

STATEMENT OF LENA MCDOWALL, DEPUTY DIRECTOR FOR MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SENATE ENERGY & NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, ON ENCOURAGING THE NEXT GENERATION TO VISIT NATIONAL PARKS.

September 27, 2017

Chairman Daines, Ranking Member Hirono, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the National Park Service's efforts to encourage the next generation to visit national parks. The National Park Service (NPS) is engaged in a variety of efforts, including special youth programs, updates to our facilities and information technology infrastructure, and stronger public-private partnerships, to draw younger visitors and engage the next generation.

Secretary Zinke is committed to improving our national parks by addressing the deferred maintenance backlog and delivering high quality experiences to all visitors, including children, young adults, and families. National park experiences benefit young people in many ways. They provide outdoor challenges that strengthen them physically, cultivate self-reliance and stewardship ethics, teach critical lessons from our country's history, and instill pride in their national parks. Passing along our parks experiences to each succeeding generation all starts with encouraging young people to visit.

A History of Focusing on Youth

Since the establishment of the NPS in 1916, families and youth groups have been an important focus of NPS programs. The forerunner of the popular Junior Ranger program, the Yosemite Junior Nature School, was started in 1930. The NPS and the Boy Scouts of America have enjoyed a partnership since 1916, and the first National Scout Jamboree was hosted on the National Mall in 1937, attracting 25,000 scouts from across the country.

Throughout the 20th century, the NPS developed and applied the principles of heritage interpretation to help visitors of all ages understand the significance of the places they visited. During the 1960s, the NPS created the National Environmental Education Development program to bring school children to parks and increase their awareness of the natural environment. Today, nearly 400 sites offer young visitors opportunities to complete a series of activities during a park visit, share their experience with a park ranger, and receive an official Junior Ranger badge and certificate.

The NPS has long been active in employing American youth to conserve the nation's natural and cultural resources. These efforts offer young people opportunities for job skills development, teach them about conservation, and inspire them to be good stewards. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) operated from 1933 to 1942 and employed two million young men in more than 90 national parks across the country, as well as 800 state and local parks. Modeled on the success of the CCC, President Johnson's Jobs Corps program, in which the NPS participated between 1965 and 1969, focused on 16 to 21 year olds.

The CCC legacy continues today through our partnerships with conservation corps organizations, which bring significant resources and employ youth across the country to complete hundreds of individual projects on public lands involving facilities maintenance, visitor services, and resources management. We have increased our use of conservation corps in recent years as part of our intertwined efforts to reduce the maintenance backlog and increase the pipeline of new talent coming into the NPS. These public-private partnerships provide critical assistance in support of the NPS mission in a cost-effective way. We now have cooperative agreements with over 40 conservation corps and other organizations that offer opportunities for youth in our national parks.

Although hard work, these experiences reward participants with lifelong connections to special places and the pride of accomplishment in improving our nation's most treasured places. Secretary Zinke recently celebrated the 101st birthday of the NPS with youth corps members by helping to repair the Rainbow Falls Trail at Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Centennial Momentum

In the lead up to the NPS centennial in 2016, we set an ambitious goal to guide efforts to celebrate this milestone: "Connect with and create the next generation of park visitors, supporters and advocates." Through a variety of initiatives at every level and with the participation of many partners, including the National Park Foundation, we sought to find new ways to inspire a new generation to get to know--and love--their national parks. We have some measures that suggest success in meeting that ambitious goal. In 2016, we welcomed more than 330 million visitors, setting an all-time visitation record for the third year in a row. This was a 7.7 percent increase over 2015. RV overnight stays in NPS-operated campgrounds were up 12.5 percent, and backcountry overnight stays were up 6.7 percent.

While we do not have data to determine how many of those 330 million visitors were young or first-time visitors, data gathered as part of the *Find Your Park* public engagement campaign suggest that millennials had a high level of awareness around the NPS centennial efforts. Following the first year of the campaign, 1 in 3 millennials were familiar with Find Your Park and the campaign reached more than 15 billion impressions--a metric that measures the number of times people encountered the campaign through traditional print media and advertising, on the radio or social media, and on mobile devices.

This year, the Find Your Park campaign continues with the theme of Parks 101. We are inviting visitors to discover new park experiences, hidden histories, lesser-known parks, trails, and other extraordinary sites throughout the country. We are also encouraging people to learn the basics of outdoor activities like camping, hiking, kayaking, and where allowed, hunting and fishing. And Secretary Zinke recently issued a secretarial order to support and expand outdoor activities by increasing access to outdoor recreation opportunities including hunting and fishing for all Americans.

Critical investments in park infrastructure will continue through the Centennial Challenge Fund created by the National Park Service Centennial Act. It leverages philanthropic support for

signature projects, with priority on deferred maintenance, visitor services facilities, and trail maintenance. These will benefit visitors now and for many years to come.

In 2018, we will be celebrating the 50th anniversary of the National Trails System and the Wild and Scenic Rivers Acts. With federal, state, nonprofit, and private partners, we are inviting the public to discover their own personal connections to thousands of trails and more than 12,000 miles of rivers protected by the Wild & Scenic Rivers System with the *Find Your Way* campaign.

Broadening the Appeal of Parks

The ways people find out about--and visit--parks is changing. In order to meet the needs of new visitors, the NPS is taking steps to respond to current trends in outdoor recreation and heritage tourism. For example, younger people who have grown up with nearly constant access to information through technology are always hungry for new and different experiences. We want to provide what the market calls for: easy access to digital information, and a wide range of affordable, high quality, and unique activities and overnight accommodations.

Visitors want user-friendly trip planning and reservation systems. Recreation.gov is the central hub for many types of national park and other federal land reservations. In 2017, recreation.gov has already seen 37 million sessions, from 19 million users, an increase of over 20 percent from 2016. These sessions have resulted in over 4 million reservations. The NPS has almost 300 reservable facilities and activities across 150 parks, which generate almost \$30 million in net revenue. Beyond standard campground reservations, through recreation.gov, we offer activities such as a lottery for the synchronous firefly event at Great Smoky Mountains, a ranger-led Halloween cave tour at Sequoia National Park, and self-guided snowmobile permits at Yellowstone.

In the fall of 2018, an all-new recreation.gov platform will be launched with a new contractor, and major upgrades are already underway. The new system will be mobile-friendly and offer additional flexibility, allowing park managers to easily add and update the availability of facilities and activities for reservations. Trip-planning features will be improved to enable users to create, reserve, and share itineraries.

Our own nps.gov website has been the focus of significant changes, as well. In 2016, we eclipsed 500 million page views by 90 million visitors. The site consistently rates among the top performing sites in the federal government and in the travel and tourism sector. Approximately 50 percent of nps.gov visitation comes from mobile devices, so during our centennial effort, we transitioned nps.gov to a mobile-responsive design that performs better on mobile devices. We also improved trip planning functionality, including new *Things to Do* recommendations.

Through our new Application Programming Interface, data and content from parks and programs can now be shared with third parties interested in creating apps and other innovative products using data from nps.gov. Programmers have access to data including announcements about hazardous or changing conditions at a national park, news releases, special event information, lesson plans, park visitor center and campground geo-locations, operating hours, fees, and other key information.

A new approach to data on nps.gov has also expanded our ability to offer visitors content based on themes that match visitors' interests. NPS.gov now includes more than 100 subject sites, offering visitors the opportunity to explore content on topics as wide ranging as bears, forts, fossils, night skies, pirates, presidents, World War I and World War II. By inviting visitors to explore themes that resonate with them, we can introduce visitors to other NPS parks and programs across the country. With these upgrades to nps.gov, we are now positioned to provide a seamless and integrated NPS experience across nps.gov, mobile apps, social media, and other technologies.

For ten years, the public has been able to place online orders for the traditional, physical version of the America the Beautiful interagency passes and, two years ago, the lifetime recreation passes for seniors and disabled individuals also became available online. In early 2016, NPS launched a pilot program to test a new kind of online pass sales--for park-specific passes only--in seven parks. Our goal was to identify and test technology that could make it easier for visitors to purchase and use park passes, allowing them to save their passes on a mobile device or print them out, similar to the digital infrastructure that airlines use for electronic boarding passes.

Through the pilot of the digital pass program, 25,000 park passes have been sold. Two of the seven parks, Acadia National Park and Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks, have made the majority of sales (72 percent and 10 percent, respectively). Sales at Acadia have accounted for approximately 10 percent of the park's total entrance fee receipts and at Sequoia & Kings Canyon, approximately 6 percent. Total sales through the pilot program increased approximately 8 percent from 2016 to 2017. We have been assessing the pilot as it proceeds and have found that we need easier-to-use scanning devices and better methods for validating passes in areas without internet connectivity. We are currently addressing these issues and plan to expand the program to other parks and pass types.

Visitors want to be able to use their mobile devices to share photos and experiences with their friends and family--and they want to take advantage of the many internet-based resources we have developed. Connectivity has also proved critical to protecting public safety during emergencies. Ultimately, we and our partners need connectivity to operate parks more efficiently. Credit card processing and our own business operations software require internet access and, in our busiest parks, increased cellular connectivity would make our internal communications more efficient while also freeing up radio bandwidth for public safety and law enforcement operations.

Two types of connectivity are important within national parks--cellular coverage over larger areas, and WiFi access points in or near our visitor facilities. Cellular coverage continues to be a challenge in large national parks located far from population centers because there are fewer cell towers, and extreme topography reduces cell signal distance and quality. The NPS provides permits to private companies, providing access to towers and other NPS facilities, to install cellular equipment, build new towers, and use new technology. Permit applications and equipment installation are typically driven by the cellular providers' interest in providing connectivity.

Over the last several years, we have been able to increase WiFi access points in parks, with over 130 sites currently providing access in visitor centers and in partner facilities, including concessions. At many visitor centers, the NPS or our partners pay for local internet service and provide it to the public for free. However, not all parks have internet available locally, and we are not able to provide technical support to visitors who have difficulty connecting to the public WiFi.

We are making progress on both cellular coverage and WiFi access. For example, at Chaco Culture National Historical Park, consumer-grade cell signal boosters were installed at the visitor center, campground, and several other areas, improving cell coverage for visitors and quality of life for employees, along with public safety benefits. Cell signal boosters have also been used in specific areas within Gulf Islands National Seashore, Mount Rainier National Park, and Acadia National Park. Lake Mead National Recreation Area recently started the first-ever concessions contract to provide WiFi at campgrounds with AccessParks. These are just a few initial examples. We understand there is much more to do and we look forward to working Congress and the private sector to achieve better, more reliable connectivity in our parks.

We are also delivering innovative opportunities for more young people to connect with national parks virtually. We have live webcams in approximately 50 parks, including places that many people may never have the opportunity to visit in person. Katmai National Park and Preserve's Brooks Falls BearCam in Alaska broadcasts incredible images of brown bears. Last year, 60 million viewers tuned in to the BearCam and 8 million people participated in interactive webchat programs with rangers at Katmai.

Similarly, our *Channel Islands Live* distance learning programs allow students to visit Channel Islands National Park virtually and interact in real time with park staff, including NPS SCUBA divers while they are underwater. We have also provided an annual series of approximately 20 distance learning programs on presidential themes.

Our NPS Kids webpage lists ways for kids to connect with parks and the WebRangers program offers digital experiences that complement on-site programs. WebRangers is designed to give children of all ages across the world, access to more than 70 fun, free games and activities. In 2016, about 550,000 people participated in WebRangers. As with most technology, it gets dated quickly, so we are creating a strategy for the future of the digital Junior Ranger program and how it intersects with the site-based Junior Ranger programs.

Veterans Initiative

As part of an effort across all Department of the Interior bureaus, we are kicking off an initiative focused on welcoming veterans, active duty members of the military, and their families to national parks. While still in the early planning stages, ideas under consideration include creating distance learning opportunities for students on military bases domestically and overseas and linking teachers at military base schools with the Teacher-Ranger-Teacher program. The Teacher-Ranger-Teacher program places teachers in parks during the summer to learn about park resources and develop lesson plans for use in both their classrooms and in the park with students. We are also looking at possible opportunities to engage with military development programs like Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps for high school students.

Interpretation/Education Innovation

In individual parks across the country, our front-line rangers are experimenting with innovative new methods for engaging with visitors. For example, we now have mobile visitor centers for the Santa Monica Mountains and Golden Gate National Recreation Areas, as well as other parks. With support from partners like the Golden Gate Conservancy, these food-truck-style vehicles, known as Roving Ranger and La Ranger Troca, bring the parks to the people, attending community events, festivals, and fairs. Through these pop-ups beyond park boundaries, we can reach more young people, including those that may not know about national parks, may not be regular visitors, or may not have transportation available to reach a park. In addition, our interpretive rangers and interns in parks and pop-ups use audience-centered interpretation to encourage visitors to be active participants, ask questions, follow their own curiosity, engage directly with national park resources and explore the current social context, while discussing their experiences with other visitors.

Connecting with young people on social media platforms continues to be an area of growth for the NPS as well. Individual national parks and programs are highly visible on social media. We continue to encourage the creation of engaging content that invites more young people and new visitors to connect with, visit, volunteer, and share their parks experiences. More than 300 parks and programs maintain social media accounts, which engage with millions of followers on platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. In addition, we are experimenting with other popular platforms like Snapchat. We know that about 30 percent of followers on the national NPS Facebook account are in the age range of 18-35 years old, and we believe that is the case on other platforms as well. We also work with partners, including the National Park Foundation, to feature and amplify the best park content on our national social media channels.

Public-Private Partnerships

There are two principal types of partners--for-profit and non-profit--that multiply our reach and engagement with younger visitors. Strengthening these partnerships is a high priority for the NPS. Our most tightly linked for-profit partners are concessioners, who have provided traditional services such as overnight accommodations, food and beverage, and retail sales in parks for well over 100 years. Along with outfitters and guides operating under commercial use authorizations, our for-profit partners are essential for welcoming visitors to parks. They provide many new and innovative services and programs that cater to millennial visitors and young families. Examples include a gourmet coffee and bike rental shop at the Grand Canyon National Park, great food and outdoor concerts at Cape Cod National Seashore, and partnerships with local schools at Acadia National Park. To enhance opportunities for recreation and visitor enjoyment, Cape Hatteras National Seashore is working with existing partners and seeking new partners to provide services including surfing lessons, guided fishing, educational programs, off-road vehicle driving tours, and guided waterfowl hunting. Two public workshops were recently held to provide information to interested outdoor guides and business owners.

Park concession partners have been working to upgrade and expand choices in overnight accommodation facilities, and to offer healthier, more sustainable food options. These improvements benefit visitors of all ages, and they appeal to millennials in particular. Concessioners have been testing and installing new cabin concepts at Gateway National

Recreation Area, Badlands National Park, and Lassen Volcanic National Park. They have also recently completed impressive renovations at several iconic lodges and cabins at Glacier National Park, as well as Canyon Lodge and Cabins at Yellowstone National Park, to continue providing the traditional lodging options visitors have enjoyed for many generations.

Another type of for-profit partnership involves companies that use a mix of cause-marketing campaigns and philanthropy to support national parks, promoting national parks along with their own brands. Some of these partnerships also result in new opportunities for the public to engage with national parks. For example, Google's Made With Code program allowed youth to create custom emojis on hot chocolate during the events associated with the National Christmas Tree at President's Park and another year allowed them to use code to control the lights on the state and regional holiday trees. American Express partnered with Games for Change to develop the Save the Park game and hosted a Game-Jam for high school and college students to explore how a park-design game could help people engage with parks and with one another.

Partnerships with non-profit groups have also increased our engagement with younger people. For example, NatureBridge provides hands-on residential programs for children and teens. Their multi-day programs take place outdoors, where students are immersed in parks like Yosemite, Golden Gate, Olympic, Santa Monica Mountains, Channel Islands, and Prince William Forest. NatureBridge welcomes more than 700 schools and 30,000 students and teachers each year.

In summary, the NPS is embarking on a multi-disciplinary approach to engaging new audiences in our amazing national parks. With the efforts of the talented and passionate staff of the NPS and our partners, along with Secretary Zinke's emphasis to build a park system for the future, I am confident that these efforts will inspire and engage yet another generation of Americans in the special places that the NPS stewards.

Chairman Daines, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you or other members of the subcommittee may have.