



RISE DECLARATIONS

Sharing the experience & insights of **Recent Involuntarily Separated Employees** working in place-based conservation

RUDY D’ALESSANDRO INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION SPECIALIST, US NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

“Many times I heard from senior field colleagues who marveled at our ability to survive and operate at NPS headquarters”

1. Describe your career trajectory from your education to your last position held.

From grade school through grad school, the classes that interested me were history, political science, and international relations. I always knew that I wanted to pursue a career that combined all of these subjects, along with fascinating natural science electives I enjoyed in college, including geology, anthropology, underwater archaeology, astronomy, and geography. While at grad school in Washington, DC, I found gig work with the US Geological Survey, little knowing that in a few short years I would be working at the Interior Department (DOI). By then, my goal was to work for the State Department or an intelligence agency, since I was pursuing a master’s degree in Russian Area Studies. Although I had enjoyed the outdoor activities afforded to a city kid through participation in Boy Scouts, a career in ecology still wasn’t on my radar at this time.

My first job after grad school, however, was with a small non-governmental organization (NGO), OASES-DC—the Organization for American-Soviet Exchanges—which had a contract with the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to provide its leadership of the US–Soviet (Russia) Environment Agreement with language and logistical support. Over the next three years I worked and became acquainted with American colleagues from the EPA, Forest Service, US Geological Survey, Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) and, of course, the National Park Service (NPS), along with their Russian counterparts. Eventually, when it was time to move on from OASES-DC, an informational interview with the legendary Steve Kohl, FWS’s Eurasia branch chief, who spoke both Russian and Chinese fluently, led to an interview with the Interior Department’s international affairs director, and an immediate offer to join her tiny staff. At the time, it wasn’t exactly where I wanted to be—I still had my dreams of working for the State Department—and thought I would be at DOI for six months, tops. That work with EPA and FWS soon after led to management of a USAID (US Agency for International Development)-funded law enforcement training program for Russian anti-poaching rangers trying to protect the endangered Siberian tiger in the Russian Far East.

Along the way, I worked on cooperative projects with Russia, South Africa, Canada, and most importantly the Arctic Council, which led to my recruitment by the State Department’s Office of Polar Affairs (!) to serve as Executive Secretary of the US Chairmanship of the Arctic Council. For two years, I worked closely with not only US diplomats but those from the other seven Arctic nations, as well as representatives from six international Indigenous groups and two dozen observers, with responsibility for organizing senior Arctic officials and a ministerial meeting in Alaska.

At the time, it wasn’t exactly where I wanted to be—I still had my dreams of working for the State Department—and thought I would be at DOI for six months, tops.

Shortly after returning to DOI from the State Department, NPS came calling, recruiting me to join their Office of International Affairs (OIA) to work as Asia–Pacific coordinator, building on what I had learned over the previous 10

What is a RISE Declaration? >>> <https://doi.org/10.5070/P5.62005>

years. Thanks to the vital assistance of many NPS colleagues, I helped support international engagement in China, first and foremost, as well as Gabon, Haiti, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and many other countries.

2. What do you consider to be the most important achievements of your career (including through partnerships across and outside government)? Why?

First, longevity, in a central agency office. Many times I heard from senior field colleagues, especially park superintendents, who marveled at our ability to survive and operate at NPS headquarters, which often attracted exceptionally capable, but also highly ambitious, members of the agency. After a few years at DOI I realized that missing out on a career at the State Department was not only an unanswered prayer, but that the career unfolding before me was infinitely more interesting. Had I secured a post at Langley [i.e., the Central Intelligence Agency] or State, I would likely have spent a great deal of my working life holed up in a SCIF (sensitive compartmentalized information facility) but instead I discovered fascinating work where I was able to engage directly with thousands of inspiring people.

Second, openness. I kept an open mind and an active interest in all that colleagues in the Interior Department and its several agencies were doing. Because I was educated in political, not environmental, sciences, I was eager to listen and learn from agency veterans willing to share with me about their projects, their office and their agency. Early DOI mentors were Kit Muller from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Paul Hearn from USGS, Herb Raffaele from FWS, Doug Morris from NPS, and Richard Ives from the Bureau of Reclamation (REC).

These may not seem like concrete achievements but the curiosity to learn about new subjects and the willingness to follow divergent career opportunities allowed me to work with many colleagues within and outside the government. Having worked in a small NGO for a few years before coming to government, I developed an understanding and appreciation for their strengths, abilities, and constraints. As a fed, I always wanted to be as open and honest with NGO colleagues about what we could and could not do, and why, as much as was reasonably possible.

We encouraged foreign colleagues to share how they achieved their goals, within their unique political, cultural, and legal frameworks, with us and all NPS staff who traveled abroad.

Perhaps the most important achievements were the creation of strong relationships with colleagues across the globe, based on a willingness to share not just the obvious strengths of our protected area system but also the flaws and our efforts to continually learn from our mistakes and improve national park management. Many of our colleagues wanted to learn from or share only our best practices; however, we at NPS-OIA were often reminded that US approaches are not the only option for effective park and cultural heritage management. We encouraged foreign colleagues to share how they achieved their goals, within their unique political, cultural, and legal frameworks, with us and all NPS staff who traveled abroad, and to share what was learned in trip reports disseminated on the InsideNPS intranet.

More practically, among my greatest achievements were finding partners to help support NPS international engagement, since our office possessed little internal funding other than that dedicated to honoring our treaty obligations to support the World Heritage Convention. The recruitment in mid-2005 of a recently retired park superintendent to fly down to the Galapagos on three days' notice to support a training workshop arranged by the Darwin Foundation was one of the steps that led to a coalition of senior NPS retirees to establish the NGO Global Parks, which often responded to short turnaround requests that we could not handle, or who worked in parallel or directly with us on international conservation projects. Through the maintenance of cordial relations with Global Parks, the relationship with our office resembled that of a "friends group" that many of our parks enjoy.

3. What were the greatest challenges you faced? How did you overcome them, or not? If you weren't able to overcome them, why not?

Easily the greatest challenges I faced related to answering the ostensibly oxymoronic question, "Why does Interior do international work?" That question dogged my work and the work of my colleagues in the offices that I worked in at DOI and NPS throughout my 33 years of federal service, save for the two-year assignment at the State Department's Office of Polar Affairs described above.

This question wasn't just asked outside the agency but by leadership within the NPS, even those senior managers who represented the Service at international conventions and conferences. The team of six staff at the NPS-OIA, who arrived within a few years of each other at the turn of the millennium, often had to justify our work not only to NPS senior leaders but to successive office chiefs.

Our timing was less than fortuitous—funding for the office had shriveled up at the beginning of the 1990s when NPS-OIA had halted organization of an annual International Short Course on Protected Areas seminar that predecessors had worked on since the mid-1960s. A staff of international cooperation specialists that had numbered two dozen dedicated employees in 1992 quickly fell to 10 and by 2005 just six. It would remain these same six staff for the next two decades, a remarkable run of stability, which allowed us to grow into our jobs and develop our abilities, while building deep connections and support within the agency—often with far more mutual respect found out in the field, among park staff.

Between 2002 and 2025, the NPS-OIA did not always enjoy strong support at senior leadership levels, because of that oxymoronic question and without a strongly expressed linkage between lessons learned abroad and their application to NPS park operations and program management. There were historical examples that we cited, such as the All-Taxa Biodiversity Inventory deployed at Great Smoky Mountains National Park because of an American professor who pioneered this in Costa Rica, whose first park directors were graduates of the aforementioned International Short Course and wanted to give us something back in appreciation. The crush of “core mission” priorities constantly pushed aside rationales for why the agency should dedicate time, staff, and resources to learn from other countries.

Stature was another challenge. We could see innovative approaches that colleagues abroad were pursuing but it was like that old saying that if a tree falls in a forest ... our senior leadership wasn't usually there to see it. Even when we enjoyed nominal support from the NPS director between 2009–2017, the agency never obtained congressional authorization for NPS international activities, and did not provide us additional funding to fill out our staff or allow us to take a more proactive approach to our work. We were always reacting. Ironically, a bump in funding was identified, but by a former NPS associate director working in a parallel capacity, who is coincidentally the brother of the former director.

During the nearly quarter-century I worked in the NPS-OIA there were many years when our office was required to meet on a quarterly basis to defend and provide justifications to NPS senior management for the dozens of requests that field and program staff submitted for approval of international travel and engagement. Skepticism from senior leadership impelled us to sharpen our criteria and communicate more effectively and regularly with field and program staff. From this, we became a central agency office that better understood the needs of the parks, regions, and program offices, and were able to align these with the concerns of agency leadership and larger governmental priorities.

Skepticism from senior leadership impelled us to sharpen our criteria and communicate more effectively and regularly with field and program staff.

A few years ago, I was taken to task by my supervisor who asserted that my “work has no value to the office or the agency.” That was a stunning rebuke, despite hearing from far more senior agency officials—park superintendents, associate directors, and program leaders—as well as from international colleagues who offered praise and appreciation of my efforts to support them. Nonetheless, I took his criticism to heart, and worked harder to ensure that the international collaborations that I worked on were supporting agency priorities more clearly.

For example, a seminar on park interpretation for Japanese rangers, academics, and NGO staff which I inherited the lead coordination for from HOAL training staff in 2005 often focused on natural resource issues. Our supervisor felt that we weren't incorporating cultural heritage issues enough, so I engaged our Japanese colleagues to develop curricular and site visits that would ensure we gave equal, if not more, attention to these issues.

4. What are your views on how your career served the public, the environment, our cultural heritage, or the greater good, as applicable? Do you feel proud of what you accomplished, or frustrated, or both?

When I was recruited by the chief of the NPS international office in 2002, I sought guidance from a Buddhist reverend, who shared this feedback:

“First, this is a government agency, so you would be serving the people, which is a good thing, and second, this is an environmental agency, so you would be serving the earth. That’s also a good thing. You’re in the right place.”

While the impact of my work was indirect to the public, as an ambassador of our agency and the nation, I feel extremely confident that the positive engagements that I established and/or maintained with colleagues across the globe—not only in my assigned area of the Asia-Pacific region, but also in Africa, the Caribbean, Europe and the Middle East—created long-lasting “soft power” good will for our nation.

I feel extremely confident that the positive engagements that I established and/or maintained with colleagues across the globe created long-lasting “soft power” good will for our nation.

Engaging colleagues in China, for example, has continued to lead to many of those colleagues seeking me out over the past year, first while serving on administrative leave under the DOGE (Department of Government Efficiency) “deferred resignation program” and now in retirement. When Chinese organizers holding a park symposium on Hainan Island asked former NPS Director Jon Jarvis to attend and speak at their event, he instead recommended me, recalling the time that he and I spent traveling across China in 2019 and relying on me to arrange visits around Beijing with US Embassy, NGO, and Chinese Government officials.

When I applied to DOGE’s deferred resignation program in spring 2025 and was accepted, I had less than a week to wrap a 30+ year career and notify NPS and international colleagues of my imminent departure. Now, as I write in spring 2026, I continue to be contacted by NPS and international colleagues seeking advice, assistance, or support. Just last month, the Korean National Park Service contacted me about help for two delegations that they plan to send on study tours to our parks later this year.

That some of our international colleagues still intend to visit our national parks and look to me for assistance is confirmation that the scientific diplomacy that our office conducted over the past quarter-century continues to make a difference in positive relationships between our nation and others.

Additionally, because of the broad engagement that I pursued in my work, American and international university students have heard about and still approach me for introductions to colleagues in the field as well as to review their research papers.

No AI software or business-oriented employee would be able to develop the sheer range of personal relationships that I and my NPS-OIA colleagues successfully accomplished during our long tenure. There are colleagues in Italy and Nigeria who followed and replicated some of the innovations that our office highlighted, especially our “bioblitz” efforts in the parks.

My lasting frustration is that there is now no one left from our office to offer the same technical and empathetic help to colleagues across the world who had always, before, looked to our nation for inspiration in managing our greatest resource—the Earth.

5. What’s the coolest thing that you’ve seen a government (local, state, federal, or another country) do for place-based conservation that you’d want to replicate or expand? What would make it easy to implement? How hard would it be to achieve?

Between 2009–2011, our office worked with USAID to provide natural resource and cultural heritage technical assistance to the nation of Haiti. We engaged with the dynamic Minister of Culture, Patrick Delatour, as well as the recent Haitian Prime Minister, Michele Pierre-Louis, recruiting NPS experts in park planning, trails management, and

cultural heritage, and organizing a visit by the former prime minister to urban sites in Washington, DC, that offered her ideas about how to improve similar heritage areas in the capital of Port-au-Prince.

While touring DC with Madam Pierre-Louis, she told us about the effort by her NGO, Foundation FOKAL, to create visual imagery for Parc Martissant, which had been a residence of the American dancer Katherine Dunham, and had also been visited by Bill and Hilary Clinton during their 1975 honeymoon. The typical approach of international aid agencies would have been to issue a large contract for hundreds of thousands or even a couple million dollars for a professional film company to make a glossy documentary. However, Foundation FOKAL realized that the local youth of the neighborhood were constantly visiting the Parc and so they decided to provide them with video cameras and have them take footage of the site, from their perspective.

Whether or not that footage was of any quality or made the case for increased international tourism was beside the point. The former Prime Minister and her Foundation FOKAL staff found an innovative way to give the local youth around this heritage site a sense of ownership and connection that almost no other aid agency would have imagined.

Considering the rise of internet social media influencers today and their adept skills at videography, Foundation FOKAL and Haiti were years ahead of the curve in harnessing artisanal filmmaking in service of creating strong local support for heritage preservation.

6. What advice would you give to successors in positions you've held? What perspectives have been important to you in your career, and which can be passed on to young people contemplating a career in public service or academia?

The longevity of my career was largely due to being a counterpoint to supervisors whose disdain for many of our own agency or departmental colleagues was an open secret. During the decade that I worked at the DOI's Office of International Affairs, the chiefs and staff of the bureau international offices—USGS, FWS, NPS, BLM, and REC—would often call or talk to me, rather than to the supervisor of the office.

Be polite, cordial, and welcoming towards everyone, above, below, and beside you. There were many times we received calls from former senior agency officials asking for favors or connections. We rarely ever refused them, but we did calculate the degree of our assistance, depending on how well or poorly they had treated us.

Listen and seek advice from veteran colleagues. During my DOI days, bureau international chiefs like REC's Richard Ives, FWS's Herb Raffaele, NPS's Sharon Cleary—who would be my future boss—and BLM's Kit Muller, among many others, stopped by the office, sharing their insights as well as personal and professional experiences, bringing me closer into the circle of international conservation professionals of the Interior Department who knew the ropes and were happy to show them to me.

As a famous saying goes, "You catch more flies with honey than vinegar." All too often during my career I worked for supervisors who spoke ill of others behind their back or openly groused about helping others. Many had sour or dyspeptic dispositions, failing to hide their feelings about others. Some did not seem to possess the self-awareness to know that when they walked down the "front hall" to see the director or visit another bureau, they cast a pall on all whom they passed. While there may have been political appointees, senior executive service officials, or regular colleagues I may not have liked or agreed with, I strived to be pleasant and open towards everyone. Being nice and treating others as you want to be treated—the Golden Rule—counts for a lot in anyone's career, as it did in mine.

All too often during my career I worked for supervisors who spoke ill of others behind their back or openly groused about helping others.

Further, take advantage of training and networking opportunities. When a supervisor offers you the chance to take an agency-wide training course, especially something akin to the two-week residential program known as NPS Fundamentals—jump on that! For me it was vital in making friends and contacts across different programs,

professional occupations—law enforcement, maintenance, interpretation, budget and finance, science, etc.—across the country, a network that would help me understand what far-flung colleagues in the field were experiencing.

Along the way, however, be sure to find balance in your life. Find a hobby—dancing, swimming, painting, writing, woodworking—and understand that your job, even if it's the career you wanted, is not nearly the totality of who you are as a person.

7. Please share anything else you think would be of value to fellow RISEs or to the general public.

One significant endeavor that both helped and hindered my career was accepting a request to serve as a steward in the union that represented NPS headquarters staff. My initial willingness to serve my fellow colleagues led to becoming chief steward and then president of the chapter. At this writing, in spring 2026, I am serving a 15th and final year as chapter president. This service did not come without repercussions. As I took on more responsibility with the union—joining contract negotiation teams, handling employee grievances, taking leave to attend stewardship training, engaging with national union officials, and managing our chapter stewards, finances, and membership—my supervisor clearly felt this negatively impacted the performance of my stated position with the office, which I was juggling concurrently. My annual performance appraisals reflected this tension.

Very late in my union tenure, I listened to an academic acquaintance describe their elevation to more responsibility at their college. They mentioned the challenge of avoiding resentment about the added responsibilities they took on. I realized I had often complained about the dual role that I found myself in—to serve as an international cooperation specialist as well as a union steward. Despite those resentments, it has been the honor of my life to serve the people, the earth, and my fellow colleagues during these past three decades.