

## **Happy Birthday, For the Love of National Parks**

The southern Ozarks in Southwest Missouri is a beautiful place. I was blessed to start my life there, but my parents seemed to be born under a wandering star. From my earliest memories, our vacations were spent exploring the vast expanses of the western United States, specifically the National Parks. I suppose that's where my love of the great outdoors began. My story from there to here took some unique twists along the way.

In those early years my parents, brother, and I soaked in as much as we could. We toured visitor centers and attended evening programs. We ran exuberantly across a grassy field in Yellowstone, intent on photographing a moose, only to find ourselves ankle deep in cold water. We climbed ladders into and out of the cliff dwellings of Mesa Verde. In the middle of the night, we drove in circles around the scorching heat of Death Valley lost, because our Rand McNally Road Atlas didn't match the actual park roads. We frolicked in the waves and picked up a ton of sea shells at Padre Island National Seashore. While in a campground at Sequoia National Park, we fearfully peered out the curtains of our camper windows during the night, watching bears rifle through the garbage cans.

My parents had other dreams too. They dreamed of their daughter being an airline stewardess – after all, you get to travel anywhere! And your family gets free plane tickets too! But I wasn't having it. Their mistake had been exposing me over the years to all the roaming of National Parks. All I ever wanted to do was get back out west and be in parks, and maybe if I was lucky, work for the National Park Service.

My family didn't have much money so sending me to college wasn't in their budget. That left higher education to me. I worked at Dairy Queen and a summer camp, saved like mad, and lived at home for that year of college where I majored in forestry. Almost by accident that first year, I discovered seasonal jobs with the National Park Service. After applying for 30 positions, I landed my first seasonal job at Padre Island, where I worked on a crew building fences, picking up trash, and cleaning restrooms. That summer gave me enough money to go back to college for another year. For a couple more years that was my pattern – work seasonally and go to college when and where I could. Then something amazing happened. Out of the blue I was offered a clerk-typist position at

Petrified Forest National Park, where I had been working seasonally. I couldn't believe it, a permanent job with benefits. At that point in my college career, I was about two semesters away from graduating with a degree in public administration and natural resources. But hey, permanent jobs are rare as hen's teeth, and besides, I can always go back to school. At least that's what I thought.

I rapidly rose through the ranks of National Park administration, finally becoming Chief of Administration and Concessions at a National Park. Concessions? You know – those places where you buy tacky souvenirs and eat expensive hamburgers? Anyway, it allowed me to see more of the Park system first working at Capital Reef, then on to Lake Roosevelt National Recreation Area, and Golden Spike National Historical Site. These were all beautiful, spectacular places where I had amazing experiences. But there was still something missing for me – I had unfinished business. For the most part, there weren't colleges near the places I was stationed, and these times were well before long distance learning. Finally, in 1999, I found myself working at Curecanti National Recreation Area and Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park. Since we were living in Gunnison, Colorado, I now had access to a local school, Western State College. At 38 years of age, I went back to school, taking classes, working full time, and slowly chipping away at an Environmental Studies degree which I completed in 2004.

Like with many things in life, things didn't turn out exactly the way I had envisioned. With my freshly minted degree in hand, I thought I could spread my wings and fly beyond the realm of park administration. After all, I was interested in park planning and implementation of the National Environmental Policy Act. But it turned out to be impossible for me to transition my career inside the Service. After a 20 year career, I left my beloved Park Service brokenhearted. In that defining moment of my life, I discovered I was more than the National Park Service and I needed more professionally.

My next job was working for a local environmental consulting firm in Colorado. There I discovered challenging work that I loved – writing, researching, and dabbling in many different resources, preparing Environmental Impact Statements, and coordinating the efforts of teams to complete projects.

In 2007 my husband's career took us to Utah. I continued to work remotely for the company in Colorado, but it was only part-time, and I was ready to transition back to full-time status. One day I decided, "Today is the day." I opened the Salt Lake City telephone book to environmental consultants, closed my eyes, put my finger down on the page, and said, "I'm calling this one." Under my finger was JBR Environmental Consultants. It just so happened, they had an opening for an environmental scientist. That fateful day was over eight years ago, and now JBR is part of Stantec.

Through consulting I have been exposed to numerous federal agencies, far more than just the Park Service. There is and always will be a special place in my heart for the Park Service. It certainly has played a huge part in defining my life. The National Park Service was created in 1916 with the passage of the Service's "Organic Act," which established the purpose to "...conserve the scenery and natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such a manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations." This is one of the important things I have learned: The mission of the National Park Service is to preserve amazing resources and provide for the public enjoyment of those resources, but you can't save everything. That's why we have other federal agencies with multiple use mandates. Now, much of my work involves assisting other agencies with the tightrope walk of balancing competing resource use and values. For me, this work has been every bit as challenging as balancing use and preservation in the Park Service.

2016 marks the 100th anniversary of the National Park Service. This year has a tremendous amount of personal meaning for me. But I find myself in the centennial year celebrating from the outside. I will always be passionate about National Parks and today I play in parks with my children and grandchildren. It is kind of bitter-sweet. The meaning may be different for me, but the love is the same. So I encourage you to make this centennial year special and go fall in love with National Parks.