

A Natural Alliance

Arizona State Parks Executive Director Kenneth Travous discusses the mission of parks and the benefits of partnering with universities



Dick Ackley—Campus Photography

Kenneth Travous offers a parks perspective.

Americans love their parks. Each year, 270 million people visit national parks and millions more visit state parks. “Parks are a uniquely American idea,” said Arizona State Parks Executive Director Kenneth Travous. Unlike in Europe during the 19th century, where some of the best lands were in private hands, America’s natural treasures were preserved for all to enjoy, beginning in 1864 with President Lincoln’s signing of the bill creating the Yosemite Grant. Today, Yosemite and other parks are experiencing increases in visitors, but declining government support. Travous recently visited Penn State and talked with Penn State Outreach about how parks are adapting and how universities can help.

Q. How are parks handling their funding challenges?

Travous: Many state park systems are struggling financially—often because parks are not looked on by state legislatures as part of the core services government should provide. In Arizona we have less money but more demand within our parks. Since 2003 we’ve cut back on staff travel to conferences, raised user fees, and we’re looking at our concession contracts and beefing up funding from parks foundations. Our goal is to become more self-sufficient. Parks are also adapting to become more relevant to people. A new climbing park we’re developing—the first in the nation—may have a role in helping Americans improve their fitness, which could help reduce the nation’s obesity and diabetes rates.

Q. Describe your park system’s education mission.

Travous: Education is the most important thing we do. We have many historic buildings and archaeological sites, and we use these cultural and natural resources in our park education programs as well as in the curricula we develop for Arizona schools. We gear our cultural and natural resources education to helping visitors understand the environment. We want people to take ownership of the environment and preserve it for the future.

Q. You’re working with Arizona universities. What are the benefits of these relationships?

Travous: We’re partnering with universities, such as Northern Arizona University (NAU), which is restoring a park building to use

for an Elderhostel program. NAU faculty members will teach environmental education, using the park as their classroom. We also have partnerships with Arizona universities that enable researchers to use parks to study such topics as rangeland restoration, water conservation and environmental issues. We incorporate researchers' findings into our park education programs, so visitors receive the latest information available on what they are seeing and experiencing in our parks. These kinds of partnerships between parks and universities can work in other states, as well. [For example, Penn State researchers participated in a project conducted in Pennsylvania and Colorado to assess outdoor recreation preferences, among other issues, and University researchers are working with the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources to develop a rapid habitat-assessment tool for measuring the impact of deer browsing on public lands.]

Q. What other ways can parks draw on faculty expertise?

Travous: Universities can help us better understand how to protect parks' cultural and natural resources for the future. The best example of this is what we've done at Kartchner Caverns State Park, which is home to one of the top caves in the world. We began developing the cave by first doing an extensive assessment, so we could preserve it in its pristine state. We consulted with University of Arizona researchers and cave experts. The result is a cave that people can tour and researchers can use for scientific purposes.

Q. What have you learned from your visit to Penn State?

Travous: We need more natural laboratories like Shaver's Creek Environmental Center, which demonstrates practical applications for protecting the environment in its many programs, such as its summer camps for young people and its Outdoor School, which is preparing future conservation leaders.

Q: Do you have any advice for Penn State?

Travous: We need research centers like the Center for Sustainability [the College of Engineering center that focuses on issues of sustainability through interdisciplinary projects and hands-on learning opportunities] to develop more ways to help people to reduce their impact on the environment. The Center for Sustainability and Shaver's Creek share similar goals and could work together to help solve some of our critical environmental challenges. Shaver's Creek also would benefit from partnering more with corporations. Corporations can learn a lot from Shaver's Creek about how to be good environmental stewards, and the center, with corporate support, would be able to teach even more people how to live in harmony with the environment. [Shaver's Creek programs reach more than 100,000 people annually; visit www.outreach.psu.edu/shaverscreek.] ♣

Funding for Parks

As government funding for America's parks declines, states are exploring new ways to keep parks open, says Arizona State Parks Executive Director Kenneth Travous. For example:

- Arizona's citizen-driven ballot initiative provides \$10 million annually from lottery proceeds to state parks for education and outreach.
- The Great Outdoors Colorado constitutional amendment dedicates some lottery proceeds to protect wildlife and preserve parks, rivers, trails and open spaces.
- The governor of Pennsylvania has proposed an additional \$2 million for the Commonwealth's 117 parks.

