

Recruiting the next generation of park rangers

By Kurt Repanshek, National Parks Traveler

Who will be the next stewards and advocates of the national parks? In a society where Baby Boomers are graying steadily if not quickly, and where the “face” of the National Park Service is decidedly male and Caucasian, it’s not an unreasonable question to ask.

The question was raised at America’s Summit on the National Parks, a conference that drew nearly 400 to Washington, D.C., in mid-January to explore the future of the National Park System as the National Park Service heads towards its centennial in 2016. Concern over that question stems from the relative lack of diversity in the faces of the nearly 279 million visitors to the parks last year, a similar lack of diversity in the workforce of the Park Service, and a nagging concern that today’s youth are not drawn to the parks.

But the concern is not newfound, and there are groups across the country that are working to answer that question by enticing youth of all races into not just the national parks specifically, but the outdoors in general.

For more than 50 years the Student Conservation Association, an idea a college student at Vassar College outlined in her senior thesis, has been connecting youth with the outdoors. It was launched in the mid-1950s when Elizabeth Cushman, shocked by a magazine article suggesting national parks should be shuttered because they were being overwhelmed by visitors, was searching for a way that students could help the National Park Service with trail work and other conservation projects.

Her proposal: a student organization fashioned after the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s.

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