive political issue.

In addition, with visitors coming to Crater Lake on their vacations, and having made financial and personal sacrifices to do so, one can't ignore that many come wanting a "Disney experience" from hearing about the beauty and features of the park. Do they really come in anticipation of getting an earful about negative environmental impacts caused by challenges such as climate change?

Park Service Backs Engaging Visitors on Climate Change

Nonetheless, the more I read about the global impacts of climate change, the more I wanted to find a way to talk about it through my job at Crater Lake.

The good news is that the National Park Service (NPS) management started prodding rangers to feel comfortable addressing climate change in presentations.

In the 2010 National Park Service Climate Response Strategy, Director Jonathan Jarvis, wrote:

The NPS is an extraordinary education institution where millions of people learn about the environment, conservation, and our rich and complex history ... We are unafraid to discuss the role of slavery in the Civil War or the imprisonment of American citizens during WWII. We should not be afraid to talk about climate change.

In addition, I attended presentations about climate change by excellent speakers during Park Service seasonal trainings. In 2008, for instance, John Morris, interpretive program manager at the Park Service's Alaska Regional Office, spoke at a seasonal training session.



*Park Service Program
Manager John Morris from
Alaska Regional Office
offering communications
advice for rangers.*

Morris is a leader within NPS in encouraging naturalist rangers, for a number of reasons, to educate park visitors about climate change. First, visitors' minds are open to learning as they feel awestruck experiencing the immense beauty of a national park. Secondly, visitors generally have deep respect for rangers and usually are open to hear what rangers have to say. Furthermore, rangers also have

direct access to park scientists and researchers to pass along a park's scientific findings, especially with climate science.

In addition, the Park Service provides annual trainings to rangers to help them be effective communicators. And most importantly, the breath-taking scenery in national parks itself conveys a message of wonder and hope. That hope can inspire action on climate change rather than despair.

In 2010, ecologist Daniel Sarr from the Park Service's Klamath regional network addressed how the northwest ecology, especially within the ecosystems of the national parks, is responding to our warming atmosphere. Also in that year, Morris led an online Park Service webinar on communicating climate change.

With the Park Service providing the support and stimulation to be emboldened and to engage visitors on climate change in formal presentations and informal conversations, the table was set.

By August 2010 I felt fully ready to engage visitors informally about climate change during conversations at scenic Crater Lake overlooks. My first lesson came quickly: It is not easy to converse with visitors about climate change if they are well armed with information they are convinced shows climate change to be "a hoax."



Ecologist Daniel Sarr from Klamath office outlined warming atmosphere's impacts on northwest ecology.

On a beautiful August day, I chatted with a visitor about the weather. In answering his questions about changing weather patterns at Crater Lake, I mentioned climate change. Yikes. He immediately went into attack mode, labeling climate change "a lie perpetrated by Al Gore." He rambled heatedly and at length for several minutes about how glaciers in Greenland are not retreating, how global temperature gauges are wrong, and how the former Vice President lives in a big mansion, no doubt has a huge personal carbon footprint, and gets rich promoting global warming.

My instinct was to gently touch him on the arm, as one might a close friend. "Sir, it is not just Al Gore," I countered. "Climate change is accepted by thousands of scientists across the world. It is also accepted as real, caused by man, and a threat to society by the National Science Foundation, the National Academy of Science, NASA, NOAA, *National Geographic*, the American Meteorological Society, the Catholic Church, etc."

He wasn't buying what I was saying, but instead constantly spoke over me. We both grew tense, and the conversation reached a very adversarial, heated tone with our practically yelling at each other.

The good news is that no other park visitors were around to hear the contentious exchange. The

bad news was that a colleague, a volunteer at the park, was standing nearby when the conversation with the visitor went sour. She left the scene and went running back to the visitor center at the sight of two adults arguing like children. Later, she asked me if the Park Service would approve of a ranger's engaging a park visitor and guest in this way.

I had thought I could convince the visitor about the validity of climate change not only through the logic of my comments but also by touching him on the arm to help calm him down. Even more, I thought I could persuade him if I just firmly stated what I know about the science and the official position of the Park Service that climate change is real and that we must respond with action.

In reality, this visitor — like so many one encounters in dialogues on climate change — was locked into his opinion, formed by information he had encountered long before visiting the national park.

No matter what I tried I was not going to change his mind. I tried ending the conversation with, “*We will just have to agree to disagree.*”

Ouch. By this point, the visitor was feeling so hostile towards me he did not even want to agree with me about amicably disagreeing.

Valuable lesson learned: If someone is firmly entrenched in a position of rejecting climate change, engaging them on the subject based on a review of the authoritative and ample scientific evidence is unlikely to persuade them otherwise. Sometimes, it is best to let them say their opinion, state why you disagree, wish them the best, and walk away.

New Climate Change Evening Program



A casual campfire setting proved perfect for invoking the tough-guy energy of actor Clint Eastwood.

By August 2011, I had overcome my anxieties and fears about formally engaging visitors on climate change. I finally debuted a new evening campfire PowerPoint program on the impact of climate change on Crater Lake, called “The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly.”

The tough guy energy of actor Clint Eastwood helped me “make my case” that we must reduce the impact of climate change on Crater Lake ... and do so now, Punk. I played music by Willie Nelson, the Eagles, and others centering on the theme of cowboys and ending with the theme to the movie, “The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly.”

The Good: I showed beautiful images of Crater Lake and talked about how the lake itself is still one of the cleanest and purest bodies of water in the world.

The Bad: I showed how climate change at Crater Lake may be having adverse impacts on pikas, cute mammals closely related to rabbits.

And **The Ugly**: mountain pine beetles are decimating white-bark pine trees. The presentation ended with expressions of hope and optimism showing the park management reducing adverse climate change impacts on Crater Lake by switching to renewal energy, electric vehicles, and other measures. We hope park visitors will take these same steps at home.

Park audiences seemed to enjoy the program, and it earned positive feedback from the park visitors and fellow rangers. Even more surprisingly, very few visitors argued with me about climate change after listening to the program. I led the program for more than a month, and only two people wanted to debate it. They basically argued that the world is facing numerous serious environmental issues that we are never going to fix.

I felt I effectively responded that for the sake of their children we must try to pollute less to reduce the threat of climate change for their future. Since I was arguing on behalf of their children, who were often standing right next to them, they were not inclined to want to continue debating.

My Biggest Crater Lake Success

On my last evening program of the 2011 visitors season, I felt like I had hit a grand slam homerun.



Having Crater Lake Superintendent Craig Ackerman hang out after a presentation with Humboldt State students helped cement the climate message.

Crater Lake Superintendent Craig Ackerman attended the presentation. Ackerman is known to be very tough and demanding, but he had nothing but positive comments about the program. A group of 20 college students from Humboldt State University in northern California were attending that evening program. The professor, Jennifer Tarlton, who teaches a college class on effective park interpretation, came with her class on a field trip to Crater Lake to see examples of ranger programs.

The students were, let's say, jazzed about the presentation. Superintendent Ackerman and a group of students from Humboldt State hung around to talk for a good hour after it had ended. Several of the students subsequently sent a hand-written thank you note, with comments like, "Thanks for addressing issues that matter," "Thanks for making others aware of this topic," "Well done interpreting a hard topic!," "Loved how you linked the current issues to how it affects the parks," "Thanks for making others aware of this hot topic," "Thank you for being a steward to our wonderful lands," and "Save the pika!"

Professor Tarlton also wrote. “Thank you for presenting your climate change interpretation program,” she said. “It was exciting to see a park willing to discuss this topic with the public in a campfire program venue.” Her note now is among my most prized possessions.

Lessons on Presenting in a National Park

Five techniques have worked for me in presenting a climate change-themed presentation in a national park:

1. BE LIKABLE. Look for those ways to establish rapport with your audience. At my ranger talks, I always try to arrive about 30 minutes early to get to know the early arrivals in my audience. In establishing connections with early arrivals, they become friendly faces in the crowd, often providing support and offering an open mind to your ideas.

2. BE ENTHUSIASTIC. Ralph Waldo Emerson was so correct when he stated, *“Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm.”*

If you are not excited about climate change, how will your audience be? Even more, if you are not about the solutions, especially the ideas of sustainability and hope, how can your audience get excited? Genuine enthusiasm is contagious.

3. BE CREDIBLE. Know your subject well. It is hard for an audience to question your knowledge if you have really done your homework. The more research and effort you have put into your subject, the more confidently you will speak about it. There’s no exception to being adequately prepared.

4. USE HUMOR. Find some way to naturally incorporate humor into your presentation. As science fiction writer Isaac Asimov once remarked, *“Jokes of the proper kind, properly told, can do more to enlighten questions of politics, philosophy, and literature than any number of dull arguments.”* If you can find a natural humorous way to share funny stories, images, or analogies, your audience will more likely stick with you on what they perceive is a heavy subject like climate change.

5. BE HOPEFUL. A friend went to a presentation by Project Ocean last November where the speaker stressed the point that on learning they have cancer, people do not research the molecular biology of cells. They want solutions, and now, on how they can fight cancer successfully. Doctor, Tell me: Is it exercise, diet, meditation, prayer, medication, surgery, a sense of humor, or anything else?

Crater Lake in Oregon ... many first-time visitors are astounded to see just how blue the deep waters actually are.

The huge planetary problems associated with climate change can be very scary for your audience to understand and come to groups with. What are your solutions for them?



It is so important to maintain those childlike qualities of wonder, fun, and hope as speakers engage people with presentations on serious issues like climate change.

Visiting Crater Lake this summer? Come by my climate change evening program running through July, August, and September. Come see for yourself.

AUTHOR

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