

A Storyteller in Acadia National Park

Hope C Lewis

I grew up spending all my summers near Acadia National Park. Headquartered on Mount Desert Island in Maine, this park boasts a rocky coast, tidal wetlands, mountains, clear spring-fed lakes, and an extensive network of hiking trails and original carriage roads. Acadia National Park protects more than 47,000 acres. Mount Desert Island has hosted summer visitors for thousands of years, from the native Wabanaki tribes on. Today, Acadia National Park generally receives more than two million recreational visits each year, making it one of the most-visited national parks in the United States. I have volunteered for the park for many years.

What this means for a storyteller is an opportunity to apply storytelling in the incomparable setting of a stunning national park. The park has a robust educational program, with rangers and volunteers striving to answer questions and share the park's message. As I planned a program of stories for the park I was required to think seriously about the park's mission. The mission statement is the same for all national parks. Clearly, as a storyteller I could fit neatly into the education category.

The mission of the National Park Service is to preserve “natural and cultural resources and values for the enjoyment, education and inspiration of this and future generations.” The park service cooperates with partners to extend the benefits of natural and cultural resource conservation and outdoor recreation throughout this country and the world.¹

There are two critical challenges here for an educator-storyteller. The first is the question of how to balance the whimsy and entertainment of stories with accurate educational information about the park and its wildlife. The second challenge is creating an intensely flexible program to accommodate all ages of audience members.

The first step to meeting the challenge of balance was to immerse myself in the environmental sensibility of Acadia. Education would have to be the primary purpose, with storytelling used as an engaging tool to involve families in an appreciation of this extraordinary environment. We are all too familiar with children’s books and films that show animals acting like humans, and I couldn’t do that and be a responsible representative of the park. I settled upon intentionally creating a Real World/Story World dichotomy to meet both the educational and the entertainment objectives simultaneously.

I found that folklore long associated with the animals of the region allowed me to add stories while still keeping education the focus. The program I developed consciously crossed back and forth between the Real World and the Story World in my portrayal of the animals. Into the fabric of the performance I wove instruction of the audience in the critical thinking necessary to appreciate both worlds.

For example, my performance is set up as a talent competition between the animals to become “Acadia Animal of the Day.” I tell the audience members that they will all vote on the winner at the end. Each animal is introduced as having a particular set of talents or skills: Lobster molts and then eats the cast-off shell. Seal can take a nap underwater. Bear can sleep for three months. Humpback whale only eats in the summer. This is the Real World part of the program. I then step into Story World and entertain with a folktale or song about the animal. I remind the audience members

about the real “talents” once or twice, as they will be responsible for judging.

The second challenge was creating an intensely flexible program to accommodate all ages of audience members. I would never know who would be in my audience on any given day. Some days it was mostly preschoolers and their families, other days it would be more teens. Families were the one constant. Younger groups would get more simple songs and more participatory stories. Older groups would get more facts and less entertainment. I was to tell one afternoon a week during the season. As I prepared the program I kept in mind that I would have to adapt almost instantly to the particular audience configuration that appeared before me. I learned to bring props and coloring pages to augment my performance.

I researched each animal extensively and collected important and quirky facts about the animals. I developed stories based upon tales from many cultures: Native American, European, New England, South American, and African. Songs were gathered or written to accompany the animals’ presentations. What evolved was a program adaptable to any audience. The final list of 25 animals provides opportunities to talk about endangered species, ecosystems, the human tendency to anthropomorphize animals, and environmental concerns.

The program is designed to include participation by all members of the audience. Short finger plays and songs are included to amuse the toddlers. Pourquoi stories engage the five- to 10-year olds. Older kids are encouraged to help demonstrate the size of various animals, hold props, and to ask questions. Questions are also invited from teens and adults. This older group also helps out as demonstrators. Teens are asked to help figure out which traits belong to an animal from a list of traits that includes misleading options as well as accurate ones. An adult is typically invited to stand and stretch her or his arms as wide as possible to show the wingspan of a bald eagle. Grandparents help by sharing memories of animals that they have seen. Coloring pages depicting the animals are handed out to everyone who chooses to take one.

The program ends with the voting process for the “Acadia Animal of the Day,” which is typically a very spirited event. The audience is asked to shout out the special skills and traits of an animal as each is re-introduced. The audience is told that they can vote for as many animals as they want, which often results in some creative vote counting and laughter. Our most frequent winner last season was Peregrine Falcon because he is the fastest animal on the planet.²

In terms of how all this excitement is organized, I find that small, realistic-looking stuffed animals or puppets represent the animals well. A large bag full of these stuffed animals accompanies me to every performance. I have a short list of planned stories for each performance, but I never end up sticking to it. A child mentioning a moose motivates me to make Moose a contestant. A teen asking about the raccoons that got into their garbage brings Raccoon onto the stage. I generally take all 25 animals in the bag so that I have the maximum flexibility to respond to the audience of the day. Depending upon the age and profile of the audience members, I can select any of my animals to pull out and present as I go along.

Do I have favorite tales? Of course I do. Stories about that trickster, Raccoon, are popular because most park visitors have seen raccoons.³ My adaptation of the Tlingit story of “How Mosquitoes Came to Be”⁴ has a young brother and sister as starring characters. I enjoy sharing an original song about the “Underwater Lobster.”⁵

Look around you for opportunities to tell your tales in a local park or other outdoor venue that allows you to bring education and entertainment together. Consider nature centers, zoos, and historical parks as well. Craft your program with the focus of the park and its role in the community in mind. You will find that it can definitely be worth your effort.

I only have one problem. I can’t find a stuffed mussel.

Go to <https://www.nps.gov/acad/> to find out more about Acadia.

¹National Park Service: <https://www.nps.gov/rlc/murie/parksandpartners.htm>

²The Peregrine can plummet as fast as two hundred miles per hour while in a “hunting stoop” (dive).

³“Raccoon and the Crayfish”

<https://www.firstpeople.us/FP-Html-Legends/TheRaccoonandtheCrawfish-Sioux.html>

⁵Yolen, Jane, Favorite Folktales from Around the World, Pantheon Books, NY 1986, p.

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Underwater Lobster

(To the tune of “Itsy Bitsy Spider”)

Underwater Lobster
Down among the rocks
Dancing on his tiptoes
Claws up front, he walks.
In between the seaweeds
Near sea anemones,
The underwater lobster
Finds lunch beneath the sea

H. C. Lewis 6-12-13



Hope Lewis is a storyteller from Seal Cove, Maine. She enjoys creating original stories, but particularly savors performing folk tales from a wide variety of traditions. Her stories are typically crafted to appeal to the entire family. Hope enjoys telling for all audiences, from school groups to elders. Maine humor and local stories also appear often in the programs, especially those crafted for adult audiences. She was honored to have been accepted as an Acadia National Park Centennial Partner for 2016, and she served as the President of the Board of Directors of Northeast Storytelling for six years. Hope was honored with the National Storytelling Network’s Oracle Award in 2019 and the Brother Blue and Ruth Hill Award in 2020.

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