



Starting an All-Volunteer CITY PARK RANGER PROGRAM: A CASE STUDY

by Bob Huggins, Program Manager, City of Sedona Volunteer Park Rangers

Before retiring after 31 years as a ranger with the National Park Service, my wife, Judy, and I spent a great deal of time wondering where we could possibly relocate after living in some of the most beautiful places in America — places like the Redwood, Grand Teton, Yellowstone, Grand Canyon, Lake Mead, Big Bend and Isle Royale national parks. After visiting hundreds of possibilities, one place stood out above them all, and that was Sedona, Arizona. Back when I was a “buck ranger” at Grand Canyon, we would escape the crowds at the park and head for Oak Creek Canyon and Sedona on weekends. It was a special place that USA Today would later name “The Most Beautiful Place in America.”

Besides being “special,” one of the reasons we chose Sedona is that it is the very embodiment of many major national parks. Best known for its beautiful red rock scenery and Oak Creek Canyon, it is surrounded by the 1.8 million-acre Coconino National Forest and wilderness areas that support campgrounds, picnic areas and miles of backcountry trails. Its unique beauty and recreational opportunities draw 3 million visitors a year, most of whom concentrate in a very small “tourist zone” not unlike Grand Canyon Village, Yosemite Valley or Yellowstone’s Old Faithful. Sedona

also experiences many of the same challenges found in national parks. Many visitors find themselves outside of their comfortable urban environment and become stressed or confused and sometimes need friendly reassurance. Many don’t know how to read a simple road map or refuse to admit that they’re lost. Others don’t understand the inherent dangers of wild land recreation. “Weekend recreational warriors” attempt feats that exceed their physical capability; family members get separated; and people lock their keys in the car, lose their wallets and experience medical emergencies.

Shortly after settling into what I thought would be a quiet retirement, I applied and was appointed to the City of Sedona Parks & Recreation Commission. In addition to all of the recreational opportunities that surround the city, for its size, Sedona also has a premier city park and trails system. One of my first actions as a new commissioner was to suggest developing a volunteer park ranger program designed to help protect the parks and provide informational services to visitors in the “tourist zone” known as “Uptown” or “Main Street.”

The concept was immediately dismissed by my fellow commissioners as “hare-brained,” and the idea could have died right there. But like the headstrong young ranger of 31 years before, I took on the challenge and, in what would become a long process, learned several important lessons that I will share with you.

Lesson 1

“Don’t make assumptions that everyone is starting off on the same page that you are.” I quickly found out that not everyone interpreted the simple term “park ranger” the same way I did. Most people don’t know the difference between a ranger that works for the USDA Forest Service from one that works in a national park or their favorite state park. Many people associate the term “ranger” only with large open spaces, such as national parks or forests, and don’t realize that city, state, county or even national park rangers can be found in most metropolitan areas throughout the United States. So my first hurdle to overcome was: “Why do we need park rangers in the city of Sedona?”

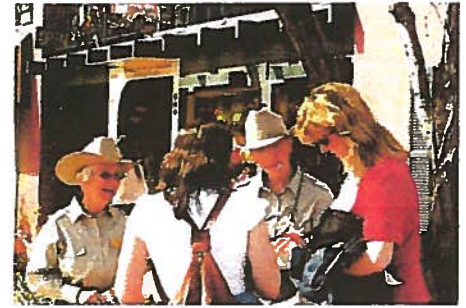
Lesson 2

“Know and clearly state your objectives, and be prepared for the unexpected.” In an

attempt to answer the question “Why do we need park rangers?” I framed my response in the form of three broad objectives. The rangers would provide a uniformed presence in the city parks providing another level of protection, they would serve as “city ambassadors” providing information to visitors, and they could provide interpretive and educational services to visitors and the schools.

That response was immediately countered with: “We have a city Police Department that routinely patrols the parks; the Sedona Oak Creek Chamber of Commerce provides a Visitor Center to answer visitors’ questions and serve as the city’s ambassador; and the local school district does just fine educating our kids.”

Other questions began to surface faster than I could answer. “How are you going to interface with other uniformed agencies, such as the police, sheriff deputies from two different counties, fire district personnel, and state park, national forest and park service rangers?” “Who’s going to pay for this, how much staff time is involved, who’s going to supervise the volunteers, and how does this interface with the city’s well-established volunteer program?”



Rangers Dexter and Huggins talk to visitors in uptown Sedona.

Lesson 3

I had obviously not done my homework! Had I taken the time to anticipate what became obvious questions and concerns, I would have either given up or taken a completely different approach.

I decided to do both. I dropped the project for a year and a half and used that time to further research the subject, which led to:

Lesson 4

“Understand how the city government works, know all the key players, and try to solicit their support before you surprise them with a ‘harebrained’ idea.”

My research also revealed that the Parks and Recreation Commission had done



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the right thing by preventing the project from moving on. The project was voted down not because the individual commissioners didn't like me or my plan but because I had never sought out or secured the support of the city staff.

I was the "new kid" suddenly proposing an untested program that potentially could have impacted the workload of an already stressed staff. Who was going to assume responsibility of managing the daily operation of a new (albeit volunteer) staff working seven days a week, 361 days a year? Was this just a "flash in the pan" idea, or was someone going to take real responsibility for seeing it through?

Once convinced that I was "for real" and, as volunteer "program manager," that I would assume all responsibility for program development, writing the policy manual, hiring, firing, scheduling, supervising and maintaining personnel records, key staff members not only supported the idea but also encouraged me to seek out community support.

My first meeting was with the city Police Department. The Sedona Police are a very professional, well-equipped and highly trained department. They also manage a large volunteer Community Police Alliance program and a Police Explorer Post and are very active in community outreach programs. My initial fear was that they would view another uniformed service supervised by another department (parks and recreation) as not only redundant but also possibly dangerously confusing to the public. Instead, they embraced the idea, citing several advantages to their department, including having additional uniformed foot patrols in the parks, having additional "official" eyes and ears in high-visitor use areas, releasing paid officers from having to answer visitor questions and having trained "first responders" who could handle situations until emergency personnel could arrive. Best of all, it wouldn't cost them anything. They even volunteered to provide a surplus police vehicle that could be converted into a Park Ranger Patrol vehicle.

Meeting with other organizations brought up other concerns, most of which fell under the category "it's never been done before" but were quickly disarmed. The USDA Forest Service was concerned that visitors might be confused by the word "ranger" and assume we were USFS personnel and that we may be out there providing incorrect information about forest regulations. When I assured them that our uniforms would clearly indicate us as "city park



rangers" and we would go through the same visitor services training as their personnel and check in every day with the USFS Ranger at the Visitor Center, they welcomed our presence. The Chamber of Commerce and the local merchant association welcomed the idea of having uniformed roving contacts out on the streets greeting visitors and providing information. With that support, the program was reintroduced to the Parks and Recreation Commission and City Council, both of which unanimously approved the program.

In June 2007, three Sedona volunteer park rangers ventured out on Main Street and began to find their niche. Soon, the community and merchants also began to realize the benefits of the city park ranger program. The rangers were willing to pick up litter on the street, remove a skunk from a trashcan on Main Street, call Public Works if there was a hazard, check the public restrooms twice a day, help resolve problems between the city and merchants, provide first aid, find a lost visitor, call a police officer if there was a problem, give a short interpretive talk, help out at community events, visit with park users, get to know the kids who "hung out" around the skateboard park and teen center and just be a sounding board for frustrated visitors, merchants and residents.

Today, the small, dedicated cadre of 10 rangers work seven days a week, 361 days out of the year. They are visible every day in Uptown, at community events in the city's parks and are frequently seen helping out at independent volunteer projects. Each ranger receives training in "first responder" EMS, CPR, the use of automatic external defibrillators, traffic control, visitor conflict resolution and basic park patrol.

Rangers are provided with full summer and winter uniforms and are required to adhere to a strict uniform and ethics policy in addition to signing a work agreement requiring six to eight volunteer hours a week.

The next question is always "How much does all this cost?" Since the program began in June 2007, the total cost to the city of Sedona has been less than \$6,000, for which they received more than 4,000 volunteer ranger hours or almost the equivalent of two full-time city employees. Those city funds included all of their uniforms and training.

But the Sedona Volunteer Park Rangers also provide benefits that cannot be measured. Thousands of visitors each year are greeted by a smiling face and are provided with accurate, unbiased information about the area. Many take home pictures of family members standing with the rangers and fond memories of the rangers' friendly advice. Several cases of heat-related illness have been averted by giving visitors a bottle of water and advising them to take a rest break in an air-conditioned building. Backcountry rescues have been prevented by convincing a family (usually Dad) that starting a 10-mile hike at noon in the middle of summer is not a good idea, especially in sandals, or attempting to drive a rented Mustang over a backcountry Jeep road will probably not work out well.

But the real rewards are the smiles and "thank-yous" received from the merchants and the visitor who reminds us that we "live in the most beautiful place I have ever seen." Talking to a visitor in one of Sedona's beautiful parks and being told, "You have the best job in the world, even if you don't get paid," and getting to remind them that we do get paid, it's just in a different currency called "sunrises, scenery, smiles and sunsets."

Information and inquiries regarding this program should be directed to Bob Huggins, program manager, Sedona Volunteer Park Rangers, P.O. Box 10324, Sedona, AZ 86339, or reach him at 928-282-3465 or ra_huggins@sedona.net.



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Rekindling the "Ranger Within" After Retirement



SEDONA RANGERS Jerry Showalter and Karen Dansby chat with local merchant Tudy Longmire.

By E&AA Life Member Bob Huggins

While I was sure I was not the first to experience it, I couldn't help but feel alone as I approached retirement seven years ago. In the months prior to retirement, I began to feel a sense of doom, an element of uncertainty and loss at the pending disconnection from the family and vocation that had become my life for the past 30 years. Like most members of the NPS family, Judy and I had lived, worked and played with the greatest people in some of the most beautiful places in America, and now it was coming to an end.

Where would we live that would even come close to matching the sheer beauty of the Tetons, the ruggedness of Big Bend, the magic of the Redwoods shrouded in fog, the wilderness sounds of Isle Royale, the breathtaking views of the Grand Canyon and the unique mix of positive energy and frustration that comes with working at headquarters in Washington, D.C.? What would I do? I was so used to waking up every morning facing new challenges. Whether it was saddling-up "Tuffy" for a backcountry horse patrol to Grand Tetons' Lake Solitude, responding to a boating accident on Lake Mead, rafting the Lower Canyons of the Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River or preparing for a last-minute meeting with the director, my life had always been

filled with that sense of anticipation and that unique satisfaction found in just being a "National Park Ranger."

But retirement day did come and go without much fanfare, and 10 months later, Judy and I moved to Sedona, Ariz. Ironically, on the first anniversary of my retirement, the *USA Today Weekend Magazine* named Sedona as the "Most Beautiful Place in America."

So far, we hadn't done too badly, but that part of the "ranger within" still remained unsatisfied. While the option of working in the surrounding Coconino National Forest or volunteering at nearby Montezuma Castle remained open, the idea of creating a park ranger program specifically designed to meet the needs of the area began to formulate as a challenge I couldn't ignore.

Why start a park ranger service in a town that has only 10,000 residents? That was the first question asked when I proposed the idea to Sedona's parks and recreation commission and city council, but it wouldn't be the last. I realized I had to develop a rationale based on community need and anchored in precedent, though a city all-volunteer park ranger program had never been attempted before. There were no guidelines or case studies.

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Rekindling the "Ranger Within" After Retirement

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Sedona would be unique among communities, and it was that uniqueness that served as my rationale.

Sedona is surrounded by the 1.8million-acre Coconino National Forest with its designated wilderness, campgrounds, picnic areas and backcountry trails. Best known for its red rock scenery and Oak Creek Canyon, the city draws over three million visitors a year, most of whom concentrate in a very small tourist zone known as "Uptown" or "Main Street."

Not unlike Grand Canyon Village, Yosemite Valley or Yellowstone's Old Faithful, Sedona experiences many of the same challenges found in the national parks. Families become separated, keys get locked in cars, medical emergencies occur, "weekend recreational warriors" attempt feats beyond their abilities and sometimes visitors just need some friendly assistance. Sedona is also blessed with beautiful city parks and trailheads that connect with the surrounding national forest trail system. What better location to create the first all-volunteer city park ranger program?

After meetings with the city police, fire district and Coconino National Forest, state parks and city staff, the proposal went to the city council and was approved. It was agreed that the City of Sedona Volunteer Park Rangers (SVPR) would have three primary functions - they would: provide a uniformed presence in the parks to act as a deterrent to inappropriate activity, provide a roving contact in high visitor-use areas and provide community support during events or emergencies.

In June 2007, three Sedona rangers (including myself), wearing tan uniform shirts with shoulder patches, identification badges, green jeans and western-style hats, ventured out onto "Main Street" Sedona. We immediately faced a barrage of visitor questions and a warm welcome from the local merchants. One of the first things I heard that day was, "Excuse me 'Ranger,' can I ask you a question?" and the "ranger within" was finally released.

Since that day, the Sedona Park Ranger Service has grown slowly and includes a retired doctor, nurse, nun, banker, former local business owner, USDA Forest Service

ranger, computer specialist, school administrator and, yes, an old NPS ranger who serves as "chief."

Today, the Sedona park rangers, who work seven-days-a-week, 361-days-a-year, have logged more than 6,200 hours of volunteer service. They have answered millions of questions, had their pictures taken hundreds of times, been the first responders to medical emergencies, directed traffic, provided interpretive programs, assisted at community events, been the focus of local media interest and become a familiar presence in the parks. They are recognized by residents and merchants as one of the most positive programs the city has ever offered.

Who knew seven years ago as I faced the sunset of my career that I was really just witnessing the sunrise of a new and even more challenging lifestyle. I guess today I view my retirement as being somewhat akin to one of the many moves we made to a new park. You experience that feeling of apprehension and sadness that comes with moving away from a family, yet you have that sense of excitement and anticipation that comes with facing new challenges. You become part of a new family, you face new challenges and that thread that binds you to the ranger brotherhood/sisterhood remains unbroken.

About the author: Originally an actor and writer at 20th Century Fox Studios, Bob Huggins left Hollywood in 1967 to become a California state park ranger at (now) Redwood National and State Parks. He and his wife, Judy, joined the NPS in 1970 as seasonal (then subject-to-furlough) employees at Grand Teton NP. They both participated in the intake program at Grand Canyon NP and went on to a long career that included duty stations at Lake Mead NRA, Isle Royale NP and Big Bend NP, where Bob served as both chief of interpretation and a commissioned law enforcement officer. He retired in 2002 as the Servicewide education specialist at the NPS headquarters in Washington, D.C. He is currently a commissioner for Sedona's parks and recreation commission and program manager for the SVPR. He and Judy can be contacted at ra_huggins@esedona.net. ■