

The Seven Virtues of *Parks on the Air* (POTA)

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In 2016, the ARRL sponsored the National Parks on the Air (NPOTA) program to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the the National Parks Service (NPS). The NPS maintains more than 85 million acres of parkland in the US for public enjoyment.

The NPOTA program was proposed to the ARRL by Sean Kutzko (KX9X). The idea was simple; inspire ham radio operators to deploy portable rigs in US parkland to celebrate the NPS anniversary, and evangelize Ham radio operations to park visitors.

The ARRL agreed to sponsor the program for one year. Sean Kutzko and Norm Fusaro (W3IZ) managed the program during all of 2016.

To say the program was a success is a serious understatement. The enthusiasm for the program was overwhelming. As 2016 came to a close, despite its popularity, the ARRL did not extend funding for the program.

One of the most avid NPOTA fans was Jason Johnston (W3AAX) of Severna Park, MD. Jason expressed serious disbelief that an idea so popular in the Ham community would not be continued. He undertook a mission to save the program.

Joined by a small group of talented and dedicated technical volunteers, Jason launched the *Parks on the Air* (POTA) program to continue the spirit of NPOTA. Today, the reach of POTA has been astounding in the Ham community. It is one of the most popular activities in all of Ham radio. Not only has it been wildly popular in the US and Canada, it is now expanding rapidly worldwide.

Like most Hams, I enjoy taking things apart to learn how they work. This includes the study of successful people and organizations, to discover the things they did to achieve success. When I analyzed Jason's POTA program, I discovered seven virtues that make the program so special, and explains why the program is so popular.

1. Shock and Awesomeness

When I joined POTA and began activating parks, I was stunned by how naive I was. First of all, I had no idea there are 281 State parks in my home state of California, covering 1.4 million acres, 280 miles of pacific coastline, and 625 miles of lake and river frontage¹. This was shocking to me. A stunning discovery.

Second, as I began to activate these parks, I was amazed at the diversity each park offers. Some are enormous, covering thousands of acres. Others are tiny - no bigger than a parking lot, with beach access and a single State lifeguard tower along the Pacific coast. Each and every park is unique. When I activate a park, I often do not want to leave. Sometimes, when I am done with an activation, I just sit at a picnic table and enjoy the stunning beauty.

As I explore each new park, I discover so many things. This exploration of natures' awesomeness is exhilarating. This feeling is an unspoken bond among all park activators.

¹ https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/California_State_Parks

2. Appreciation

POTA enthusiasts share a high level of appreciation.

Not only for the National and State park systems that preserve nature's beauty, but also the founders, the ARRL, and volunteers that built the POTA program.

Sean Kutzko (KX9X) and Norm Fusaro (W3IZ) lit the match then lit the fuse. For this, we are forever grateful.

I am quite certain Sean Kutzko's goals for the NPOTA program were fairly humble. Get Hams in National parks to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the NPS, and if possible, evangelize Ham radio to the public while you are there. Little did Sean know at the time, his NPOTA idea would explode to become a worldwide phenomenon in the Ham radio community.

There is also, a communal deep appreciation among POTA members for Jason Johnston. This incredibly humble man, took the time and effort to figure out how to save the NPOTA program.

Jason did not do it alone. He recruited a core group of talented volunteers, each sharing their technical expertise to get POTA off the ground. The initial group was Tom (W8TAM) and Julie (WT8J) Martin, Mike Case (W8MSC), Vance Martin (N3VEM), Jeremy Turner (N0AW), and Colby Dillion (WR5B).

To all of you, a sincere thanks from those of us who celebrate your genius everyday in a park or while on the hunt for activators.

3. Respect

One of the cornerstones of the POTA community is respect. In fact, the POTA rules specifically state this is a requirement to participate in the program.

For park activators, this includes the respect shown to park personnel, the park grounds, and the public. In every park I have activated, the park personnel, both State and Federal, have been friendly and supportive of Ham radio operators. This is the result of respect shown by previous activators.

I always take the time to talk to members of the public who are curious about my setup. Many times I have put an activation on hold to explain to a young person what I am doing and why. I keep QSL cards in my power box and hand them out to anyone that wants one. This is common respect for the public.

After an activation, when all my gear is back in my truck, I go back to the activation spot and ensure that it is in the exact condition (or better) than I found it.

When on the air, activating or hunting, POTA members are required to exhibit respect for each other, long a tradition of the Ham community. This is what makes POTA so much fun.

4. Trustworthiness

A critical success factor of POTA is its simplicity. The rules are simple. Everyone understands them. There are no ambiguities.

For an activator, the rules are few. You must be a currently licensed Ham operator for the bands you use. The park must be on the list of parks. The park must be open to the public. You must be within the boundaries of the park at all times during the activation. You must complete 10 contacts within a calendar day (UTC) within the park. You must log the contacts and upload them to the POTA web site.

For a hunter, there are only two rules: You must be a licensed Ham, and you must provide your signal report to an activator.

When you submit your logs, you must check two boxes certifying that you followed the above rules when you activated the park. The entire POTA program is based on trustworthiness. It is assumed you are a trustworthy individual. If you are not, there are no POTA police to chase you down.

Is it possible to cheat? Of course. Does it happen? Probably. I am confident it is very rare.

In reality, the invisible badge of trustworthiness among the POTA community is what keeps the POTA community trustworthy. Hunters are not required to submit logs. They are completely dependent on an activator to ensure the contact log is accurate and uploaded to the POTA website in a timely manner. Hunters trust that activators are trustworthy.

There have been times that I have failed to activate a park because I could not achieve 10 contacts, due to weather, time, lousy band conditions, or whatever. In POTA terms, this is called a failed activation. We all dislike failure.

It is easy to pretend you did not attempt the activation in the first place. This is not trustworthy within the spirit of POTA. You must submit your logs to give the hunters credit for a contact, even if you did not succeed in the activation.

I upload my log every time I fail an activation, knowing that it will show as a failed activation for all to see. I know my fellow activators do the same. The invisible badge.

5. Preparedness

Many Hams believe a fundamental goal of POTA is emergency preparedness (EmComm). Although this is not true (it's all about the parks), POTA activations are a great way to keep your EmComm skills sharp. Every POTA activation is an EmComm simulation for me. First, I use checklists, a critical part of any EmComm program.

Second, I try to be on the air within 12 minutes after my truck wheels are parked. I do this to simulate a real emergency where I need my gear up and running in a hurry. This also requires me to have my gear organized and ready for duty.

Third, a POTA activation is a perfect simulation of a real EmComm event. You must pull call signs and conversations out of noisy bands. You must remember call signs long enough to accurately log them. You must be able to handle pileups, which can be stressful at times. You must stay cool and calm, and communicate clearly without any signs of stress or agitation. You must perform in less than ideal weather conditions.

Another trait of this virtue is innovation. POTA activations allow Hams to experiment with antennas, off-grid battery and solar power, radio configurations, and signal propagation. This has been a hallmark of Ham radio operations for over 100 years.

POTA activations ensure that my field equipment is tested and ready for duty. They also keep my EmComm radio skills sharp, something that is not available to those who do not practice.

6. Evangelism

This is one of the more subtle virtues. It exists on two levels.

First, it is the evangelism of park exploration. Remember, the entire NPOTA charter was to get people in parks to celebrate 100 years of park conservation. So there is an expectation that POTA activators share the joy of being outdoors, in a beautiful park, with others.

Just as important, is the evangelism of Ham radio. This is not always convenient, or easy to do, but it is very important. A lot of activators do not want to take the time to explain to the public what they are doing in a park. This is a mistake.

There is no better way to light a spark in a young person, than showing them how your gear works, and let them listen to your POTA conversations. I cannot recall how many times I have shown a curious park visitor my logbook. During one activation, I was fortunate enough to make contacts in 38 states, Canada and Puerto Rico. When I showed a curious visitor the HamRS map of contacts, they were stunned. A Ham radio enthusiast in the making.

We need young people to carry on the tradition of Ham radio. POTA is a great way to do this, everyday, in a park.

7. Fellowship

Of all the POTA virtues, this one is my personal favorites. The POTA community is overrun with the friendliest people you could ever meet. Over time, you begin to remember call signs. You exchange QSL cards. You look up call signs on QRZ to learn more about other hunters and activators. You are constantly struck by the enthusiasm exhibited by activators and hunters.

You begin to realize, the Ham community, and POTA in particular, is a place to enjoy a true sense of fellowship with others. This fellowship is the result of mixing all of the other POTA virtues together. What results is magical.

You meet the nicest people on the other end of a POTA contact.

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