



*Ah, spring. Time for warm weather, melting snow, blossoming hills, and (of course) the MER Conference.*

It's funny how nature can actually teach us a thing or two about today's digital ecosystem, and the US National Parks and National Forest provide a particularly interesting example. For records professionals, the lesson learned is one of resource management philosophy.

Allow me to reminisce. Early in college, I worked over the summer at Mt. Rainier National Park. My role there foreshadowed my unbeknownst future connection to RIM; working with the curatorial department, I digitally cataloged books and academic papers in the small staff library, sorting and identifying historical items for future access. But the lessons I learned in land management philosophy stuck with me more than the task of classifying and cataloging.

Why? Because for every US [national park](#), there are nearly three [national forests](#). Although the two entities are superficially quite similar, I quickly learned they have vastly different resource management strategies... strategies that today have relevant parallels to data governance.

National parks are guarded as relics: highly protected and meticulously maintained. They're treated as fragile gems in a vast, open-air museum of natural history. Restricting human interference is a tenet, and there is a relatively high ranger-to-visitor ratio. One is warned to "leave only footprints, and take only pictures." Yet national forests, on the other hand, are treated with a pragmatic approach: balancing human activities with sustainable leverage of resources. The [first chief](#) of the US Forest Service famously stated that the purpose of the national forest system was "to provide the greatest amount of good for the greatest amount of people in the long run." The forest system even has carefully-crafted policies for sustainable hunting, fishing, and firewood collection. The two approaches represent protectionism vs. pragmatism, in a nutshell.

So what does it all have to do with records management?

The traditional records approach is quite similar to our national park philosophy: identify, protect, and lock down the items which have the greatest long-term value. Management is relatively rigid. But today the tides are changing as records teams transition to being dynamic

curators for all business content: managing data that may or may *not* fit the description of a “traditional” record. Data that would not have been declared a record a few short years ago is now being eyed by the business for its potential strategic value – particularly in analytics. It is the firewood in the forest. Records managers, used to their role as rangers in Records Content National Park, now also need to learn more pragmatic techniques for managing the ever-expanding Business Data National Forest.

Perhaps this is where the analogy ends; after all, a perfect analogy would just be a description. Our national parks and forests obviously aren’t expanding at the rate of today’s unstructured content. There’s no need to make a judgment call on whether national parks are “better” than national forests, or if traditional records are “better” than more ambiguous data. Parks and forests both have their place in public land, as do records and non-records in the enterprise. And they all require some degree of meaningful management.

Which brings us to today’s challenge: how do records management professionals help create a “trail map” designed to help the entire enterprise access and benefit from our natural data resources?

Some tips for the trek: acknowledge that you can’t personally meet with every visitor (or document, rather!) that passes through the digital forest. Set meaningful policies and guidelines, doing your best to communicate them to all other business units. Post trail signs rather than personally briefing every data wilderness hiker: some degree of automation is inevitable when the individual pieces of data being created outnumber records managers by several orders of magnitude. And prepare for unexpected weather... have a plan to address novel data types as they arise.

We’re on the cusp of an era that demands a more holistic, flexible, and inclusive approach to governance of digital business content. Data is a living resource rather than a just a static snapshot. Records managers are poised to be essential curators in this environment, setting guidelines that matter to all parties that interact with the data landscape.

So as we approach MER, now is a better time than ever to think about your individual role, sustainable data management strategies, and the future of the business’s data. But most of all, enjoy the scenery.

## **Paige Bartley**

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*Paige is a research and marketing strategist at ZL Technologies, focusing primarily on high-level industry trends. She is an obscure knowledge enthusiast, Duke fan, and a long-time dabbling musician. Her background is as diverse her interests, including an undergraduate focus on neuroscience, a master’s in management, and a background in the biomedical research field and clinical trial software. Knowledge you can’t retrieve is knowledge you don’t have, which is why information governance matters to her.*

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