



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

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Grand Canyon News Release

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National Park Service to release Board of Review Report on 2007 death of Grand Canyon National Park employee Eric York

Grand Canyon, Ariz. – The National Park Service (NPS) has released the Board of Review Report surrounding the 2007 death of Grand Canyon National Park employee Eric York.

York, a wildlife biologist at Grand Canyon National Park, was found deceased in his residence on the South Rim on November 2, 2007. Tests conducted by the Arizona Department of Health Services (ADHS) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) following York's death confirmed that he had died from pneumonic plague, a rare, but often fatal disease caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*. Plague is primarily a disease of animals, but can be transmitted to humans through the bites of rodent fleas or by direct contact with infected animals. In rare cases, pneumonic plague can spread from person to person through aerosolized respiratory droplets (e.g. coughing, sneezing). According to the CDC, person-to-person transmission of plague has not been observed in the United States since 1924.

As a wildlife biologist, York had direct contact with both wild rodents and mountain lions, which put him at a higher risk for plague than other park staff and the general public. Prior to his death, York had recovered a dead mountain lion in a remote location of Grand Canyon National Park and had transported the animal to his residence, where he had performed a necropsy on the animal. Tests conducted by the CDC determined that the strain of plague that infected York was the same strain of plague that infected the mountain lion York had recovered.

Following York's death, a Board of Review was convened by the NPS to examine and evaluate the pertinent data and facts surrounding his death. The report provides an executive summary, findings, and recommendations.

The recommendations outlined in the Board of Review Report have been put forth, so that the NPS can prevent similar events from happening again. The recommendations include the following:

- Supervisors need to be actively involved at various levels of their subordinates' jobs, including training and field observations in order to identify risks and help create a safer work environment.

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- The park needs to develop and implement written programs that will lead to a safer work environment, including risk assessments, job hazard analyses, and the proper use of personal protective equipment.
- Work programs need to be regularly reviewed and evaluated for safety-related issues by the park's safety officer.

“Eric was a hardworking and dedicated employee who gave fully of himself to understand and protect the wildlife in Grand Canyon National Park as well as other places around the world,” said Grand Canyon National Park Superintendent Steve Martin. “His death was a tragic loss to his family and to all who knew him. We are taking the recommendations outlined in this report very seriously and have already begun to take appropriate actions to ensure that another tragedy such as Eric’s death does not happen again. The National Park Service has developed servicewide protocols to assist biologists and other employees in identifying risks, appropriate work practices and personal protective equipment to make their jobs safer.”

Plague is considered endemic in northern Arizona at elevations above 4,500 feet. Park officials want to remind people living, working or visiting areas where plague is known to exist to take the following precautions to reduce their risk of exposure:

- **Do not** handle sick or dead animals.
- Prevent pets from roaming loose.
- **Control fleas** on pets by applying flea collars or sprays routinely. Check with your veterinarian about the appropriate flea medicine for your pet.
- **Avoid exposure** to rodent burrows and fleas and wild animals.
- **Use insect repellent** when visiting or working in areas where plague might be active or rodents might be present.
- **Wear rubber gloves** when cleaning or skinning wild animals or cleaning rodent traps.
- Domestic cats are highly susceptible to plague. Cat owners should take their ill cats to a veterinarian for evaluation.
- Be able to identify the symptoms of plague or other zoonotic diseases and seek medical treatment immediately if any of the symptoms occur.

For more information on plague and other zoonotic and vector-borne diseases as well as for tips on prevention, please visit the CDC Web site at <http://www.cdc.gov/>.

Copies of the Board of Review Report will be posted on the park's Web site at <http://www.nps.gov/grca/parknews/newsreleases.htm>.

For additional information please contact Maureen Oltrogge, Public Affairs Officer at 928-638-7779.

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