**The FriYAY Podcast Series**

**Transcript for Episode 27:** Steve Morris, International Partnerships Deliver Fruitful Experiences

*(Introduction Music)*

It’s Fri-Yay, Fri-Yay, Fri-Yay, FriYAY! (woo!)

*(Fast guitar-picking music)*

**Narrator:**Welcome to the FriYAY Podcast Series from PPFL. Each week we interview interesting experts in a variety of disciplines from underwater basket-weaving to animal husbandry. This week we're talking to Steve Morris from the Office of International Affairs. Sally Mayberry conducted the interview.

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**Sally Mayberry, byline:**  
Welcome and thank you for joining us on FriYAY, Steve. Let's start things with the first question which is what does the office of international affairs do and why is the work so important?

**Steve Morris:**Well our office is responsible for offering policy guidance to allNPS staff in parks, programs, andeverywhere who want to engage withinternationalcolleagues in any way. Whether that wouldbe through exchanges, through travel, and any kind ofcooperation. For example anyone who wantsto travel overseas on official duty hasto submit their paperwork through ouroffice and we review it and coordinatethe approval processthrough the state department, through theDepartment of the Interior’sInternational Office, and through theDirector's Office.

**Sally:**What is a recent example ofinternational partnership that you canshare helping us understand thesignificance of these relationships?

**Steve:**  
I would mention Greenland. We had a visit from the U.S. ambassador to Denmark a year ago to our then Acting Director David Vela who promised to provide assistance. This was part of a whole of U.S. government project to help Greenland in part to counter Chinese influence there. So we've been actively engaging through the embassy in Copenhagen. We've been doing webinars and we're looking forward to being able to do some exchanges and study visits.

Also I mentioned China itself, as many people know, the bilateral relationship between the United States and China has deteriorated in recent years yet the U.S. Embassy in Beijing as well as the state department here in Washington continue to look to us in the Park Service as a positive face of the United States and as a vital way to maintain the bilateral relationship. We're a good news story. We're often called upon by the State Department to be kind of a neutral ground to promote cooperation when relationships with other countries get tense. Our ability to do that has been important both to the State Department but to the overall U.S. government.

**Sally:**  
In your most recent quarterly bulletin you cover a lot of different activities that you have going on. Can you briefly share how many programs you have and what they accomplish?

**Steve:**Yes I'd be happy to. And let me just mention that the bulletin describes not only the work of our office but also we try to cast a broad net and look across the-the entire National Park System at individual parks and regions. What they're doing that might have international aspects to it? For example, we've featured in the past activities that Denver Service Center has been carrying on. They were working for a number of years helping support planning in Brazil and Brazil's national parks. More recently we've been working with the Superintendent at the Sitka National Historical Park who's trying to arrange for the rights to reproduce plates and illustrations from the Tlingit Catalog at Russia's Kunstkamera Museum. For our office itself, we have a number of programs that we're directly responsible for. One of the main ones is the U.S. World Heritage Program. Many people have heard of world heritage sites but they may not be aware that there's actually a convention or an international treaty, the World Heritage Convention. The Secretary of the Interior is the responsible for the U.S. implementation of that treaty and that's delegated to the Assistant Secretary for Fish, Wildlife, and Parks.

Our office is the staff office for the program. We help oversee the development of nominations of U.S. sites that are proposed for inclusion in the World Heritage list. We also report on activities and possible threats affecting the 24 U.S. sites that are on the World Heritage list. So that's a big part of our job. We also conduct quite a few what I would call technical assistance exchanges where we're providing park service expertise to other countries. When that involves travel, it's often funded by the State Department, USAID, or NGO partners. We don't generally have service funds to put into that but we make our staff available at no cost to the State Department if they can cover the travel. We get a lot of requests from the State Department to do this kind of work and that's all coordinated by our office.

We may also maintain bilateral agreements with a number of different countries. Of course Canada and Mexico, our nearest neighbors, we share ecosystems and species with them, similar conservation challenges, but we also have agreements with a whole range of other countries from Argentina to Australia.

We also help guide the Sister Parks Initiative, which is meant to be a park-to-park relationship. There are more than three dozen of these relationships throughout the service and our office helps vet them, make sure that the documents that formalize them are reviewed by the State Department, and we sort of keep people within the guardrails and provide any kind of assistance and guidance we can but these are primarily park-to-park relationships.

**Sally:**What benefits do the partners and the National Park Service receive from your program?

**Steve:**There's many benefits. The partners learn a lot from us but I always say we learn as much as we can teach them. A lot of our ideas over the history of the service can be traced back to things that were going on in other countries. Some people don't realize it but our founding director, Stephen Mather, a century ago in fact charged the service to keep abreast of developments all over the world. Park interpretation, for example we like to cite this one, evolved from the example of Swiss alpine guides who served as ranger naturalists in the early 1900s at Yosemite's National Park. There's a plaque on a rock behind the Yosemite Museum that attests to Director Mather's willingness to listen to and learn from best practices abroad.

Another one is the all taxa biodiversity inventory that came from Costa Rica. It's important to talk about migratory species because many of the species that live in our national parks for part of the year go to other countries during the rest of the year and so we're sharing these species and if their habitat isn't protected overseas then we're not going to have them in our park. So that's another, I would say, direct benefit of our work is to make sure that these shared species are well taken care of throughout their life cycle.

In terms of our own staff there's tremendous benefits and every time our staff if they get the opportunity to interact with international colleagues and particularly if they get to travel overseas they always come back with a whole renewed appreciation for their job and the realization that they're part of a global community that's trying to do the same thing they're trying to do in their park which is to conserve nature and preserve the past and tell the stories of the past and the current situation. So many times they say their international exchange was the most meaningful thing that they did in their whole career.

**Sally:**It looks like the program offers international volunteers to work on park projects. Can you elaborate on that a little bit?

**Steve:**Yes, I'm glad you brought that up becausethat is one of ourunheralded secrets, I think. Theinternational volunteer and parksprogramessentially it's a way for foreignnationals, many of them students but not all,to come to the U.S., to do internships inour parks. So you know they're working directlywith our people learning a lotand of course we're learning from themas well. They have to pay their own wayto come here but their host parks canoften give them free or low-cost housing. They get an experience that's unlike anyother.

We bring in over more than a hundredforeign nationals every year throughthis program. We're authorized by theState Department tobe the official visa sponsors throughthe J-1 exchange visa.It's been a challenge of course duringthe pandemic times to keep this programgoing. OurIVIP coordinator is Linda Bennett, she'sbeentrying to evolve it into a virtual IVIP. She's had some success in recruiting, forexample, German speakers to help Acadia NationalPark translate some of their documentsinto German and similarlySpanish speakers to help the de AnzaNational Historic Trail translate someof their materials into Spanish. Butwe're hoping thatsoon, once the pandemic is under control, that the State Department will beginissuing these visas again so we cancontinue to host these volunteers.We see this as an important way ofaccomplishing the international missionof the National Park Service becausemany times these volunteers go back totheir own countries and becomepark managers and carry on the kind ofwork that we're doing in the U.S.

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**Narrator:**To learn more about the FriYAY Series visit the Common Learning Portal.