

## State Park Leadership School 2024

### Class Representative Speech

Danielle Schneider 1/13/2024

Good evening, everyone. I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone involved with State Park Leadership School for this incredible opportunity. Thank you to our Regents, America's State Parks, the Stihl cooperation, the National Recreation and Park Association, NC State University, Sherry and the wonderful Oglebay staff, and to all my peers in attendance tonight.

Last night, when I sat down to write something for you all, I found myself in this really sweet moment, somewhere between excitement and paralyzing anxiety, where I asked myself: what is a leader or "what does it mean to me to be a leader"? What does it mean to work in parks? Will this be my life's effort? Which casually spiraled into: Did I answer the leadership style flowchart questions correctly... am I actually democratic and charismatic? Is the universe infinite?

In all seriousness though, I stand up here today with a profound sense of admiration and gratitude for the incredible work that each and every one of you does in caring for our country's most breathtaking landscapes and important cultural resources. As park rangers, managers, superintendents, or facility coordinators, you are heroes of your local environment and the stewards of our shared legacy. Your commitment to preserving the beauty and diversity of our natural world is nothing short of inspirational. You invite us to explore, learn, and appreciate the wonders of our world along the way.

In the face of unending challenges such as climate change, staffing shortages, budget cuts, invasive species, difficult weddings and bridezillas, political drama, and overuse or misuse, your dedication shines like a beacon of hope. It is essential to recognize that the challenges are formidable, but don't ever forget that the resilience you all exhibit can overcome the most daunting obstacles. Your leadership ensures that our parks and wild spaces thrive, and our community's maintain access to these recreational resources.

At the heart of every state park, live the people who serve, lead, and inspire the public. A public who often romanticizes us, for better or for worse. They may not always understand the work we do, or outwardly appreciate it, but in this age of social media, your work has not gone unnoticed. I mean, guys... our jobs are so cool! There are park podcasts, park ghost hunters, outdoor-rec and park themed drag queens, and endless companies with merchandise featuring our backyards and incredible artwork made of the spaces we call an office.

Your work has an impact on the lives of countless individuals who seek solace, inspiration, and rejuvenation in the embrace of outdoor spaces. You provide a refuge for the weary, a haven for the adventurous, and a classroom for the curious. Your efforts not only protect ecosystems but also foster a connection between humanity and the natural world.

You have become the protagonists in the narratives of countless individuals who follow your journeys, celebrate your successes, and are willing to stand in solidarity with you. The very image of a park ranger has become synonymous with environmental advocacy and fortitude,

and your popularity reflects the collective yearning for a world where nature thrives, and everyone has the time they need to spend outside.

I hope you leave this week with a renewed sense of purpose, of drive, with fresh inspiration, and the unwavering knowledge that you have a wide support system of other leaders to draw from. 1st year students, keep in contact with one another. Use each other over the next twelve months. Believe me from personal experience, the connections you make here are important. To the graduates today. You are all wonderful, impressive people who matter.

As park rangers, you are not just custodians of landscapes... I mean, yes sometimes you are literally custodians, but you are ambassadors of accessible adventure. Your passion ignites a spark in the hearts of those you encounter, inspiring a collective responsibility to cherish and protect our outdoor spaces.

Thank you for your dedication, bravery, and the tireless work you do to ensure the enduring access and quality of our treasured parks. May your passion continue to inspire and light the way for generations to come.

In the words of the great conservationist John Muir, "The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness." Well, I believe it is also through Utah's dunes, along the Pacific, Atlantic, and gulf's shores, and down the mighty Mississippi. From Oregon to Arkansas, Maine to Missouri, we stand by the gate, welcoming the world to our passion.