

**STATEMENT OF PALMER “CHIP” JENKINS, ACTING INTERMOUNTAIN REGIONAL DIRECTOR, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SENATE ENERGY & NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, REGARDING OPPORTUNITIES TO EXPAND VISITATION AT LESSER-KNOWN PARKS.**

**AUGUST 8, 2019**

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Chairman Daines, thank you for the opportunity to provide the Department of the Interior’s views on the topic of opportunities to expand visitation at lesser-known parks. Each and every unit of the National Park System--no matter its size, location, special features, or number of visitors--contributes to the fabric of American life and offers visitors an opportunity to experience an important aspect of our shared heritage. We appreciate the committee’s interest in shining a light on the parks that receive less visitation by holding this hearing at one of Montana’s lesser-visited parks, Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site.

The National Park Service manages a remarkable collection of places representing the richness and diversity of American history, heritage, culture, and natural resources. The National Park System’s 419 park units protect iconic landmarks such as Devils Tower National Monument; stunning landscapes such as those found in Glacier and Yellowstone National Parks; and unique flora and fauna from the rainforests in Olympic National Park to undersea reefs in the Virgin Islands. These parks also protect historic landscapes such as Civil War battlefields and World War II internment sites; sites of invention and ingenuity, such as Thomas Edison’s laboratory and the Wright Brothers’ workshops; monuments to great leaders such as George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King, Jr.; and priceless archeological sites in the Southwest and elsewhere in the country. Beyond the 419 units, the National Park Service also manages wild and scenic rivers and national scenic and historic trails (most of these rivers and trails are not counted as units), and assists with numerous preservation, conservation, and recreation activities throughout our country.

**Park Visitation Trends**

Visitation to units of the National Park System reached 318 million in 2018, an increase of about 16% from a decade ago, with especially notable increases over the last five years. But within that system-wide increase, there is great variation among individual parks. Visitation has increased steeply to some of the most famous parks in the country. Arches, Zion, Glacier, Acadia, and Yellowstone National Parks, for example, have all experienced significant double-digit percentage increases in growth in visitation over the last decade or so – 30%, 50%, even 60% increases. Other parks have seen notable but more modest increases – 10% to 20%. And still other parks have experienced relatively flat or even declining visitation.

Several factors have likely contributed to the recent spike in visitation to certain national parks. The continuing economic expansion since the 2007-2008 recession suggests that people have more means for travel. International visitation to the United States has increased significantly

over the last decade, and survey data suggests that over one-third of overseas travelers to the United States include a visit to a national park or monument in their trip. Additionally, the National Park Service celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2016, and the commemoration, with numerous promotional and celebratory events and programs from a large community of partners, likely helped drive the surge of visitors in 2016 and 2017, when visitation topped 330 million annually.

Social media is playing an important role as well. It is easier now more than ever for travelers to share inspirational photos of their journeys, prompting their followers to seek out iconic vistas, views, and unique experiences themselves. This has actually become a challenging trend in some places as previously obscure parks experience a sudden swarm of visitation.

The U.S. travel sector includes over two billion domestic person-trips, plus 80 million international visitors, annually. In a sector so large, several different trends have emerged simultaneously. On one hand, air travel continues to grow rapidly, as it has for the last three decades, encouraging a “hub-and-spoke” approach to travel: flying from home to another metropolitan area, then traveling by rented car around the area. This can sometimes result in a decrease in visitation to lesser-known parks.

On the other hand, mobile technology is making do-it-yourself travel easier than ever, with thousands of mobile phone apps bringing travel, accommodation, and activity services to our fingertips. Technology combined with social media means that interest in obscure or off-the-beaten path sites can suddenly go viral, and that destination marketers can more easily reach and influence potential visitors to their area. Travel news outlets have also recently been reporting on an increase in cross-country road trips. As a result of the diversity of the travel market, attracting visitors to a particular site, community, park, or destination is more complex than ever.

### **National Park Service Initiatives**

The National Park Service does not have the expertise and resources of the travel industry, and is barred from paying for advertising. We do, however, work in a variety of ways, both independently and in collaboration with community partners, to promote lesser-visited sites.

Here at the Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site, visitation has grown from about 20,000 to about 26,000 annually over the last decade. The key to this increased visitation has been building relationships with partners throughout the region, including the Powell County Chamber of Commerce, and local and regional tourism groups. The park offers unique programming and events, including the annual Pumpkin Sunday event in the fall, Haying with Horses, and the Holiday Open House. The park has agreements in place with the Draft Horse Expo and it partners with the Rialto Community Theatre. Some of the events held at the park are uniquely local and intended to engage the local community, such as hosting the Powell County High School Cross Country Meets and the Deer Lodge Medical Center Wellness Walk. The Movie with a Ranger and Evening at the Ranch programs provides visitors with activities in the evening hours that encourage hotel guests and RV campers to also explore the town and support restaurants and shops.

Nationally, there are several programs to attract visitors to lesser-visited parks. In 2015, the National Park Service and National Park Foundation, our national philanthropic partner, launched the public engagement campaign called “Find Your Park” as an initiative for the 2016 Centennial. Find Your Park continues today, through traditional advertising in key markets, digital and social media advertising, and special events and programs. A continuous theme of Find Your Park is highlighting the breadth and depth of the National Park System. For example, Find Your Park videos have featured parks such as Morristown National Historical Park, not just the well-known iconic national parks.

The National Park Service has always hosted special events and programs in parks, but during the Centennial, park staff were encouraged to plan unique events to appeal to visitors, often in collaboration with partners. That creativity continues, attracting new and repeat visitors to parks. For example, James A. Garfield National Historic Site hosts a Shakespeare in the Park series as well as a Civil War Concert Series. Herbert Hoover National Historic Site is also hosting concerts, featuring the Air Force Band of Mid-America.

Another Centennial initiative was the “Every Kid in a Park” program, which is now transitioning to “Every Kid Outdoors” following the authorization of the program by Congress with a revised name as part of Public Law 116-9, which was enacted earlier this year. This program provides free passes to parks and public lands to fourth graders and their families. For smaller sites that do not charge entrance fees, the significance of this program has been the associated transportation assistance provided to school groups by the National Park Foundation and other partner organizations. This initiative has been very successful in introducing fourth graders and their families to the sites run by the National Park Service in their own communities.

In addition, beginning with the Centennial, the National Park Service has had a program placing individual youth volunteers in parks for the purpose of enhancing those parks’ capacity for managing volunteer programs. At least 20% of these “Community Volunteer Ambassadors” are placed in lesser-visited parks in order to conduct community engagement and support ongoing park stewardship.

An area where the National Park Service has made great strides in increasing the visibility of lesser-visited sites is in digital and social media. Our website, NPS.gov, is regularly upgraded with trip suggestions, thematic itineraries, and other tools to guide people to park experiences based on interests and activities. It is a great way for potential park visitors to discover experiences available at parks they may never have heard of. The website also features monthly getaways, articles often featuring lesser-visited parks, and monthly messaging themes that highlight the broad range of sites within the National Park System.

There are many lesser-visited parks using a robust and strategic presence on social media to cultivate a community of engaged followers and raise their visibility, including Dinosaur National Monument, Waco Mammoth National Monument, Rosie the Riveter World War II Home Front National Historical Park, and Katmai National Park and Preserve. A video recently posted by Martin Van Buren National Historic Site in New York went viral and has received more hits than the number of annual visitors to the park.

A number of parks, some of them off the beaten path, have instituted web-based distance learning programs, bringing park rangers into classrooms and planting the seeds for future visits. Parks actively involved in this effort include Buffalo National River, Homestead National Monument of America, Channel Islands National Park, Denali National Park and Preserve, and Nicodemus National Historic Site.

The National Park Service works closely with state and local tourism partners to manage and promote high-quality visitor experiences. This work varies depending on the needs and priorities of the park and the community. For example, Fort Sumter and Fort Moultrie National Historical Park has a well-established relationship with the Charleston tourism office, coordinating familiarization visits for travel journalists and sharing visitation data and forecasts. In addition, several parks in southern Arizona are working with local partners and tourism stakeholders to develop strategies to encourage more visitation and longer stays in the community of Ajo, just north of Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument. In Delaware, National Park Service staff at First State National Historical Park are participating in community discussions, facilitated by the National Parks Conservation Association and the Conservation Fund, on leveraging the presence of this recently established park, for positive economic benefits.

In summary, there are multiple ways in which lesser-visited parks are becoming more attractive to potential visitors. We hope to continue building on these efforts to make more people aware of the vast resources under our stewardship.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you have.