

Balancing a Ranger's role as an educator, naturalist and enforcer of the law is increasing: Protecting our Nation's treasures

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I have worked at all levels of governments which include county, state and federal law enforcement. The one theme in my career that I have noticed is the limitations of personnel, specialist and technology in the field. I have had the privilege to be involved with administering critical and complex enforcement compliance plans designed to protect facilities, infrastructure and personnel from criminal and terroristic acts. Experience on evaluations of a security plan to determine its overall effectiveness from campus safety, homeland security and patrol in both urban and rural settings. With the ever increasing budget constraints that face our nation, we as law enforcement professionals confront these challenges head on. We are always looking for ways of improving efficiency and effectiveness to our customers. This article reviews literature on the law enforcement function of a park ranger into three parts: 1) styles of park law enforcement; 2) park security and crime before the September 11th, 2001 attack; 3) park security and crime after the September 11th, 2001 attack.

Styles of Park Law Enforcement

It would seem one of the primary challenges for a park ranger is a determination of which park law enforcement style to use and when to use it. Research indicates that a "low key" approach is used far greater than a "high key" enforcement approach (Pendleton, 1998). While many cities across the United States typically respond to its problems utilizing firemen, paramedics and policemen, park rangers absorb all these and more including resource management and visitor education in their park communities (Soden & Hester, 1989). Mott (1986) observed that the general public image of park rangers include a "cop image" which is removed from the normally perceived image as the "camper's friend" (p. 8). According to the National Parks and Conservation Association (1988), this role shift for park rangers is reducing the attention to natural and cultural resource management. A park ranger must develop a balance of discretion on the level of enforcement needed on a case-by-case basis.

Soden and Hester (1989) noted that park rangers' professional duties are increasing in the area of law enforcement. It would appear the more "traditional" park ranger duties are significantly changing. Perhaps the image of "Smoky Bear" being dissatisfied from trading in his shovel for a gun portrays their findings (p. 68). As this shift is occurring, the number of rangers able to conduct police work is limited due to insufficient staffing and doing more with less is a dilemma, which the National Park Service has met. The role of combining law enforcement duties with the stewardship of our national treasures seem to be one of park ranger's greatest challenges.

In an attempt to understand the various styles of park law enforcement, Pendleton (1998) conducted an ethnography using a symbolic interactionist perspective during a twelve-month period. This consisted of field observations (263 hours of warden patrols) and semi-structured interviews (open-ended) in the Pacific Rim National Park Reserve in British Columbia, Canada. This study found that a “low key” enforcement approach is being replaced with a hard enforcement (formal sanctions) strategy. Under the soft enforcement approach (leniency), a warden would encourage, bluff, avoid and bargain with the perpetrator, which typically resulted in no action. The traditional role of a park ranger solely being the “camper’s friend” appears to be in the distance as urban crime is moving into the rural and park settings.

Pendleton (1997) noted that although criminal activities in parks are similar to urban crimes, some crimes, such as poaching both wildlife and plants and tree theft are unique to rural forests and parks. Munson (1995) stated that illegal drugs like marijuana pose a threat to both the public and law enforcement because often growers are heavily armed and their marijuana plantations can be booby-trapped with guns or other devices to prevent access. Pendleton (1996) found that law enforcement officers (LEOs) and rangers encounter weapons on a routine basis in their daily rounds.

Visitors often consider park environments pristine safe, however they are beginning to be associated with terms such as dangerous, crime plagued and public “bad lands” (Pendleton, 2000). These associations affect the frequency and number of park visitors and amount of crime. The presence or absence of park rangers (guardians) may affect the commission of crime occurring in the leisure setting. Pendleton (2001) believed that this notion is related to the leading sociological theory of crime, which is the routine activities perspective. However, further research is needed to confirm this perspective.

Pendleton & Thompson (2000) noted that “soft crimes” like littering, graffiti and vandalism (minor or non-serious offense) are directly linked to the different type of park visitors. When these “soft crimes” go unchecked, park rangers are creating a “criminal hot spot” and the potential for “hard crimes” to develop like drug trafficking, illegal drug use and drinking. They conducted a study for six years upon crime and enforcement in park and recreational settings in both the United States and Canada. This study used prior research and data from extensive observations and interviews with park professionals and users to determine that the presence of criminal hotspots would reduce or eliminate law abiding park visitors.

Park Enforcement Prior to September 11, 2001

A key to deter such “criminal hotspots” appears to be an active and funded park enforcement program. Enforcement must be both passive (includes limiting access and use of natural surveillance through landscape design) and active (high visibility of police “park rangers”) measures. By implementing this enforcement program, it will provide a means of intervention on combating various levels of crime in the park.

Tynon, Chavez and Kakoyannis (2001) conducted research to determine if crime and violence on western National Forests are a real concern or rather just highly publicized incidents. A case study was conducted using face-to-face interviews with personnel at eight Forest Service sites in the western United States during the summer and fall of 1998. Using scripted conversations to ensure consistency in each interview and a tape recorder, Tynon and Chavez interviewed typically two to four people at each site, which included LEO's (Law Enforcement Officers), administrators, and others. These interviews frequently concluded at each site visit with a tour of criminal hot spots. The primary interview subjects were LEO's, special agents, and investigators. Secondary interview subjects included administrative staff that directly supervises the work of LEO's, and others, such as outdoor recreation planners and public affairs specialists who had knowledge of criminal activities. This study found that LEO's are not solely conducting natural resources law enforcement but also combating urban-associated crimes like domestic terrorism (i.e. park office building bombings) and ecoterrorism (i.e. sabotage to mining or logging equipment, criminal trespass, and arson).

In response to the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, Pendleton (1996) examined the causation of this type of hostility toward legal authority and physical safety of federal officers in the western United States. During a 24-month period in 1992-1994, the author conducted field observations and interviews with the United States Forest Service and the United States Park Service. A total of 60 observations were systematically scheduled to rotate equally through four research areas. The first research area was the primary participants were the Forest Service Law Enforcement Officers (LEO's), assigned to each of the four ranger districts with the national forest. The second research area consisted of secondary participants who were special agents and investigators assigned to the research forest to investigate and prosecute cases. The third research area was made up of key civilian administrative staff who directly supervised the LEO's and other agency supervisors who have responsibility for the law enforcement program was interviewed. The fourth research areas were the indirect participants which includes numerous Forest Service employees both supervisory and staff, community members and visitors.

In total, over 600 hours of observations and interviews were collected as well as the USFS and USPS official records which included memos, reports related to crime and law enforcement. Quantitative data based on crime and enforcement was collected directly from the files in one of four randomly selected Forest Service districts with the research forest for the years 1989 through 1992. All the automated crime and enforcement records retained by the National Park Service with the research park from 1986 through 1993 were analyzed. Basic quantitative analysis was conducted, a 50 percent random sample was drawn from the known offenders who were arrested and/or given a Notice of Violation (citation) for an offense by the Forest Service.

A criminal history records check was completed on each of the offenders to determine the extent and nature of their prior criminal history. In addition, a similar sample of known offenders from the national park, which surrounds the national forest, was selected for a criminal history analysis. National park offenders were matched with national forest offenders on the basis of the initiating offense for which they were cited/arrested by each agency

because the offender must pass through the surrounding national forest to enter the national park. Also, subscriptions to community newspapers were obtained to provide a news account of relevant events. Records, news releases, reports and other documents from local activist groups were also obtained and received.

Pendleton (1996) found that fugitives from the law often hide out in state or national forests to avoid detection and apprehension. Property crime was consistently encountered, especially breaking into cars to steal items including the cars, left behind while the owners are on a hike or participating in some other activity. He noted that the environmental crime of stolen trees, mushroom and other forest products sold on the black market. Weapons, alcohol, drugs, violence and other crimes occur in the forest and park areas. He also observed three main themes developing within which crime was observed and reported. The first main theme included was front country opportunity (highest degree of human presence and influence, i.e. paved roads, fully developed campgrounds, concessions). The second main theme was transition country opportunity (areas that separate the primitive from the developed, i.e. gravel roads, logging sites and trailhead parking lots). Third and last main theme was backcountry opportunity (areas generally reserved for foot or horse travel, i.e. rugged areas, semi-remote). He concludes that the conventional view of parks and forest as a safe place to retreat from everyday life is a distortion. The fact is that among the visitors who come to these natural settings, there are also criminal offenders.

Pendleton (1996) quoted one supervisor stating, "We don't want them (LEO's) out there playing cowboy. We prefer the social relations approach, which emphasizes public relations. We have evolved from the days where we cuffed and stuffed them (offenders) (p.19)." This philosophy on policing confirms Pendleton (1998) research findings that soft enforcement is preferred over hard enforcement. The author concludes that the conventional view of parks and forests as safe places to retreat from everyday life is a distortion. The fact is that among the visitors who come to these natural settings, there are also criminal offenders.

Swearingen & Johnson (1995) examined the effect a uniform park employee has on deterring visitors' noncompliant behavior during off-trail hiking at a park. Visitors were contacted for participation in a mail survey during the summer season at multiple sites throughout the entire park. The mail survey questionnaire was designed to assess visitors' attitudes toward visitor management strategies. One thousand six hundred and sixty-four visitor contacts, 1,152 valid questionnaires were returned for a 72% response rate during three-month period. The authors found that 76% of the time a uniformed employee was in the presence of a visitor, it decreased off-trail hiking. According to the participants surveyed, 97% of visitors whom came in contact a uniformed employee did not consider this a negative impact on their leisure experience. Swearingen & Johnson (1995) concluded that the presence of a uniformed agency employee is an effective deterrent to some noncompliant behaviors in a park setting and may even improve the quality of visit. The most often cited reason by park visitors on noncompliance was ignorance of rules or behavioral expectations. Thus, education and public image is associated with the Pendleton (1998) findings on "low key" versus "high key" enforcement, where "low key" is most frequently practiced.

There are various examples of security problems affecting park environments. In 1996 along the Appalachian Trail, a double homicide occurred at a campsite in Shenandoah National Park. Three years later a series of homicides occurred around and in Yosemite National Park (Manning et al, 2001). Nguyen (2001) explains that the ranger shortage is impacting the increase of animals being poached, illegal dumping of hazardous chemicals like buckets of motor oil, old refrigerators or furniture in our parks.

Another study was conducted during the summer and fall of 1999 along the Appalachian Trail where nearly 3,000 visitors participated in a mail-back questionnaire. Manning and colleagues (2001) had nearly 2,000 completed questionnaires for a 66% response rate. Ninety-eight percent of visitors surveyed along the Appalachian Trail reported feeling very secure or reasonably secure. For many (96%) visitors, did not encounter a security problem along the trail. The few (4%) that did encounter a security problem at the trailheads and parking lots reported (52%) it to law enforcement authorities. Manning and colleagues (2001) found that only about half of visitor report a security problem to authorities, which represents a significantly large sum of incidents that go underreported annually.

Park Enforcement Following September 11, 2001

The National Parks Conservation Association (2001) noted a study by Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER) that violence against federal land management employees rose significantly in 2000 (including park rangers). Senator Craig Thomas concluded in a separate study conducted in 1998 for the National Parks Omnibus Management Act that there is a need to add 1,200 new rangers to address the problem. For example, at Organ Pipe Cactus National Park, Chief Ranger Dale Thompson stated that usually only one ranger on duty patrols 330,000 acres. As Chief Ranger Olias at Zion National Park stated, "Parks tend to be places where people hide out because the places are isolated. Many of these people are extremists who have survivalist skills and are used to living off the land. We have international terrorists, but we also have domestic terrorists" (National Parks, 2001, p. 14). Vanderpool (2002) cited a study conducted in 2002 by the Interior Department, Immigration and Naturalization, and Environmental Protection Agency, prompted by Congressman Jim Kolbe stating, "the extremely valuable, and sometimes irreplaceable, natural and cultural resources...are in jeopardy" (p. 26).

In the past, the park service occasionally battled drug smugglers, artifact looters, and armed poachers, but now faces the "war on terror" by protecting park visitors and our cultural treasures from these potential attacks (Wilkinson, 2002). The author cited a commissioned Pentagon report in 1999, which stated, "Americans will become increasingly vulnerable to hostile attack on our homeland, and our military superiority will not entirely protect us" (p. 36). The U.S. Interior Department assistant secretary for law enforcement and security, Larry Parkinson said, "urban sprawl is pushing drugs and violence closer to parks" (Fialka, 2003). According to the U.S. Justice Department statistics in 2000, "the nation's rangers are more likely to be assaulted than any other federal law-enforcement officer" (Fialka, 2003). This is related to the understaffing and lack of funds. Brooks (2003) cited that the U.S. Justice Department study

found that park rangers are fifteen times more likely to be killed or injured on the job than an agent with the Drug Enforcement Administration.

As “urban sprawl” is encroaching, the unimaginable may occur while vacationing in America’s national parks and forest of encountering an armed combat (Roosevelt, 2003). He reported, “marijuana farms are infesting Kentucky’s Daniel Boone National Forest” (p. 45). Bill Whitaker with CBS News reported that one plant (marijuana) brings \$4,000 on the street (Roberts & Whitaker, 2003). Egan (2006) noted that there is a growing problem with methamphetamine laboratories in the Appalachian Mountains. Not only will rangers worry about rescuing lost hikers and conserving nature, but also about park security (Economist, 2006).

Chavez, Tynon, & Knap (2004) examined successful strategies and best practices of combating crime through crime prevention and communication using two case studies conducted within the United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service. The authors mailed the United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service Law Enforcement Investigations Branch a document to their SAC’s (Special Agents in Charge) nationwide to nominate a site to be examined. Each site had to meet the selection criteria specific to the case study. The authors noted in both case studies that the areas were isolated and radio communication was poor or nonexistent. These areas were prone to criminal activity including littering, auto and property thefts, traffic and water related fatalities, assaults, gang fights, drug use and homicides. To combat these crimes, the USFS instituted restrictive regulations, educated the public through various means including the media, brochures, and word-of-mouth with the goal of attaining a reasonable and acceptable level of crime. Within one year of instituting these regulations and communications, they significantly reduced serious crimes and considered the areas safe for families to enjoy. The preventive goal of the USFS is collaboration through the resources of a personal commitment of time, money and people to combat crime.

A study conducted by the National Institute of Justice (U.S.) through the Eastern Kentucky University Justice and Safety Center (2004) found that law enforcement officers from small towns and rural areas (which would include park rangers) are “generalists” rather than “specialists” because of their limited financial resources to purchase new technologies and train personnel in specialized areas of crime. The author sent out 384 surveys to small and rural law enforcement agencies that contain fewer than 20 sworn officers serving populations of 50,000 or less across the United States during the fall of 2000. The author received a 62% response rate (239 out of 384 respondents) and noted that underutilization of technology is directly related to financial and budget constraints and what management perceived as “unimportant” and “important” for use.

Sommer (2004) confirmed budget constraints on the federal level for the National Parks Service by noting that the Bush administration mandated operating budget cuts of some \$50 million to offset increased Homeland Security duties of protecting dams, borders, and national landmarks. Martin (2005) explains that rangers whom dealt with drunk drivers, disorderly teens, and small thefts are currently faced with armed pot growers, street gangs and methamphetamine addicts. The task of balancing ranger’s role as an educator, naturalist and enforcer of the law is

increasing.

About the Author:

Todd M. Caudill is a law enforcement officer by profession and an avid outdoorsman by passion. When he is not protecting our Nations treasures, he's most likely hiking, working on his urban farm and keeping up with his two daughters and wife on avid adventures.

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