



THE SIGNPOST

Third Quarter 2025

President's Message:

The end of the busy summer season is rapidly approaching, so we collectively as park rangers can soon catch our breath. We are now also just over six months out from our next conference, which will be at the Handlery Hotel in San Diego, from March 1st through 5th.

In this issue of the issue of The Signpost learn more about our 2026 conference and the recent World Ranger Day event in San Luis Obispo county. We also have an article on leadership and an opinion piece on the use of the ranger job title. In my Under the Flat Hat article, I discuss the multi-faceted nature that the park ranger profession has had for over 160 years. In our "From the Archives" feature I share a President's Message from 2018.

As mentioned in the last The Signpost PRAC will post a virtual general membership meeting online this fall. It is tentatively scheduled for early October. Look for further announcements on PRACnet.

Finally, if you are interested in submitting an article for the next Signpost the deadline will be Friday November 14, 2025.

Matt Cerkel, President
Park Rangers Association of California



California's World Ranger Day Ceremony 2025

By Matt Cerkel



World Ranger Day was established by the International Ranger Federation in 2006 and is celebrated every July 31. The annual celebration honors the work rangers do to protect our natural treasures and cultural heritage. It's also a day to honor rangers around the globe who were seriously injured or killed in the line of duty.

This year's California ceremony for World Ranger Day was hosted by San Luis Obispo County Parks & Recreation at the recently renovated historic Cayucas Veterans' Hall in Cayucas State Beach. It was attended by 73 rangers from 23 different agencies, a university, and four ranger associations.

During the ceremony, attendees observed a moment of silence to honor the memory of 175 rangers from forty-one countries who were killed in the line-of-duty in the past year.

The ceremony was coordinated by PRAC Life Member and World Ranger Day founder, Jeff Ohlfs. San Luis Obispo County Parks Director Tanya Richardson provided the introduction and welcome remarks, followed by a keynote speech by Nick Franco, retired California State Park superintendent and retired San Luis Obispo County Parks director. Following the opening remarks, an open "campfire" session was held, during which many attendees had the opportunity to share their thoughts on what "being a ranger" means to them.

The Pacific Ocean provided a stunning backdrop for the ceremony. Following remarks in the morning, activities included a tour of the Cayucas Pier and State Beach with a San Luis



Obispo County park ranger, a junior lifeguard event, and a multi-agency ranger vehicle display.

The event concluded with a group photo and a catered barbecue lunch, provided by the Lions Club of Cayucas. The historic Madonna Inn provided a cake, cut by ANPR President Rick Mossman, who was the longest-working ranger present. Rick gave the First slice to Juan Flores, an Isla Vista Recreation and Park District ranger, who was the newest working ranger in attendance. His special event was possible thanks to the support by the Federation of Western Outdoor Clubs and the Ranger Foundation.

Planning for California's World Ranger Day 2026 celebration is already underway and will be hosted in Riverside County to celebrate the 100th anniversary of their ranger program.

Leadership that Lasts: Three Overlooked Qualities

By Andres F. Torres, City of Bakersfield Park Ranger

At some point, many of us find ourselves in a position of leadership in our lives, whether in our careers, friendships, family, or beyond. An excellent question to meditate on is "what kind of leader do I want to be?"

Here are three qualities we should develop to improve ourselves and our leadership style.

Be humble.

As much as we would like to be Superman, we cannot meet that mark. As humans, we are limited to the topics or skills that we can master. Realize your limitations as well as problem-solving abilities. The best way to tackle challenges is to collaborate with your team to develop effective solutions. If there is a specific expectation that must be met, include it. As you listen to your team's suggestions, you will soon realize the effectiveness of combining abilities. If you want to be a good leader, be humble and recognize that you may not have all the correct answers; ask your team for insights.

Help your team reach their goals.

People have a natural desire to improve - whether it is through education, training, or self-



development. Draw close with your team (invite them to lunch, team building project, go to the shooting range, etc.) to allow for open candor and opportunities to share goals. When you have the information, work hard to help them; moreover, it may be as simple as giving them opportunities to run projects or joining them for a gym session to help them achieve their health goals. To be clear, these things will take time and require some sacrifice, but the rewards are worth it. In exchange, you will have a team that is appreciative, loyal, and capable. If you want to be a good leader, get to know your team and help them reach their goals.

Have difficult conversations.

Sometimes people may prefer to ignore a situation rather than have a difficult conversation. This doesn't solve the problem but only prolongs the issue without a foreseeable end. You can start with "I dislike this issue, and we need to talk about it" or "I don't understand why this is happening, let's discuss this further." Remember to conduct the discussion with respect and a sincere desire to improve the situation; this type of frankness not only provides a resolution but also fosters a better relationship between all parties. If you want to be a good leader, don't be afraid to have difficult conversations.

Final Thought:

Positive leadership is not the ability to give orders but to influence and elevate others. A good leader is humble enough to acknowledge they don't have all the answers, is willing to commit to their team as well as invest in helping them reach their goals, and dares to face challenges, even if it's just a conversation.

2026 California Parks Training Conference in San Diego

By Candi Hubert, Vice President

Please mark your calendars, the 2026 PRAC Conference will be held March 1st-March 5th at Handlery Hotel in San Diego. The hotel is situated in the heart of the city with convenient access to the best sights and attractions.



- 10-minute walk to San Diego Trolley and Fashion Valley Mall (20 restaurants and 200 stores) Adjacent to Riverwalk Golf Club (18-hole championship course with preferred tee times and rates)
- 6 miles to downtown, San Diego Airport and miles of breathtaking San Diego beaches
- 4 miles to SeaWorld, Balboa Park and San Diego Zoo

To book accommodations, call (619) 298-0511 or 1 (800) 676-6567. Or book online: <https://reservations.travelclick.com/98118?groupID=4807027>

All guests need to reference **Park Rangers Association of California Conference**, to receive the discounted rate of \$129 per night.

The PRAC Conference has been held in San Diego in the past and we look forward to returning to the area. The keynote speaker will be our President, Matt Cerkel.

Our conference committee is currently working on designing the program with the City of San Diego, including field trips to Balboa Park and other potential outings. If anyone is interested in assisting with courses, please let us know.

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Opinion: Restricting the Term "Ranger" Violates the Constitution—and Common Sense

By Scott Wagenseller, Founder and CEO, Gates Security

cross the country, individuals and private organizations are stepping up to protect natural lands, manage open spaces, and safeguard the public on private and public properties. Many of these professionals, by tradition and by function, identify as *rangers*—and rightly so.

Yet there are renewed efforts by some to restrict the use of the term “Ranger” or “Park Ranger,” arguing it should be exclusive to sworn law enforcement officers employed by



public park agencies. This position is not only historically inaccurate and practically misguided—it is unconstitutional.

The term “ranger” has deep roots in American history and culture. From the Texas Rangers of the 1800s to today’s National Park Service rangers, the name has always signified versatility, resilience, and protection. But it has never been the exclusive domain of law enforcement. To attempt to legislate or restrict its use now—especially against private organizations or non-law enforcement personnel—is a clear violation of First Amendment rights and a misunderstanding of the term’s legacy.

A Tradition Far Broader Than Law Enforcement

Unlike titles such as “police officer” or “sheriff,” which are legally defined and restricted to certified law enforcement personnel, “ranger” is a general descriptive term, not a protected title under federal trademark, statutory law, or peace officer regulations.

Private camp rangers, scouting rangers, wildlife rangers, and conservation rangers have used this title for decades without controversy. ATV manufacturers, outdoor apparel brands, and even professional sports teams have adopted the term because it conveys toughness, dependability, and a connection to the land. No one confuses a Texas Rangers baseball player or a Ford Ranger truck with a government-issued badge.

To argue that calling a private land steward a “ranger” creates confusion is to underestimate the public’s intelligence and overreach the power of language regulation.

A Constitutional Right to Language and Expression

The First Amendment protects more than speech—it protects naming, branding, and occupational identity. The U.S. Supreme Court has repeatedly affirmed that the government cannot restrict the use of common words unless those words are being used fraudulently, maliciously, or in a way that causes actual harm.

Private ranger security services, conservancy rangers, and outdoor land managers use the title honestly and in line with their duties. They are not masquerading as law enforcement officers. They are transparent in their scope, often better trained for specific terrain, rescue, and ecological challenges than traditional law enforcement could ever be.

Suppose the public sector wants to distinguish its officers more clearly. In that case, it should continue doing what it already does: add terms like “Law Enforcement Ranger,” “Park Police,” or “Peace Officer” to signage, uniforms, and vehicles. The burden is not on



private individuals to change their titles—it is on government agencies to communicate clearly.

Government Has No Monopoly on Stewardship

At the heart of this debate is a larger, more pressing truth: public lands and community spaces are not protected solely by government employees. In many regions, particularly rural or underfunded areas, private ranger services play a critical role in protecting land, guiding visitors, and responding to emergencies. Restricting their ability to call themselves “rangers” delegitimizes this essential work and places ideology over service.

To suggest that only government agencies can use the word “ranger” is to claim an exclusive right to stewardship—a notion that is both elitist and unsustainable. Stewardship belongs to the public, and the word “ranger” belongs to everyone who embodies its spirit, regardless of whether they carry a badge or a permit.

Let Rangers Be Rangers

In a time of growing environmental challenges and limited public resources, we should be welcoming more rangers—not fewer. We should embrace private professionals, nonprofit partners, and trained volunteers who proudly call themselves rangers and serve the public and the land.

Restricting the term “ranger” is not just unconstitutional—it’s counterproductive. It doesn’t protect the public. It doesn’t clarify roles. It only serves to exclude people doing essential work under a proud, time-honored name.

Let us respect the Constitution, honor the tradition, and support all who serve—whether their paycheck comes from a city, a state, a nonprofit, or a private landowner. A ranger is defined by action, not by employer.





Under the Flat Hat

By Matt Cerkel



On July 31st, I attended California's World Ranger Day ceremony in Cayucos (San Luis Obispo County) with my wife, who is also a park ranger. Much like PRAC's annual conference, the World Ranger Day event reinforces my passion for the profession and for protecting the parks and serving visitors.

The variety of rangers at the event reminds me of the diversity of duties and traditions of our profession. Still, there is a common goal of protecting parks and their resources, while managing and serving the public visiting the parks. This tradition of multi-duties goes back to the origin of the profession here in California, when the state appointed Galen Clark to be the Guardian of the Yosemite Grant. Linda W. Greene, a National Park Service historian and the retired chief of Resource Management at Death Valley National Park, discussed the duties of the Guardian in her 1987 book "Yosemite: the Park and its Resources." http://www.yosemite.ca.us/library/yosemite_resources/state_grant.html

These duties included:

- Patrol the grant (park).
- Prevent depredations.
- Build roads, trails, and bridges.
- Bestow and regulate leases for the erection of hotels and other improvements (manage park concessions).



- Preserve and improve the valley (park resource management). Always be present in or about the valley and Big Tree Grove, at least during the visitor season.
- Have police authority to arrest offenders.
- Control fires.
- Provide information to assist visitors.

Green also noted the Guardian was often expected to perform all these duties with "insufficient appropriations for such work." This all sounds very familiar to park rangers today.

In his book "Guardians of the Yosemite A Story of the First Rangers," published in 1961, John W. Bingaman, who served as a National Park Service Ranger from 1921-1956, stated that "the ranger is the law, the information bureau, wildlife protector, handy man, forest fire fighter and rescuer. He is responsible for the protection and administration of his area. He is trained for these duties and must be mentally and physically qualified to handle them competently. The two most important duties of a Ranger is the saving of human life and fighting forest fires."

Bingaman went on to say, "So it went through the years, the ranger always alert, patrolling the forests and trails, protecting and maintaining the Park in safety for the thousands of visitors that came to see the wonders of nature, and get rejuvenated" ...and..." The ranger is a uniformed man wearing a badge and required to dress neatly. A wide-brimmed Stetson hat, forest green trousers, and a uniform shirt with insignia set him apart from the park visitors."

Finally, when discussing the training Park rangers received, Bingaman stated: "Full instructions for all first aid work are part of the ranger's training. In later years, the training included attendance at a two-week F.B.I. School to learn the techniques of law enforcement. In the 1930s, a routine Forest Fire Training School was established, which the rangers attended."

http://www.yosemite.ca.us/library/guardians_of_the_yosemite/

While details about the training have changed, the duties and responsibilities sound very familiar to modern park rangers.

Even looking at long-established local park ranger programs here in California, such as the Marin Municipal Water District, which established its park ranger program in 1917 to oversee patrol, firefighting, enforcing rules and regulations (including making arrests),



maintaining sanitation, and preserving wildlife. The park rangers were required to wear a uniform and were instructed to use every courtesy to make the public's visit a pleasure and a success.

Park rangers who do all these duties are often referred to as "generalist" rangers, and the Park Ranger Association of California has promoted the generalist ranger for nearly 50 years now. Our park ranger certification program is built around this idea of the generalist ranger.

Next year, 2026, will mark the 160th anniversary of the park ranger profession and the generalist model of park rangers, which began here in California with Galen Clark. As I wrote in March 2018, "Clark established the park ranger profession as one of protector, host, and administrator...he began the proud ranger tradition of protection and care of parks, combined with courteous and helpful service to the visiting public." If you are a park ranger, you should take pride in this long-standing tradition.

From The Archives
The Signpost Second Quarter 2018
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President's Message
By Matt Cerkel

Returning to the Yosemite Region for the PRAC's 2018 California Parks Training Conference is like coming home for the park ranger profession in California. The idea of setting large tracts of wildlands aside for public enjoyment and preservation essentially began in Yosemite in 1864 with the creation of the Yosemite Grant, California's first state park and the birth of the National Park idea. In 1866, Yosemite became the birthplace of the park ranger profession with the appointment of Galen Clark as the "Guardian of Yosemite."

Clark was the first person formally appointed and paid to protect and administer a great natural park." Clark was "California's and the nation's first park ranger." Clark, along with a Sub-Guardian, had to protect the area...They were to strictly enforce the new state laws



enacted to protect the Park, containing the first park-protection laws in the nation. “Specifically, no trees or timber were to be cut or injured, no fires were to be allowed in dry grass or undergrowth, no structures were to be erected without approval, and trails, bridges, and ladders were to be kept in order. They were also” given authority to ‘prevent...visitors...from doing anything which would tend to impair...the Valley or its surroundings.’” Guardian Clark was also named a special sheriff's deputy by Mariposa County and made the first known park arrest in 1870, which demonstrates that law enforcement duties for park rangers are not a recent development. It was also expected that the guardian and sub-guardian be in the valley and Big Tree Grove during the busy season, “to bring about entire safety and security that wanton damages will not be inflicted.” At times, Clark had to accomplish his mission of protecting the Park with “no appropriations, salary, or money to develop the park” (budget issues in parks are almost as old as the parks themselves). As a result, Clark went without even a partial salary for years and was never fully paid. “As the first park ranger, Clark established the park ranger profession as one of protector, host, and administrator...he began the proud ranger tradition of protection and care of parks, combined with courteous and helpful service to the visiting public.”

In 1890, Yosemite National Park was created, and it was administered by the US Army. In September 1898, the Army Superintendent of Yosemite “received authorization to appoint Forest Rangers... for temporary service. These men were to assist the Troops on their patrols.” These rangers were kept on for the winter to protect the Park (when the Army had returned to the Presidio in San Francisco). “The Army reports to the Secretary of the Interior referred to these rangers as “Park Rangers.” This was probably the first usage of the “Park Ranger Title.” The forest rangers in California National Parks officially became known as park rangers in 1905. So even the job title of park ranger had its origins in Yosemite.

In 1916, the National Park Service was created, and it inherited the park rangers working at Yosemite and the other national parks. The book “Guardians of the Yosemite” described these early National Park Service Park Rangers as “The ranger is the law, the information bureau, wildlife protector, handyman, forest fire fighter, and rescuer. He is responsible for the protection and administration of his area. He is trained for these duties and must be mentally and physically qualified to handle them competently.”

Stephen T. Mather said this about park rangers in the 1920s: “They are a fine, earnest, intelligent, and public-spirited body of men (and women), and the rangers. Though small in number, their influence is large. Many and long are the duties heaped upon their shoulders. If a trail is to be blazed, it is ‘send a ranger.’ If an animal is floundering in the snow, a ranger is sent to pull it out. If a bear is in the hotel, or if a fire threatens a forest, or if



someone needs to be saved, it is ‘send a ranger.’ If a Dude wants to know the why of Nature's ways, if a Sagebrusher is puzzled about a road, his first thought is, ‘ask a ranger.’ Everything the ranger knows, he will tell you, except about himself.”

It should be noted that the interpretive park ranger had its origin in Yosemite, too, with the first real park interpretive programs, which were simultaneously developed in Yosemite and Yellowstone in 1920. Initially, these rangers were called Ranger Naturalists. During the 1920s,, the duties and training of the Ranger Naturalists were formalize. Thisch included founding the Yosemite School of Field Natural History in 1925.

My view is that professional park rangers are “protectors, explainers, hosts, caretakers, people who are expected to be knowledgeable, helpful, courteous and professional: people who find you when you’re lost, help you when you’re hurt, rescue you when you’re stuck, and enforce the law when you or others can’t abide by it.” Since 1866,, this is what a park ranger in California has been;. It is what unites our profession. We are all these things and more; it is our common ground and heritage, and it all began here in Yosemite.





Park Rangers Association of California-The Signpost



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Thanks for reading! Please [let us know](#) if you have ideas for what you would like to see in future issues of The Signpost.