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# Following the Flat Hat: What Leads People to National Park Service Interpretive Careers?

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Following the Flat Hat:

What Leads People to National Park Service Interpretive Careers?

By

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An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
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### Abstract

National Park Service interpreters around the United States are dedicated to connecting people to their parks and historical sites. While these interpretive rangers have an important mission of preserving the landscape and stories of our nation's most treasured places, a gap in the research of significant life experiences and environmental education professions exists in understanding the motivations behind following a career in the park service. Through semi-structured phenomenological interviews, the significant life experiences of interpretive park rangers were investigated as to their degree of influence on their choice of career. The findings indicate that quality time spent outdoors, family involvement, and education were main factors. Identification of the overlap of these themes helps to validate the ability of existing significant life experience research to apply to interpretive rangers in order to better understand and potentially allow for greater and more diverse recruitment of National Park Service rangers in accordance to the 2016 *A Call to Action* goals. These findings agree with the existing work on significant life experiences and conclude main factors of National Park Service career choice.

*Keywords:* National Park Service, significant life experiences, interpretive rangers, career choice

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## Introduction

The National Park Service (NPS), “America’s Best Idea,” celebrated its 100th birthday this year on August 25th, 2016 (National Park Service n.d.). From its beginning, the NPS has been fueled by the passion of people who love the landscape, the stories, and the flora and fauna of America’s most sacred places. These people choose to spend parts or their entire careers upholding the goals of the NPS. But where did the passion of these people originate? How did they get their starts?

The reasons for choosing certain life paths is investigated in the field of significant life experiences (SLE). A SLE is an experience a person credits as instrumental to their current life outcome (Tanner 1998). A main goal of SLE research is to determine what education methods or experiences produce beneficial behavior, including in social or environmental contexts. Significant life experiences can include influential people, books, positive or negative experiences, educational and learning experiences, employment opportunities, or any phenomena, object, or person regarded as causal to an individual’s life path when viewed retrospectively. That is to say, without a certain specific experience, the person feels their life would have taken a different path, though a large degree of unpredictability and chance is to be expected in life histories (Bandura 1982). It should also be recognized that not only inspiration from earlier life experiences or chance encounters contributes to a person’s choice of career. A person’s career and roles throughout their life are influenced by complex and varied contexts (Blustein 1997). The major theories of career choice share themes of biological factors, parental influences, outcomes, personality, methods, and life-stage influences (Osipaw 1990). Many of these factors, like parental influences, personality development, and life-stage influences have overlap with significant life experience categories.

The main takeaways from these theories are that career choice is largely based on an individual's skills and attitudes, both of which are also heavily influenced by SLEs.

A particularly impactful SLE for skills and attitude is facing challenging experiences in the outdoors, which leads to an increase in certain social, behavioral, and technical skills that can be difficult to cultivate in other contexts (Moote Jr. & Wodarski 1997). Exposing children to constructive risk opportunities through adventurous play confers a large range of benefits important for healthy lifestyles, and limiting risk reduces opportunities for development of self-confidence and personal freedom (Staempfli 2009). These SLEs have the potential of considerably affecting career choice through skills gained.

Research on significant life experiences of many outdoor professionals, particularly environmental or outdoor educators, has been extensive. However, profession-specific research on the significant life experiences of interpretive rangers in the National Park Service has been virtually nonexistent. A search of major scholarly resources with the terms of “park ranger” attached to “significant life experiences” yields nothing explicitly related to park rangers and their inspiration behind their choice of profession. Recognizing the limitations in existing research, Chawla (2006) recommended an expansion of diversity of research subjects in significant life experience research including varied professions.

The significance of choosing the National Park Service as a career path is highlighted by some of the NPS goals as the service enters its second century. Goals set to be completed by the 2016 Centennial and continuing after were outlined in *A Call to Action: Preparing for a Second Century of Stewardship and Engagement*. Of particular interest was the theme of Connecting People to Parks, and the subset goal of “developing and nurturing lifelong connections between the public and parks—especially for young people—through a continuum of engaging recreation,

educational, volunteer, and work experiences.” To meet this goal, each park was tasked with the action of providing opportunities with partners and youth organizations “to create a pathway to employment with the NPS.” The hope of this goal was to ultimately increase diversity in the park service. Creating this pathway for youth and other ages of people hoping to work in the NPS supports the need to identify why rangers choose the park service in the first place.

Once in the NPS, interpretive rangers dedicate themselves to upholding multiple goals, including environmental preservation, historical literacy, cultural appreciation, and others. As defined by the National Association for Interpretation, “Interpretation is a communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and the inherent meanings in the resource” (Brochu and Merriman 2002). One of the mandates of NPS set by the Organic Act in 1916 is of course preservation of the natural resources and scenery of America’s special sites, which has been expanded in scope in the last 100 years to include important cultural and historical sites (National Park Service 2013). Because of the personal observations of the intense dedication of the average interpretive park ranger to the mission of the park service, I decided to pursue an inquiry into what rangers credit as the origin of their love of parks and how they made their career decision out of all possible outdoor employment opportunities available to them. In other words, what significant life experiences have contributed to their choice of a career as an interpretive ranger in the National Park Service?

In this thesis I will first review the literature surrounding significant life experiences and phenomenological research before describing my use of semi-structured qualitative interviews to address my research question, followed by a presentation of my findings and a discussion of my results. The findings of my research support Tanner (1980), Chawla (1999), and others in that the

main significant life experiences contributing to a person's pursuance of environmental education were time spent in nature, family influences, and education.



### Literature Review

The following is a brief review of two main topics related to my research to give sufficient background information on the subject of NPS career pursuance. The topics of significant life experiences and phenomenology as a qualitative research method were important to understanding the significant life experiences behind interpretive rangers' career choice and the methods used to investigate their experiences.

#### *Significant life experiences*

Significant life experiences (SLE) is important to understanding what experiences later lead people into pursuing paths of environmental activism, environmental education, interpretation, and many other careers. The investigation of SLE has been ongoing since the 1960s and began with Thomas Tanner. Tanner (1998) reports beginning this field of research after becoming interested in the similarities in narratives between environmental educators, environmental and wilderness activists, and other people closely involved with the natural world in their adult lives. Nearly all of these subjects reported activities dealing with some influential activity, person, or event that they credited as having a major impact on their present-day career or actions. In Tanner's (1980) earlier article, he addresses the importance of taking advantage of significant life experience research to retrospectively determine if environmental education accomplishes its aim of preserving the health and resources of the planet for use and enjoyment of future generations. He concluded that outdoor experiences were the most important factor for the sampling population of environmental leaders, and that more SLE research needs to be accomplished in order to determine how best to provide these experiences to youth.

Formative experiences of environmental educators has henceforth been a major focus of SLE research. Several avenues of study have been opened up since then, with researchers looking into the significant life experiences of different professionals. One of the most prominent researchers after Thomas Tanner in the academic field of SLE is Louise Chawla. In Chawla (1998), the author concludes through a review of SLE research on environmental activists or others with high environmental sensitivity that the experiences that meld the outer environment of the physical and social world with the inner environment of one's own self are most described by researchers as important. She argued that this inner environment must receive greater focus in future research. Many of these studies also relied heavily on surveys as their primary method of data collection, leading her to observe that a growing faction of research is turning to open-ended surveys and informative interviews, making qualitative analysis of autobiographical recollection a relatively new area of environmental education research. Quantitative data is difficult to translate reliably to tangible experiences in the field of environmental education. This review drew attention to the lack of comparative study of possible similar experiences between people who exhibit high environmental sensitivity and those that don't to determine if SLE really causes differences between these populations. This was a caution she supported by referencing comparison interviews amongst undergraduates in environmental studies and other majors, conducted by Myers (1997), as there was little difference in the nature exposure in childhood and resulting environmental sensitivity of the two groups. These experiences don't necessarily result in a person following environmental activities or careers. Chawla further concludes that extremely few of the categories in the reviewed research touch the internal development of receptiveness to environmental issues.

One year later, Chawla (1999) focused on a broad variety of environmental professionals and the SLE in relation to their life paths. By interviewing environmental professionals to provide

self-identified significant experiences throughout their lives that led to them turning to environmental action, she determined that sources of environmental commitment originate from a variety of sources throughout their lives, including childhood nature experiences, family, education, negative experiences, and others. She further concludes that a mixture of chance and personal history determine the path people take and their understanding of the past directly influences their actions in the present.

Following Chawla, Corcoran (1999) discussed similar findings in formative experiences of environmental educators, noting that the most important experiences were time outdoors, family, positive experiences with various media, and teachers. He felt that SLE research is vital to understanding the ways to increase exposure of younger generations to the places that their predecessors found lasting and driving to major life decisions.

Gough (1999) provided alternate views of how SLE research is approached and introduced a framework for understanding what SLE research is accomplishing. Gough argued that the field of SLE research needs to progress beyond the tendency to be self-referential, and that SLE research often digresses in its goals from subject to subject. According to Gough, SLE research is not a body of work so much as a tool for researching other things.

Bustam et al. (2003) built on and contrasted to previous studies in investigating the link between environmental sensitivity and either outdoor activities in youth or influential experiences. The researchers found that more research needs to be done on the theorized and demonstrated connection between the two variables. Their findings also suggest that the activities that a person participated in are just as important as the activities they claim to be the most influential.

Recently, Caeser (2015) offered a much different perspective and investigation of significant life experiences in environmental justice than that of Chawla (1999) and others. By

using a framework of environmental positionality and a person's predisposition to certain viewpoints, this study investigated the impact of negative experiences in shaping the motivations of environmental justice activists. The importance of recognizing a group's marginality when researching the motivations of their environmental activism, and illuminating some of the environmental and social privileges of traditional significant life experience research subjects was discussed. Further demonstrated were the benefits of approaching significant life experience research in a sociological way with respect to the cultural and historical contexts of the people used in these studies.

### *Phenomenology as a Qualitative Research Method*

Phenomenology is both a qualitative research method and a philosophy, but the brief overview included here primarily focuses on the literature surrounding the methodological approach of phenomenological interview to collect qualitative data.

The field of phenomenology began as philosophy with Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger to describe either the experience or understanding of things (Smith 2013). Phenomenology begins with the phenomena instead of theory (Cohen 1987). Dowling (2007) contrasted the main philosophical phenomenological differences between several schools of thought, including both Husserl, Heidegger, and phenomenology as a research method, and shows that despite the differences, fundamentally phenomenology is used to understand a person's own experience of some "phenomena." Dowling's review further described some of the debate between the philosophical and methodological use of phenomenology, in that arguments have arisen on the tendency of phenomenological methods focus solely on experience and ignore the original philosophical aim of understanding the core of the phenomenon that elicited the experience. The

author concludes that the trends of phenomenology show it moving to primarily to a methodological approach and risk leaving behind the field's origins as a philosophy.

Phenomenology as a qualitative research method originated to capture certain phenomenon as experienced by individuals, with interviews being the primary qualitative data collection tool (Englander 2012). By analyzing these interviews, the researcher then steps away from the meaning they are wishing to capture and instead becomes sensitive to the meaning placed on the words by their interview subject (Hycner 1985). Phenomenology as a methodology has been in conflict over the idea of the interviewer striving to be purely objective, which Lowes and Prowse (2001) argued was unnecessary in the interview process with sufficient checks in the analysis process, due to the need for the interviewer to understand their subject during interviews. Englander (2012) asserted that it is thus necessary to review phenomenological research within its own academic field and not compared to the broader field of empirical sciences.

### Methods

I conducted semi-structured interviews with Visitor Services employees at a small National Park in the Pacific Northwest. My selection criteria for the interviewees was that they had been working in the park service for at least the past season and planned to continue working for the NPS in the future, and were involved in interpreting the park's story and in other forms of visitor interaction. All interviews were conducted by me and lasted from 30 minutes to an hour and a half and were recorded with pen-and-paper notes. The age range of interviewees was split between two groups, mid-20s and mid-50s due to the demographics of the particular park. I interviewed 6 rangers from the Visitor Services and Interpretation department of the park. Three rangers were permanent employees and three were on a seasonal schedule.

My interview method was based on semi-structured phenomenological interviews, inspired by Chawla (1999). As discussed in the literature review, phenomenology investigates a person's own experiences from their point of view, as they understand them (Smith 2013). In this way, my study was investigating the self-reported reasons why these rangers feel they were inspired to pursue interpretation in the NPS. The small sample size of park rangers interviewed was sufficient to investigate significant life experiences because of the amount of data typically collected in phenomenological interviews and the necessity of the unique phenomenon of being a park ranger to determining the method (Hycner 1985). Furthermore, qualitative interviews that focus on unique cases provide more in-depth exploration of an issue (Kvale 1994).

The content of the interviews centered on the backgrounds of the rangers. They were asked questions about their education and employment backgrounds, the length of time working for the NPS, their experiences in natural spaces or National Parks before their employment, and the value of working for the NPS to them. The more in-depth questions involved the main memorable

activities from their youth, their level of involvement in the outdoors, their family's attitudes to outdoor recreation, particular memories of thinking about going into the park service, and what experiences they consider to be major factors to choosing the career they have today.

Categories expected from the literature (in particular from Chawla (1999)) to play a role in pursuing an interpretive ranger career with the NPS were experience of the outdoors, family, organizations, education, and previous work. Categories not expected to be as relevant from were friend influences, social justice, books, and negative experiences. Coding of interview responses was done using an open coding approach, grouping responses into these categories. All coding was done by me.

Results are presented in a qualitative manner with a table compiled of summaries of reported influences (presented in Appendix A). Due to the small number of interview subjects, further statistical analysis beyond the description of demographics above wasn't necessary.

## Results

The categories used in analyzing the interviews were based on Chawla (1999), with adjustments from interview responses and the addition of “previous NPS exposure”. These categories included; outdoor experiences, family influence, education, employment, organizations, socio-environmental conflicts, books, and spiritual beliefs. The categories of negative experiences (such as habitat destruction and pollution), influence of friends, sense of social justice, and concern for children/grandchildren from Chawla (1999) were unnecessary as they weren’t reported by interviewees or not relevant to this study due to the differences between the mission of environmental educators and interpretive rangers, as discussed in the introduction.

Appendix A shows the various significant life experiences reported by the interviewed rangers as organized by category. The categories are listed from most reported to least, with the three most reported being outdoor experiences, family influences, and education. Employment, organizations, and previous NPS exposure were mentioned in similar frequency by rangers, and socio-environmental conflicts, books, and spiritual beliefs were only mentioned by one to two rangers as significant life experiences. Rangers also recognized that many of them entered the park service because of a favorable opportunity that could have otherwise not happened, as one ranger put it, “You have to be in the right place to be hired at the right time.”

### *Outdoor Experiences*

Experience of the outdoors and nature was the largest factor for interviewees, similar to Chawla’s (1999) study. Every single interviewee responded that they had some amount of time spent outdoors as children under the age of 18 or young adults, as shown in App. A. Outdoor experiences occurred during either frequent visits to places near home, or experiences in places



away from home. Outdoor experiences away from home in general more aptly fit into the categories of family influences or previous NPS exposure. Themes of emotional regeneration and overcoming challenge were also present as lasting skills impacting their later choices to enter the NPS.

Experiences close to home were regarded as normal and routine but still special parts of daily life. One ranger spoke of how he would spend days camping by himself or with friends in a National Forest nearby his home:

I was a jungle boy. I would jump off some 40 feet waterfalls with my friends. I would just say “Back in a couple days, Mom!” and camp in Forest Service campgrounds in some pretty rugged country.

Another interviewee remembered the days she would spend as a child riding her pony in the forest around her family home and the plants she would bring home:

Spending a lot of unstructured time outside felt safe. It only really felt scary if I saw someone else, like if I saw someone else hiking. I would dig up plants from the woods and bring them back home to plant inside, and I had a rabbit so I would use the rabbit manure to fertilize the plants. ... Being outdoors is what I felt good doing as a child, so surely other people must feel the same way.

More than one ranger spoke of emotional regeneration occurring while outside. Words like “tranquility,” “peace,” “serenity,” and “soothing” occurred across multiple interviews. From the same ranger as above, speaking of how spending time in nature has helped her in her life today:

Nature has a way of ordering things in my life. It’s an instant feeling of “bigger than thou” and I’m not religious, but nature is a good reminder to slow down, simplify, prioritize; nature’s always right. Nature’s really core. It gave me the capacity to self-soothe, observe, take a slow pace.

On the subject of self-soothing, another interview subject had a similar method of calming himself gained from earlier experiences:

A really special place was the Indian Heaven Wilderness in the Columbia River Gorge. I fell in love with the history of it being a traditional native gathering place to pick berries. Anytime I feel stressed or am feeling frazzled, it helps to think back on these places that really mean peace and serenity.

One interviewee spoke of escaping into nature as a way to deal with emotional turmoil:

If I ever had an argument with my family, I would go into my room and slam and lock the door, then climb out the window and go for a long walk outside.

Not every memory of the outdoors reported during interviews was a positive one, but they still were remembered as instructive and impactful. Interviewees appeared to have even more to say when they had experienced a physical discomfort as opposed to other more positive memories. Even in the face of challenging experiences outdoors, the interviewees still had positive things to say about these instances. One ranger recounted a lesson about going off trail during a hiking trip:

Me and my sister decided to go off trail because there was a really cool creek, with a bridge that crossed it, and we knew we were supposed to stay on the trail but we really wanted to go in the creek. The rocks were covered in slippery algae and, no surprise, I slipped and fell into the ice cold water. It was shocking but I was okay. It made me think twice but it turned out fine.

A different ranger remembered getting a bad sunburn as a child and how her parents handled the situation:

It was 50 years ago in Cape Hatteras National Seashore, which that part of the state was a giant beach at that time, and I got really sunburned. But it didn't ruin the trip in part because my parents weren't upset by it. They just had an attitude of that's what we were doing and we were going to deal with any challenges.

Another interviewee had the opportunity to go on a 10-day backpacking trip to the 4 Corners part of the U.S. Mountain region through her high school and the impact the trip had on her through the different challenges she faced:

We had to carry our own gear, and we read Edward Abbey and Carlos Castaneda. There was a leadership portion--all the trip leads would get up early to hike before us and we had to navigate to them with a compass. One of the days I sprained my ankle and the group had to figure out how to do that while still hiking with me. We all had a partner and needed to budget our food, but my partner and I didn't budget our food well so we were eating pretty crappy food. But we weren't in any danger and never felt in danger.

### *Family*

The influence of family members was also an important theme throughout all interviewee responses. Role modeling a love of the outdoors, bringing the interviewees as children to parks, or teaching important outdoor life skills or natural history knowledge were mentioned by several

rangers. This instillation of a positive outdoor ethic was reported as important in some way during interviews. Two rangers credited their parents being educators as inspiration for a life-long enjoyment of hands-on education and as being important to their later decision to go into the park service. As their parents were teachers, they were able to have family-based learning experiences that centered on many natural history topics, such as learning the local trees or investigating tide pool life. A few rangers said that they used outdoor skills taught by their family members in their current career positions such as boating skills. Family for several rangers was the gateway into experiencing the outdoors, whether it was family trips to state or national parks or forests, or spending time together doing activities they wouldn't have done alone, or getting away from everyday life distractions and getting closer to their family members. Parents, grandparents, and siblings were important to different rangers as influences.

One ranger attributed her passion for choosing a career in the park service that allowed her to be outdoors because of her family:

At a certain point, and earlier than we think, people stop wanting to try new experiences and I was lucky my parents brought me outdoors. Sleeping in a tent is kind of risky—you can't lock your doors. It was my parents, and really my dad, that made me love the outdoors and national parks. ... It was a happy time with my family that I really enjoyed, and I always was looking for ways to replicate that experience.

Another ranger recalled that many of their main skills that led them to be successful as an interpretive ranger came from a family ethic of understanding the world around themselves, respecting the outdoors, and sharing knowledge. A similar response by another ranger was that if she hadn't been taught to be in the woods by her parents and taught skills like fire-making, first aid, and how not to get lost, she would have been a lot more hesitant to become a park ranger.

### *Education*

Several rangers responded that education was a major factor leading them into the park service. Grade school experiences and college education were mentioned. One ranger mentioned that an early experience that set them on a path to later work as an interpretive ranger was taking interesting history classes in college. He said he always admired the mountain men of history, “But I couldn’t be a hermit, I like being around people too much.” The love of history sparked from that class was what set him on a path to eventually work at a national historical park.

A different ranger got her start in college by chance, when she had to choose a major for a scholarship and decided to go into wildland management, which led her to a college workshop talking to land managers and thinking about the balance between human enjoyment of nature and protection of the landscape. She said that experiences from her earlier life started to come together and make sense, leading her then to a college summer internship at a National Park. She explicitly said that was an inspiring moment for her career, and she has been in the NPS ever since.

As for earlier education, one ranger had a non-traditional grade school environment with an open classroom that allowed her to have a lot of freedom in her learning path. This school allowed for a lot of experience in the outdoors and free-choice learning. She felt that first not having a lot of rigidity in her early education, but later taking a more traditional educational path gave her the feeling of always being able to make a choice. This passion to pursue her own goals made her admire the NPS for being true to a mission that she respects and believes in.

### *Employment*

Several rangers credited earlier work experiences outdoors as instrumental to their path to choosing the NPS. The interviewees had a few personal summarizations of their main motivations

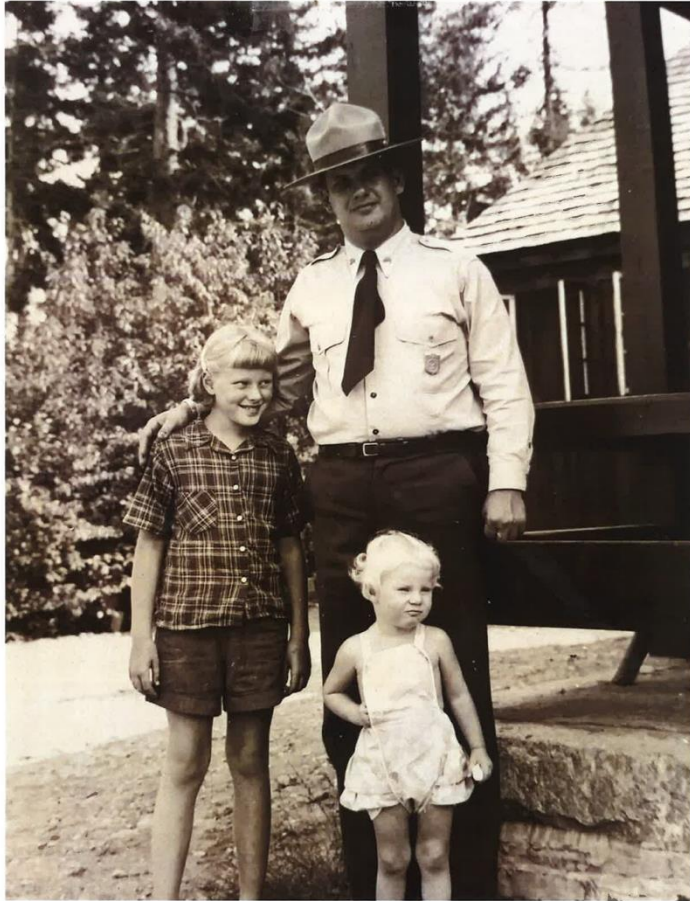
to later follow a career in the park service. One ranger hadn't worked in any other national park, but previously had a full career in therapeutic recreation and long-term recreation care:

The epitome of working outdoors is working in a National Park. It's kind of the top for me. I retired [from long-term recreation care and teaching] in December 2013 and just felt like, "Wow! Now I can be a park ranger."

A response in this same vein was from another ranger about going into her first NPS position after working for state parks:

I felt very excited. I was really excited to play with the big dogs. You know, state parks are just state parks. So it was an adventure and really neat to get away. I felt like I was going to save the world—solve all these great environmental problems.

One ranger's experience has been in early childhood education, an experience that has shown her the passion she has for education in the NPS, driving her to search for more education-based positions instead of classroom-based teaching.



**Figure 1** An interviewed ranger (bottom right) at age 3 with sister and a NPS park ranger at Acadia National Park, one of her best-remembered NPS sites.

### *Previous NPS Exposure*

Several of the rangers interviewed spoke of how their previous interaction with the National Park Service was what inspired them to pursue a career as an interpretive ranger. One had admired NPS rangers from childhood where she was “always the kid at the front of the ranger talks.” A different ranger remembered attending education ranger programs that focused on direct learning experiences. Two rangers stated that important experiences had been becoming involved with the NPS by volunteering or working as a

partner to the park. When one ranger was asked the point she realized that being a ranger was something she wanted to do, she responded:

I didn't think about working for the park service until I was about 14 when I saw a ranger hiking by on the trail and thought, “I'd like to hike for a job!”

### *Other categories: Organizations, Socio-environmental conflicts, books, and spiritual beliefs*

While the factors of organizations, socio-environmental conflicts, books, and spiritual beliefs were the least mentioned during interviews, they were still reported as influential experiences to the ranger's career choice of the NPS.

Two rangers were in organizations as youth that allowed them to gain skills or insight they felt were important to their path into the National Park Service. Both rangers joined the Girl Scouts as children and mentioned that though the organization didn't focus on outdoor skills as much as they had wanted, it gave them skills in areas like leadership and teamwork, and helped them pursue outdoor experiences they felt were missing from the Girl Scouts that became important for their career path.

Socio-environmental conflicts as a significant life experience was only reported by one ranger. In college, this ranger had worked in the Forest Service and experienced two separate conflicts that he said were thought-provoking about the role the National Park Service now plays. The first was conflict over the Northern Spotted Owl conservation controversy, causing the ranger to leave the Forest Service while still a college student due to his discomfort over being involved in conflict. The second experience was conflict in his hometown between long-time residents and a federal land protection act converting land into protected wilderness. He felt that this was ultimately a good act in order to protect some special, beautiful places from being destroyed, and made him appreciate the difficult role public land protection agencies (like the NPS) has to fulfill. Furthermore, it allowed him to admire the NPS for its mission in preserving sites for future generations.

Only one ranger mentioned a book as having a significant impact on her path to choosing the National Park Service for a career. This influential book helped her understand the impact of time outdoors in childhood had on her life and her passion for sharing environmental education experiences with others through her position with the NPS.

Finally, the significant life experience of spiritual beliefs was only talked about by one ranger. This ranger said that her upbringing as an Episcopalian led her to have a deep connection to the natural world, and that connection set her on her route to later become a NPS ranger.



## Discussion

In this thesis I researched the significant life experiences contributing to National Park Service interpretive ranger's career choice in phenomenological interviews. I found that a number of factors were reported by rangers as having significant impacts on their life paths. The main experiences were in the categories of outdoor experiences, family influences, education, and to a lesser degree, employment, previous NPS exposure, organizations, social-environmental conflicts, books, and spiritual beliefs.

All of the rangers interviewed in this thesis talked about how important spending time outdoors was to their later choice to become a NPS ranger. A considerable amount of literature has recognized the various effects outdoor experience has on a person's mental and physical health (Keniger et al. 2013), and shown that outdoor experiences provide highly valued and large amounts of satisfaction due to the inherent nature of being outdoors (Kaplan and Talbot 1983). Participating in outdoor recreation that depends upon the natural world for its value has immense implications for later embracing a stewardship of the environment and fostering a sense of responsibility for the preservation of landscapes (Atkinson 1990). It is no surprise then that all rangers had outdoor experiences in their youth that depended on appreciation of their natural environments, as a large portion of an interpretive ranger's profession is tied to the preservation of landscapes and historical and cultural narratives through education of the public. Their decision to pursue a career with the NPS is similar to that of outdoor educators, in that a predisposition to enjoying the outdoors plays a substantial part in career choice (Allin & Humberstone 2006).

It was also significant that rangers reported emotional responses to outdoor experience. In many cases, these were powerful motivators to seeking a career that would help others to have

connections to the outdoors. Due to the profound emotional connections the interviewees reported, some of which still helped rangers cope in their lives today, it is possible that the high amount of emotional charge these outdoor experiences held for them were highly influential significant life experiences leading them to their ultimate career choice of a park ranger rather than another career. In other educational professions, SLEs in the outdoors that led to direct, personal feelings towards nature were discussed as most impactful to career choice (Torkar 2014). Greater degrees of caring attitudes to the environment and environmentally beneficially behavior has even been shown in children who have more personal connections to nature (Cheng & Monroe 2012). These personal connections are lasting and lifelong and convey a sense of care (Corcoran 1999). The amount of dedication displayed by interpretive park rangers to both the aspects of environmental preservation and cultural/historical heritage in the NPS mission would not be genuine without a sense of personal connection arising from an emotional response. It is noteworthy that the rangers in this thesis reported such emotional connections, and would be an interesting avenue of study to investigate if this is a theme shared among all park rangers.

Additionally, several rangers spoke in length about overcoming challenging experiences outdoors. Psychological theory on memory has suggested that exposure to a distinct rather than mundane experience earlier in life leads to familiarity and more vivid memory later, particularly for negative experiences (Ochsner 2000). Despite readily speaking about the negative aspects of these experiences, the memories of these happened to be surprisingly positive. Rangers found that these negative experiences were quite influential to their life paths. This surmounting of challenge is present in the literature with Cooke et al. (2006), when a physical nuisance of insect bites turned out to be less of a hindrance to a youth adventure expedition than the researchers expected, additionally suggesting that more experienced youth were less bothered by the

physical discomfort. Adventure in youth increases personal empowerment and the development of effectiveness at major life tasks (Sibthorp and Arthur-Banning 2004). In interviews, the rangers that reported pushing through physical discomforts or negative experiences ultimately gained long-lasting skills. By falling in a creek, one ranger gained skills in situational awareness and a lesson about respecting off-trail environments. A sunburn allowed one ranger to find enjoyment in an outdoor activity despite physical discomfort. And the ranger who faced multiple physical challenges over food and injury during a trip was able to grow in leadership, knowledge of survival skills, and teamwork. In children, willingness to take risks in outdoor play increases development of positive mental, physical, and social skills, while reducing risk generally results in negative development outcomes (Little and Wyver 2008). While Burman and Davis-Burman (2005) argued that reinforcing positive experience generally leads to greater personal growth as opposed to risk situations outdoors, they acknowledged that these experiences are subjective and that some people can have positive transformative experiences from overcoming risky situations or discomfort outdoors. This appeared to be the case for the rangers I interviewed. This increase of skill and personal growth were thus reported by rangers as instrumental for their later career path choice.

Family influence was equally as reported in interviews as outdoor experiences. Family is an important factor to both SLE research and career choice theory. Human development through life is intimately tied to the family unit, demonstrating how important family is to an individual's life path (Bronfenbrenner 1986). Pines and Yanai (2000) stated that career choice can unconsciously reflect familial history, to the point of seeking careers that replicate childhood experiences. Expectedly, rangers felt their families were a major SLE to their love of outdoor recreational activities, outdoor ethic, skills, and knowledge all leading to career choice. Family

health and strength and family participation in outdoor experiences are a very strong relationship demonstrated by Freeman and Zabriskie (2002), important to an individual's development as part of the family unit. The rangers had the most to say about family experiences during childhood, the most impressionable time of an individual's life. It has been shown that children's literacy of the natural world is actively influenced by their parents across a range of family outdoor involvement levels (Crockett 2013). In this same thread, Larson et al. (2013) concluded that efforts to provide benefits of state parks to youth would be most effective if targeted at parents as they are a major influence to their children's outdoor activities. The two rangers whose parents were educators spoke about the knowledge they gained from their parents about natural history. This early start of curiosity about the natural world and a family-based encouragement for learning allowed them to start developing one of the most crucial skills in being an interpretive park ranger: content development in natural history or human history (Ivey and Bixler 2013).

Different levels of education was a SLE retrospectively regarded by several rangers as an experience they credited as a start to their NPS career path. The ranger that had an open classroom environment in her grade school years, allowing her freedom in her educational choices from a young age and large amount of experiential learning opportunities, found that factor to be a particularly noteworthy landmark on her path to the NPS. Her statement is supported by how hands on learning environments in environmental education experiences has lifelong impacts on lifestyle and professional commitments, in this case to environmental preservation (Colvin 2013). The rangers who felt that their college years were more influential than earlier education spoke of specific courses that proved to be both inspirational and highly useful to their later careers with the NPS. College education was an important significant life experience to inspiring later life choices in Chawla's (1999) study.

The significant life experience of employment was discussed by some rangers as important to their career path. Employment during young adulthood has important implications for career choice later in life as a “trial run” by allowing exercise of burgeoning skills (Brown 1996). For some rangers, employment prior to their first NPS positions provided inspiration in their career path through direct experience. One ranger had worked with state parks, allowing her to develop the necessary job skills and sparking an interest in pursuing the more iconic National Park Service. In environmental educators, earlier employment as significant life experiences allowed them to learn about their field and inspired them to pursue it as a career rather than a one-time job as it provided a discovery of passion for the field (Siegel 2007).

The exposure to the National Park Service was an influential factor shared by several rangers. In learning about the NPS early in life and admiring the ranger profession, or becoming involved with a park through volunteering or partnership with a previous job, rangers were building a sense of familiarity important to their later career choice. Familiarity and connection to geographical place are strongly related to development of identity (Pearce 2012), which links to career choice theories based on a person’s personality determining their ultimate career decisions (Osipaw 1990). Additionally, visits to natural locations like parks experienced in childhood strongly indicate the likelihood of adults to continue visits to similar locations throughout their lives (Thompson et al. 2008). Those rangers that had interpretive experiences in NPS sites exhibited connections to the NPS through their memories of interpretive and ranger-led educational programs, which Knapp and Yang (2002) found to be the most important factor for interpretation program memories.

Other categories of organizations, social-environmental conflicts, books, and spiritual beliefs were not as often reported by rangers overall and were less influential to these individuals

when compared to other reported factors. However, they still convey importance as significant life experiences, even if just as contributory factors to other experiences. Youth organizations (in this case, being a member of a Girl Scout troop) were a gateway into leadership and outdoor experiences. Youth organizations often provide greater learning opportunities and modes of growth than in other aspects of young individual's lives (Hansen et al. 2003), contributing to later career choice through theories of personality development (Osipaw 1990). Social-environmental conflicts were spoken of as a significant life experience by one ranger, allowing him to greater appreciate the mission of public lands agencies and the importance of access to the outdoors was to him. While not a highly reported SLE, conflicts between people over natural resources in the form of negative experiences was a SLE shared in environmental educators as important to following their career path as it gave them inspiration to make change (Palmer et al. 1999). Books can serve as experiences influential to later career paths, as one ranger felt a specific book on environmental education allowed for an identification of educational goals that were important to her transition to an NPS career. Finally, Religious beliefs were mentioned as an important factor to one ranger's NPS career path due to a feeling of spiritual connection to the natural world. Religion has been suggested as a unique source of motivation and significance different from other psychological processes (Pargement et al. 2005). Religious beliefs were a SLE identified by Palmer et al. (1998) for development of environmental awareness and caring to the natural environment.

Overall, the findings that the main influential experiences to career choice were outdoor experiences, family influences, and education were significant to supporting shared outcomes of SLE research on interpretive rangers, upholding specific National Park Service-wide goals and providing potentially promising additional avenues of study. That these SLEs reported in earlier

literature were also reported by NPS rangers validates the overlap of categorizing interpretive rangers with environmental educators when researching instrumental experiences to life paths, with demonstrated connections to Tanner (1980), Palmer et al. (1998), Chawla (1999), Corcoran (1999), and others. Though the profession of park ranger is virtually missing from SLE research, it is useful to discover that their SLEs fall into similar categories.

These findings are of importance to understanding the experiences of individuals that led them to become rangers, in the possibility of providing such experiences to foster a future generation of interpretive rangers. With the National Park Service Centennial setting goals to actively help youth and diverse populations enter the park service, knowing how these populations become excited about the NPS mission is crucial. This opens up additional avenues of study. This thesis was an effort to describe the unique experiences of very small group of rangers, a group with little ethnic diversity. It was not intended to be generalizable research, and even if it had been, ethnically diverse populations have been historically underrepresented in the NPS. The NPS is challenged with connecting audiences of diverse cultural backgrounds to the stories contained in the sites, and doing so with ranger populations not representative of our nation's diversity can be challenging (Floyd 1999). This disconnect between NPS demographics and the demographics of the United States could result in rangers missing appropriate interaction with people coming from complex cultural contexts. In order to fully realize the goal of embracing and cultivating a diverse workforce, it would be prudent to continue investigation on the influential experiences that produce diverse and committed rangers.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: Table 1. Factors Contributing to Choice of NPS Career

<b>Table 1</b> Factors Contributing to Choice of NPS Career	
Time spent in nature spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Childhood home near forest, mountains, undeveloped land</li> <li>• Large amounts of unsupervised time in outdoors during childhood</li> <li>• Outdoor recreation (boating, hiking, camping, backpacking)</li> <li>• Emotional rejuvenation</li> <li>• Adult experiences of beautiful landscapes</li> </ul>
Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recreational trips to public lands with parents, grandparents, siblings</li> <li>• Outdoor ethic instilled by parents (reduce impact on land, respect wildlife and others, awareness of surroundings, etc.)</li> <li>• Parents were educators focusing on hands-on education</li> </ul>
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Influential courses, workshops in college</li> <li>• Unstructured open classroom in childhood</li> </ul>
Employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• College employment with state parks</li> <li>• Career in long-term care using outdoor recreation</li> <li>• Desire to incorporate teaching in an outdoor setting</li> </ul>
Previous NPS exposure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Volunteering with park before employment</li> <li>• Partnership with park through another organization</li> <li>• Early admiration of NPS mission, ranger position</li> </ul>
Organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth organizations (Girl Scouts, Brownies)</li> </ul>
Social-environmental conflicts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conservation controversy in Forest Service</li> <li>• Federal land protection act in local area turning land into preserved sites</li> </ul>
Book	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Influential environmental education book</li> </ul>
Spiritual beliefs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Religious values connecting to the natural world</li> </ul>



**Appendix B: Consent Form**

The Portland State University  
Consent to Participate in Research

Following the Flat-hat: What Leads People to National Park Service Careers?

July 25, 2016

**Introduction**

You are being asked to participate in a research study that is being done by undergraduate Honors College student Avarie Fitzgerald with advising by Dr. Marion Dresner from the Department of Environmental Science and Management, at Portland State University in Portland, Oregon. This research is studying the past experiences that might have contributed to choosing a career in the National Park Service.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a current employee of the National Park Service.

This form will explain the research study, and will also explain the possible risks as well as the possible benefits to you. We encourage you to talk with your family and friends before you decide to take part in this research study. If you have any questions, please ask one of the study investigators.

What will happen if I decide to participate?

If you agree to participate, the following things will happen:

Avarie Fitzgerald will schedule an interview slot at a time and place most convenient to you. If scheduling conflicts make it impossible to meet for an in-person interview, you can have the option to be interviewed over the phone or through an online calling application (e.g., Skype). Interviews will range from 30 minutes to 1 hour 30 minutes. The investigator will ask about such topics as your youth experiences in National Parks or other natural spaces and your reasons for entering and staying in a National Park career.

How long will I be in this study?

Participation in this study will take no more than 1.5 hours over a period of one day.

What are the risks of being in this study?

There are risks of stress, emotional distress, inconvenience and possible loss of privacy and confidentiality associated with participating in a research study.

For more information about risks and discomforts, ask the investigator.

What are the benefits to being in this study?

By participating in this study, you will be contributing to the understanding of what draws people to work in national parks, helping others recognize the social importance of parks. In the future, this study could also potentially help the National Park Service make pathways into employment easier.

How will my information be kept confidential?

We will take measures to protect the security of all your personal information, but we cannot guarantee confidentiality of all study data. Interview responses will be coded with a number and the names corresponding to the coded numbers kept separately in a locked room. Names will **NOT** be published in the study. Any identifying information will be omitted from the final research project.

**Information contained in your study records is used by study staff. The Portland State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) that oversees human subject research and/or other entities may be permitted to access your records, and there may be times when we are required by law to share your information.**

Your name will not be used in any published reports about this study.  
Will I be paid for taking part in this study?

No payment will be offered for participation in this study.

Can I stop being in the study once I begin?

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the right to choose not to participate or to withdraw your participation at any point in this study without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Whom can I call with questions or complaints about this study?

**If you have any questions, concerns or complaints at any time about the research study, Avarie Fitzgerald or her associates will be glad to answer them at [Personal phone number omitted for publication].**

Whom can I call with questions about my rights as a research participant?

**If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may call the PSU Office for Research Integrity at (503) 725-2227 or 1(877) 480-4400. The ORI is the office that supports the PSU Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB is a group of people from PSU and the community who provide independent oversight of safety and ethical issues related to research involving human participants. For more information, you may also access the IRB website at <https://sites.google.com/a/pdx.edu/research/integrity>.**

## CONSENT

You are making a decision whether to participate in this study. Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided (or the information was read to you). By signing this consent form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights as a research participant.

You have had an opportunity to ask questions and all questions have been answered to your satisfaction. By signing this consent form, you agree to participate in this study. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Adult Subject (print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Adult Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## INVESTIGATOR SIGNATURE

This research study has been explained to the participant and all of his/her questions have been answered. The participant understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to participate.

Avarie Fitzgerald  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Investigator/ Research Team Member

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Investigator/ Research Team Member)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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