

AMERICA'S LARGEST CLASSROOM EXPANDING THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN OUR PARKS

A Partnership Model of Education at Cuyahoga Valley National Park

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Introduction

For many in our country, when they hear the words *national park*, they think of high mountain ranges, wide open spaces, and miles of undisturbed wilderness. The areas that we have deemed to be important to the United States, and to the world—important enough to be managed by the National Park Service (NPS)—include magnificent natural wonders as well as sites that tell important American stories. Smaller parcels of land and historic places are significant for their location and their meaning for the past and future. Cuyahoga Valley National Park in Peninsula, Ohio, is one of the smaller places. These 33,000 acres protect historical stories and valuable habitat adjacent to an urban area. From its enabling legislation and onward, the park has mandated and emphasized strong interpretation and education programs.

When park leadership determined that they wanted a residential learning program, one where students could stay overnight and have a multiday experience, the park superintendent and his staff did a careful analysis of the field of residential learning. They addressed the capacity of federal employees to create localized curriculum, develop long-term



Students hiking with river monitoring gear during environmental education program. | Zaina SalemPhoto

relationships with teachers, manage food service and custodial operations, and connect with new audiences. At the end of the assessment, the team concluded that leveraging the skills of a partner organization would provide the best opportunity for success.

Out of this conclusion came the award-winning and highly successful Cuyahoga Valley Environmental Education Center, managed by NPS and a nonprofit organization, the Conservancy for Cuyahoga Valley National Park. The park and this key partner offer high-quality education programs annually for over 10,000 children from local schools and communities. The center's staff has, in turn, partnered with numerous schools and organizations to develop and deliver programs that are academically sound and engaging to students. The park is especially known for its work with urban school districts. As the future of national park education is developed, Cuyahoga Valley National Park provides a model of engaging with partnerships to

provide innovative programs that engage young people in developing skills and values to shape the future.

Curriculum development

When the idea for a residential learning center was first proposed, NPS staff explored partnering with a local state university to develop and staff the educational program at Cuyahoga Valley National Park. When state budget cuts caused the university to withdraw from the proposed arrangement, the park turned to its primary partner (its Friends Group), the Conservancy for Cuyahoga Valley National Park, and asked if it would be the operating partner of the new Cuyahoga Valley Environmental Education Center. The group agreed. As a nonprofit, it was nimble and creative, and could easily hire staff with skills to run a residential center, create a curriculum, and begin programming.

From the beginning, NPS and nonprofit staff agreed that engaging the community was critical to



Students kayaking on the Cuyahoga River. | Zaina SalemPhoto

the success of the curriculum design process. They put aside two potential stumbling block notions: one is that simply getting students to a national park is adequate, and the other is that trained park interpreters have enough skills to develop programs on their own. Rather than assuming that the park would engage students on its own and that the rangers should develop all of the education from scratch, the team initiated a collaborative curriculum development process. They spent time with teachers, students, and community members to learn about their knowledge of the park, their interest in learning about the environment, and the educational methodologies that would best supplement classroom-based learning.

Teachers identified hard-to-teach and difficult-to-learn concepts that would be best taught in a field setting. Students expressed an interest in learning about the local natural environment. At the time, there was a trend to teach about tropical



Student taking notes by the river during environmental education program.
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rainforests, yet students wanted to know more about what was in their neighborhoods and what they could do to protect these environments. Teachers and students knew that the Cuyahoga River captured the attention of people around the world when it “caught fire” in 1969, yet they had little knowledge of the geography and biology of the river, or why it happened. This input prepared the NPS and conservancy team for its dive into curriculum and the identity of the Cuyahoga Valley Environmental Education Center.

Using an educational advisory committee that included school district curriculum directors, administrators, and teachers allowed the nonprofit organization and park staff to provide input and feedback. Ready with this input, the conservancy raised money to support curriculum development and contracted with area educators to assist. This process resulted in a curriculum that was aligned to state and school district curricular objectives. Further, it meant that area schools had immediate buy-in and were highly interested in the quality of the program.

A shared model of leadership

As the Cuyahoga Valley Environmental Education Center was being developed, it was important to ensure it had strong leadership from the beginning. A leadership team was established that consisted of three NPS staff and three board members from the conservancy, who determined the administrative structure for the center. The conservancy was given the overall administrative responsibility for the center, with key input from park leaders. One important premise that remains to this day is this shared model of leadership.

The director of the center is an employee of the conservancy. The director works closely with the park’s chief of interpretation, education, and visitor services and the division’s operations managers to make management decisions and establish future directions. Day-to-day responsibilities, including



Students roasting marshmallows at the end of the day. | Zaina SalemPhoto ↑

program design and teaching, are managed and implemented by both conservancy and NPS staff, who work side by side. Today, an education committee of the conservancy—which includes board members and community volunteers—provides guidance to the center. The center’s director and NPS staff regularly engage with the committee to get their input and guidance.

When students participate in programs at the center, they know they are in a national park. A uniformed park ranger participates in opening and closing activities; there are NPS arrowheads displayed in all the buildings; students receive junior ranger badges; and several park rangers teach programs. Within this model, program leadership is provided by conservancy staff, and most of the center’s teachers work for the conservancy.

The word most used by NPS and conservancy staff to describe the partnership is *seamless*. It does not matter which organization staff work for—they have a common mission and have a shared culture at the center. NPS invests money in buildings and several staff positions, including one full-time staff member and several term or seasonal employees. Their investment results

Boys hiking during program at the national park. | Zaina SalemPhoto ↓



in over \$1 million of staff time, program leadership, and program support for a high-quality environmental education program.

Most significant is the conservancy's ability to raise money for the center. The conservancy has a sophisticated fundraising program and raises hundreds of thousands of dollars each year to assure that children from lower-income families can participate in the center's programs. The result is that the center has a rich relationship with urban school districts in the area and reaches many children that would not have been able to attend without this financial model.

Because of the successful partnership model with shared leadership created at Cuyahoga Valley Environmental Education Center, there is an emphasis on extending the model to other partners. The park and the conservancy both utilize partners for mutual benefit, from area educational organizations to youth-serving nonprofits. Over the years partners have helped the center serve a greater diversity of people and have carried the park mission into a wide variety of settings and populations.

Looking to the future

If our national parks are to be important to future generations of learners, then we need to help them see the relevancy of the park to the natural and cultural communities where they live. This is more than providing students a bus ride and a positive experience in the park. They need to have an opportunity to develop a personal connection with the park and to see how it is connected to the importance of their own community.

The staff of Cuyahoga Valley Environmental Education Center has embraced a mutual learning ap-



Students working in garden during environmental education program.
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proach and is making connections in the communities that surround the schools being served. While it is helpful to partner with teachers who bring their students to the center, the staff is deepening direct partnerships with communities so that the park is not such a different and unknown resource, especially to urban families. This takes trust, relationship development, and an investment of time to build strong connections.

The center is also exploring ways to enable students to see parks and environmental nonprofit organizations as opportunities for career choices. New programs are being developed at the high school level tied to the creation of career academies in local high schools. Some academies in urban areas are being developed around environ-

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Up close and personal. | Zaina SalemPhoto

mental themes and the center is a key partner in their planning and implementation. The benefit to our national parks and their partners is the development of career pathways that might increase cultural diversity in environmental professions.

Conclusion

Cuyahoga Valley National Park created a larger, more extensive educational program by choosing a nonprofit to co-manage and lead it. In turn, the partner has reached into surrounding communities to bring diverse partners to the table to strengthen the quality and reach of its learning opportunities. For educators, parents, and others who see value in connecting with our national parks as learning centers, engaging with park partners and parks can lead to educational success. Park partners strive to engage communities in national parks, and park-based education assures that we will have future generations of children committed to their national parks and enthused about preserving nature, history, and the values inherent in a national park movement.

References

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