

Building Your Interpretive Résumé

By Jeff Axel

Lake Roosevelt

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After that first job offer, I was so excited I told everybody that I was going to be a park ranger interpreting the resources of Lake Roosevelt. It was a culmination of a childhood of visiting national parks where youthful daydreams and adventures in parks had inspired my imagination and made me think interpretation was the job for me.

As my first season reached its midway point, I knew I wanted another season, and another and another. And, I thought about the parks I wanted to work at. I saw the daunting hiring process to move to another park or move to higher positions. Or for many, the Holy Grail: permanent status. What would I need to do to compete?

You may be asking yourself if trying for a coveted interpretive position at a famous park is a smart move. Maybe you wonder if it is worth the risk to try and establish a career in the National Park Service. Can you go up to 10 years without most benefits? Thankfully, ANPR offers health insurance to members as some try to make a ranger career a reality.

For me, choosing the NPS was a mix of naiveté and ambition. I decided to shoot for the moon. I started as a Student Conservation Association intern and am now in my 10th year with the NPS. I have worked at five parks with many more in my future. I am a permanent GS9 district interpretive supervisor, park partner coordinator, community planner, and now a member of the National Education Council. I rolled the dice and won. Many others tried but their bids came up short, often through no fault of their own. If you want a job at a well-known park or if you want to become permanent you will need more than willpower to make it. You'll need skills and accomplishments to shore up that résumé. If this is your dream job and you want the green-and-gray ride to continue you must prepare for a long, hard journey. While you can't control being in the right place at the right time, you can control the rest.

To improve your odds, I want to share a few things you need to do. This is not a complete list, just some of the things I've found that were useful.

First, clarify with your supervisor what your career plans are, and make sure your supervisor supports your plans and your career goals. If you find yourself in a bad situation, look for another park. Small parks, recreation areas, and isolated parks are great places to get a variety of non-traditional experiences hiring officials look for. Large famous parks look great on a résumé and will give you experience practicing and honing a few specific interpretive skills with a lot of visitors. Plan your seasonal time to combine both. Shop around and diversify your seasonal experiences.

While working seasonally, you need to pursue Interpretive Development Program modules. www.nps.gov/idp/interp. Your supervisor can get you started and mentor you through the process. Field interpreters should submit IDP102 and IDP103 their first season. These basic modules incorporate what you do at work already and don't take much time. If you create original Conducted Activities or Illustrated Programs, submit for IDP210 and IDP220. If you do writing, submit a product for IDP230. Don't procrastinate on this one.

As a hiring official, I am looking for seasonals who have taken the time to submit at least one product to the IDP. You may be awarded points on your application, and that will put you higher on the hiring roster than other candidates simply because you submitted a product, certified or not. The fact that you submitted one of your programs tells me that you take the interpretive profession seriously and that you value your interpretive skills enough to pursue certifications. Don't let some of the old guard dissuade you with talk about how the IDP will be going away or is irrelevant. Its tenets have rung true for more than a century, going clear back to the late 1860s when explorers discovered places of intrinsic value to be shared and protected. The IDP today is simply the most sophisticated, state-of-the-art language we have to describe what it is interpreters do in parks. As the years pass, it will evolve, but it will never abandon its mission-critical function in parks.

Stay abreast of park management goals. Find a role for yourself as your park moves forward. Parks run on multi-year plans. What is your division's long-range plan? If you express interest in what management is planning, you might just gain that manager/mentor who will help you realize your dreams. Talk to a manager or look at park planning documents in your park library. Browse them and see if you can find a way to combine an interpretive interest of yours with a management goal. This is a great way to get noticed. For example, is your park changing a management plan for a certain resource? Learn about that and make it a part of your program. This makes your program timely, gets you noticed, and provides the park a chance to get the word out about a resource issue.

Now that the NPS has embraced the CMS system for all our websites, it is easier for interpreters to create content for the web because we enter text and images into preset web forms. If you have the time, and the park website coordinator is willing to teach you, learn how to assemble the pages. It isn't like the old days of building websites in HTML. It is much simpler now, so that interpreters can focus on interpretive page content, not the nuts and bolts of computer programming. See if there is an opportunity to write content for your website or take pictures.

Being a good interpreter isn't enough anymore. One direction many parks are heading is outside park boundaries to develop relationships with surrounding communities. Management needs interpreters who understand this, because we as interpreters are best equipped to facilitate a community's stewardship interest in a park. The days of parks as bureaucratic islands are at an end. The boundaries have blurred, allowing us to work in the community and the community to take more of a role in the park. Sometimes this graying of the boundary has resulted in detriments to the parks, but more often, it results in benefits for the park. Don't let a few horror stories about partnerships gone awry ruin potential winners. Watch out for traditionalists who put a bug in your ear about how bad partnerships are. As a partner coordinator, I can tell you there is a lot of enthusiasm in the community for people to play a role in a national park, and it is a great force for

good that will be with the NPS into the future. In the end, well-managed partnerships make us stronger, not weaker.

As a seasonal, you may not be called on to develop or pursue partner relationships in a long-term way, but don't shut out possible connections either. Sometimes a program presented in the local area may result in a large donation to a park friends group. Perhaps a chat with visitor will allow you to establish a relationship that will benefit the park, such as bringing in volunteers who end up contributing tens of thousands of dollars in their time or personal resources. These accomplishments are non-traditional, but show your ability to use interpretive values and skills outside of traditional pathways. Show the breadth of understanding you have for the scope of interpretive possibility.

Networking is a big part of interpretive work too. You should already be networking with coworkers, particularly those with prior experience, and with mentors, to learn more about your park, this profession, and the shared workplace narrative that guides group efforts. Go over your résumé with folks who have been through the hiring process before. What did they write? How did they phrase their skills in such a way that they were offered a job? I didn't get where I am alone.

Along with networking with the people you work around, stay abreast of the most current trends in interpretation. Read the *Journal of Interpretation Research* and join the National Association for Interpretation. Lead a session with your coworkers on what is new in the interpretive profession.

What does the future hold for seasonals? If the proposed spending package passes Congress and is signed by the president, there is the chance that up to 3,000 seasonal positions may be offered as the NPS ramps up to the centennial in 2016. This will refresh the seasonal ranks with new faces and provide opportunities for leadership and skill growth among folks such as yourself already in the NPS. The next eight years should be heady ones for the Service.

Gaining the skills you need to turn hopes to reality in the interpretive field of NPS work is a long process that for many is ultimately unattainable. Thousands will try to follow their dreams. Of these, only a few will make it every season.

It takes people of unusual resolve with an appetite for risk to see it through. But then again, the rewards are great. If you apply yourself and do what needs to be done to compete strongly, perhaps you'll be one of the lucky few who will get to do this job as long as you want and where you want.

Good luck!

Jeff Axel got his start in the National Park Service at Kalaloch Beach Campground in Olympic National Park. At the age of 8 he earned his first Junior Ranger badge for picking up trash on the beach. Since then he has visited almost 90 national parks, mostly in the West, and worked at five. He currently is a paid snowbird, splitting his time between Lake Roosevelt National Recreation Area in the summer and the Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail in the winter.