

# 100 percent ranger



## Rick Mossman: An interview with Brenna Lissoway

**Growing up in Topeka, Kansas, Rick Mossman knew from age 7 that he wanted to pursue a career with the National Park Service. After earning a degree in wildlife biology from Kansas State University, Mossman became a seasonal ranger at Buffalo National River in Arkansas. The experience solidified his penchant for “traditional” ranger skills, especially search and rescue.**

**D**uring a 2014 oral history interview with Brenna Lissoway, Mossman reflected on how he grew to understand the importance of resource education as a critical element of visitor and resource protection. From his first permanent NPS appointment as an interpreter at Ford’s Theater in Washington, D.C., he integrated this belief over a 36-year career engaged in several commissioned ranger positions, including at Bandelier National Monument in New Mexico, Grand Canyon National Park in Arizona, Wrangell-Saint Elias and Glacier Bay national parks & preserves in Alaska, Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming, and finally as chief ranger at Wind Cave National Park in South Dakota. Mossman continued to share his experience and values in his post-retirement role as the program director and chief ranger for the National Park Service Ranger Academy at Colorado Northwestern Community College and is now a private consultant.

**LISSOWAY:** During your NPS career, did you develop a philosophy about the way you approached difficult situations?

**MOSSMAN:** When I went through FLETC (Federal Law Enforcement Training Center) we were taught to use the lowest level law enforcement necessary to seek compliance. That was a kind of philosophy. I’ll be very honest, I don’t think we had as much emphasis on officer safety then that we do now. And maybe it’s more necessary now.

I’m big into resource education. If you look at a park ranger job description, it says we’re 51 percent resource education. That’s important. I always give the example to my students, and all the rangers that have ever worked for me: A kid’s fishing on the Lewis Lake Dock in

Yellowstone National Park with his dad. Beautiful evening in Yellowstone. And he's got worms on his hook, which is illegal. Legally, I can cite that kid, or I can give the dad a citation. But if you were to do that, what's that kid going to go away from that park with? I said, you sit there and talk to them and you explain why you don't use bait. We don't write a citation. I never want to see somebody write a citation for that. Because I want that kid going away from that park with a positive experience from a ranger, and not with a negative experience that he's going to remember for the rest of his life. Education is much more important than the actual citation or arrest. Obviously we have to do that in a lot of cases. But the education is the most important thing, especially for us as park rangers.

When I got to Wind Cave, the sign on the office said Law Enforcement Division. And I immediately removed that sign. I said, no, we are the Division of Resource and Visitor Protection. That is our title. Personally, I don't like the term "law enforcement ranger." I like the term "protection ranger." Again, because we're in charge of protecting the resource as much, or more so, than protecting the people. You know, that's our mission. It's not just law enforcement.

**LISSOWAY:** Have you seen the protection ranger skill set or attitude change over your career?

**MOSSMAN:** I have. I'll be the first to admit I'm one of the old dinosaurs that was a general ranger coming through the ranks. Part of it is our own fault, and part of it is, unfortunately, necessary. We have professionalized law enforcement much more, just because of the culture of the world, the way it's changed. We have a terrible record as far as the number of rangers that have been killed in the line of duty. Five in the last 25 years, I believe, that have been murdered. I mean, per capita, that's the highest of any federal agency, I believe. It's easy for people out there to get complacent. And the park visitor is not like maybe it was 50 years ago and we have crime in the parks. So we have to deal with it. We have to be just as professional as every other law enforcement agency out there, and know officer safety, and know what we're dealing with, and expect the unexpected. But then again, we also know we're dealing with



*Mossman at Glacier Bay National Park & Preserve in Alaska.*

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people on vacation that are usually pretty good. But we still have to be prepared. So there's been a lot more emphasis on law enforcement and all those tools and techniques we need to learn, which is important. But as a result, so many other things have become of lesser importance.

**LISSOWAY:** Who in your career did you look to as a mentor?

**MOSSMAN:** A number of them. When I worked at Wrangell-Saint Elias and Glacier Bay, my two bosses there were two of the best bosses I ever had: Jay Wells and Randy King. Jay had the same kind of law enforcement philosophy that I do. I'll never forget him saying once, at a seasonal training, "If you can't explain to a visitor why you're giving them a ticket, then you shouldn't be giving them that ticket." Just because we can, doesn't mean we should. You've got to be able to articulate why they're getting this ticket and the impact that has on the resource or the park.

So I always took that philosophy and used that. I always tell my rangers, "If you stop and write a speeding ticket, don't be a trooper and just go up and say, 'You were doing 65 in a 45, here's your ticket.' "I would walk up to them and say, 'You know, you're in a national park. We have lots of wildlife. Last week we had a grizzly cub killed by a car that was speeding. We're here to protect the resource. We don't want you to hit an elk or a deer.'" Then, give them the ticket, if you need to. It goes back to educating the visitor. Use it as a positive spin, if you can, on how their violation is impacting the resource. Not just that they've broken the law, because people just break the law and get a ticket, they don't like it. But if they understand why that law exists, they can accept it a lot easier. I think we have the opportunity to do that in the Park Service. I've never had people not really understand that, for the most part.

*Brenna Lissoway is the archivist for Chaco Canyon National Historical Park in New Mexico.*