

THE IDEALS OF TRUST & LISTENING: FRAN P. MAINELLA

Former Florida State Park & NPS Director Discusses Texture Of Change & Essence Of Play



Fran Mainella is a woman of firsts but above all she is an impassioned thinker and activist. She sets goals and gets them done but also distinctively understands the importance of listening and learning from others. Because of these traits and many others, Mainella rose through the ranks and became Florida State Park Director in the late 80s and supervised the recovery from Hurricane Andrew in 1992, which is no small feat. In 2001, she was appointed Director of the National Park Service [NPS] by President Bush becoming the first woman to take that position. After retiring from that position in 2006, she has subsequently continued her efforts to fascilliate the importance of the outdoors as a visiting scholar at Clemson University where is Co-Chair of the US Play Coalition. In the 3rd part of a 3 part interview, Mainella sat down with The Buzz at the NASPD Annual Conference to discuss the ideals of trust and listening.

The Buzz: Continuing on from your position as Florida State Park Director and going to the federal level was likely a whole completely different beast...and also much more high profile. Can you talk about that?

FM: One of the things-- there's many commonalities...many of the same

management issues and things like that. But there's just a greater level of bureaucracy on the federal level. But when [President Bush] asked me to come in as National Park Service Director...he and I talked about partnership as a key goal, because we knew that it had become even more pronounced after 9/11 because of the dollars and everything else...we needed to work in partnership --- and we also needed to listen to...the people [of the United States] own these parks, not my park staff, not me, but the people own these parks. We just have the gift of being able to try and take care of them and make them available to the public as a whole. And so that resulted in...I think that we were better able through partnerships to form a better working situation. It resulted, for example, in 2003 we hosted the Joint Ventures Conference which was bringing together all the Federal Land Managers; Army Core of Engineers, Forestry, Bureau of Land Management...many of them in the Department of the Interior. But all of us you know, we needed to work better together. And not just in crisis. So as a result of Joint Ventures, I had them all sign a pledge: we're going to work together and we're going to meet on a quarterly basis, not just in crisis. As a result, we did that for the whole time I was director. And it resulted in a lot better working relationships. We even developed our Fire Council which came out of a lot of that work. Fires are usually in crisis time, but we were better positioned on the front side to deal with things. We ended up sharing equipment, better understanding each other --- and just better communications and better education resulted from the partnerships. But partnerships take work, and that was the only thing--

The Buzz: And trust.

FM: And trust.

The Buzz: And loyalty.

FM: Well I think the trust actually came --- I've always said "put things in writing", because it helps it on the front side. But the trust starts to grow in those partnerships as you work together, and you find out that really you do have so much more in common than you [don't]. You know, you can share so many good, positive things and not just the negative things that make you different. I mean, forestry does land for agricultural purposes, and [then there's] park services over here and we're doing it for preservation but also for enjoyment. So there's different goals for but at the same time, in the end, we all care about that resource, we all care about that visitor, we all care about what damage happens from fire, hurricanes, or whatever, [so it becomes] how can we work together better? So it resulted in a great change. But my coming into that role, it was --- change is difficult for employees --- so, as a result, there was some hesitation obviously --- like for example, I wouldn't let them do a fee increase in the parks, the national parks, unless they could show me they had reached out to other partners to talk about that fee increase. [And not] just putting it in the

newspaper. Not just advertising it [as far as] what is the legal documentation is, but did you reach out? And if you didn't do that, you didn't get to up your fees. So it was put into practical terms.



The Buzz: And in closing, change involves listening, and the idea becomes, "In order to do all change, both sides need to listen." Can you talk about the importance of listening in a scenario like this?

FM: I think the key, again back to leadership, I talk about the three C's. There's courage, connections, but communication..[that] is absolutely the key to success. And the most difficult part of communication is listening because think about how many of us are already thinking about how we're going to respond to the person we're speaking with, and they haven't even finished their statement. We're already on that next part. We have to learn to listen and really understand that we can be so much better in our own accomplishments if we again listen to others. Because there's so many good ideas that can come [from that], and there's so much more commonality than difference. I think those are important pieces for us, and so I just strongly encourage that communication. Today, communications has to go beyond-- it used to be you'd say it's the visual, the auditory, the written, but the listening piece has to now be done, or any part of communication...you've got this social media now. There's so many different techniques, and as much as I talk about the US Play Coalition, with kids being on [the net] 10 hours a day, [you have to] try to get them a little more balance in life, but today still, communications is key. Technology is a key tool, but it's all about having a balance.

The Buzz: And having a face-to-face interaction. I think face-to-face cannot be undervalued.

FM: We had on the Clemson website...back when we first formed the US play coalition, we had two teenage girls sitting on a playground piece of equipment. It was a dome-type shape, and they were texting. They were texting each other, but they're not even looking at each other. And this goes back to the skills that come from allowing play to take place...it is that interaction, that face-to-face, that communication...all [those things] are going to help you be more successful and more effective. Because if you are doing everything, as I call it, in the third person, which is what our technology is, there's misunderstandings in that third person. Think about how many times you write something --- and if you go around a circle and say, "What does that mean to you?", you're going to get different interpretations, and that's why it's really important to listen and then also have that face-to-face to be able to further clarify. So I always hope that we do not ever lose out on that face-to-face communications.



Tim Wassberg

A graduate of New York University's Tisch School Of The Arts with degrees in Film/TV Production & Film Criticism, Tim has written for magazines such as MovieMaker, Moving Pictures, Conde Nast Traveler UK and Casino Player. He enjoys traveling and distinct craft beers among other things.



Make Sure To Check Out:

The [US Play Coalition](#), which is a partnership to promote the value of play throughout life. They fulfill their mission through education, research and communication.