

Statement of Thomas C. Kiernan, President
National Parks Conservation Association
House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies
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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Moran, and members of the subcommittee, I am Tom Kiernan, President of the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA). I appreciate the opportunity to testify on behalf of our more than 600,000 members and supporters from every state and congressional district to provide our views regarding appropriations for the National Park System for the upcoming fiscal year. Since 1919, NPCA has been the leading, independent, private voice in support of promoting, protecting and enhancing America's national parks for people from all walks of life to learn from, be inspired by and enjoy – now and on into the future.

We respect that it will be a challenge again for you to sort out and balance competing, often conflicting demands for limited federal resources; we understand the difficult task you face. I commend each of you for your commitment and for your fortitude in going forward even with the specter of an unprecedented sequestration looming over all our heads. I particularly want to compliment you, Mr. Chairman, for your courage in spearheading the letter calling on super committee members to consider all options in addressing the federal deficit last year. Putting common sense ahead of ideology, you demonstrated the kind of serious, responsible leadership needed to resolve the problems our country faces and we admire you tremendously for it.

I am here to argue that during these times especially, investing in the national parks should be an American priority. Providing adequate funding for the national parks is more than simply another expenditure; it is an investment in our nation's future with tangible returns that are particularly significant now as we continue to try to recover from this long economic downturn.

We've noted before that for every federal dollar spent on the national parks, at least four dollars are generated in economic value to the public at large. Adequately funded national parks create jobs, sustainable businesses and vibrant communities. The national parks are reliable economic engines: visitors to the National Park System contributed more than \$31 billion to local economies and supported 258,000 jobs in 2010, an increase of \$689 million and 11,500 jobs over 2009, according to recently published data by the park service and Michigan State University. The same data showed that visitors to Yellowstone spent \$334 million, supporting almost 5,000 jobs, and City of Rocks supported 85 jobs through \$6.3 million in visitor spending. These are just two illustrative examples of the economic impact of park units on local communities.

According to a 2011 study from the McKinsey Global Institute commissioned by the Interior Department, the national parks make up 60% (\$33 billion) of Interior's overall contribution to the economy due to outdoor recreation. The study also determined that for every two people employed by the national parks, another job was created in local economies. In one example, Glacier National Park led to 18,000 local jobs, accounting for 25% of the jobs in the restaurant sector, and 50% of jobs in the lodging sector.

But people won't come to the parks if their experience isn't enjoyable or if it's marred by parks in poor condition and lacking necessary staff.

In January, NPCA, the National Park Hospitality Association, and the National Parks Foundation, in collaboration with the National Park Service, convened an unprecedented event called America's Summit on National Parks. The gathering, which included hundreds of diverse community, education, economic, business, tourism, health care, conservation, youth, and political leaders, reinforced the strong support for national parks among a wide cross-section of the American public. The nonpartisan nature of support for national parks was evident there, and at the subsequent White House Conference on Conservation. Summit participants agreed on a set of principles to guide national park-related policies, opportunities and funding as we prepare for the 2016 centennial. The principles—which include a focus on funding—quickly garnered endorsements from nearly 100 businesses, philanthropic, conservation, tourism and recreation groups, and many more continue to sign on. Efforts launched at the summit continue. We all look forward to working with you to help ensure the federal government does its part to perpetuate the American story and values through the national parks.

This February, President Obama signed an Executive Order to promote tourism in the United States, and at the time Secretary Salazar noted that, “By investing in our parks and promoting them to visitors, especially internationally, we can have the dual benefit of an improved National Park System and a stronger economy that produces more jobs.” Unfortunately, the administration's FY 2013 budget request for the National Park Service is just not consistent with their lofty and ambitious pronouncements. We ask you to find a way to do better.

With an overall request for the Park Service that is essentially flat, the administration would increase funding for specific, targeted activities under park service operations by \$13.5 million. These include some additional money for the administration's priorities, but mostly funding for a lot of things that really just have to be paid for, such as the presidential inauguration. The problem is that under the administration's budget, these worthwhile things would come at the expense of base park operations – the very account that keeps the parks open and functioning and keeps rangers on the job. We were disappointed that the administration simultaneously claimed to provide funding for fixed costs while cutting budgets at the park level by nearly \$22 million; we respectfully ask your subcommittee to find the funds to prevent this staff cut at a time when we are seeking to enhance the tourism economy and keep parks protected. The damage these cuts would do to the gains and improvements made as a result of this subcommittee's laudable efforts are not theoretical. This cut would result in the loss of more than 200 FTE, which depending on how those cuts are apportioned, could eliminate as many as 600 seasonal ranger positions. It makes no sense to market our national parks to international visitors while cutting the funding necessary for the parks to serve those very visitors when they arrive.

National parks are among the most visited locations in America. According to Forbes, eight of the top 25 U. S. travel destinations are national parks. If the administration is serious about

promoting tourism as a boon to the economy, funding for the national parks – and especially base park operations – should really be increased rather than kept flat or reduced. What kind of impression will it make on visitors if the parks are allowed to return to the days of missing rangers, shuttered visitor centers, dirty restrooms, deteriorating resources, dangerous roads and trails, and reduced interpretive and educational programs? Not a very good one, I suspect. At the very least, we are hopeful the subcommittee will improve on the administration's request and provide more adequate and realistic funding for base park operations and fixed costs.

NPCA fully supports helping the Park Service understand, prepare for, and respond to climate-driven changes unfolding in national parks throughout the country. Planning in advance for things such as increasing wildfires, invasive species, and coastal flooding is needed.

We're also worried about the continuing trend of reductions in the national parks construction account and the impact that will have on the continually growing deferred maintenance backlog.

Last fall, NPCA released a report entitled *Made in America: Investing in National Parks for our Heritage and Our Economy*, which highlighted the jeopardy in which continual, incremental cuts place our national parks, the heritage they protect, and the experiences they provide. Over the last two years, NPS discretionary funding has been reduced 6%; operations funding has been reduced \$25 million; and construction has been cut by 35%, or \$84 million, contributing to a 66% decline in that account since FY02 in today's dollars. Total discretionary funding for the National Park Service is more than \$400 million—or 14%—below FY02 in today's dollars.

The construction cut is proposed despite a maintenance backlog of more than \$3 billion for the most critical systems, and a total deferred maintenance backlog of more than \$11 billion. The backlog is attributable to chronic funding deficiencies in several categories, including operations, transportation and construction. These deficiencies have forced park managers to make choices between what needs to be done and what absolutely must be done immediately to keep facilities up and running and visitors safe and satisfied for the time being. The longer needed repairs and maintenance to facilities is put off, the more expensive and difficult they become. The National Park Service needs almost \$700 million annually just to keep up with the backlog, yet receives just half that. We realize deferring projects is one mechanism to minimize cuts to other accounts in an austere climate, but we fear we are getting to the point where there is nothing left in that account, and that is compounding the problem and the long-term threat to our national heritage.

We are pleased that the administration recognizes the need to continue to fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), so that critical lands like the state lands in Grand Teton National Park can be protected. It's important to recognize that there are so many LWCF needs that continue to go unfunded, with a backlog of more than \$2 billion for NPS acquisitions. There are currently more than 2.6 million acres of private inholdings in national parks, and when there are willing sellers, there is broad public support for acquisition because people want to see public access for recreation and intact parks that don't suffer from incompatible development.

Removing privately owned inholdings and completing parks actually makes their administration and resource management more efficient and cost effective, thereby freeing up money for other needs. Purchasing inholdings from willing sellers can help facilitate better invasive species control and water quality, reduce fire risks, remove obstacles to recreation and wildlife management, and facilitate conservation of historic resources. At the moment, with real estate prices at rock bottom, there are many good deals to be had from willing sellers. We are hopeful the president's LWCF request will accommodate what is necessary to carry out the purchase and exchange of Wyoming state lands to benefit Grand Teton National Park and other timely needs. We appreciate this subcommittee's bipartisan understanding of the value of the program and hope we can work with you to continue support in FY13.

It seems as if there's always a good deal of talk on Capitol Hill about what the American people want, expect and deserve. Phrases such as those are thrown about fairly readily on both sides of the Capital on both sides of the aisle. The views of the American people about their national parks are pretty clear. Their love affair with the national parks spans time, region, economic status and political persuasion. As reflected in a recent Harris poll, national parks are among the most popular roles for the federal government. The National Park Service is arguably the most popular federal agency and the park ranger may be the most recognizable and appreciated federal public servant. Statistics show that support for national parks has remained strong and even increased with the recent downturn in the economy. A 2010 poll found that nine out of ten Americans have visited a national park and six out of ten did so within the past two years. Despite concerns about the economy and the federal deficit, 88% of Americans say it is either extremely important or quite important to protect and support the national parks. And with the park service centennial in mind, 85% of voters surveyed favor giving national parks enough funding so they are fully restored and ready to serve the public for the next 100 years.

By taking care of our national parks, this subcommittee can make a statement that Congress can still do some things well. Despite a political scene that is so divisive and dysfunctional at so many levels, Americans from all walks of life and political persuasions cherish our national parks and want them protected. This subcommittee can make a statement that it understands that, and that the Congress is still capable of hearing them. And at the same time, it can make an investment in local economies and help recapture the U.S. share of the tourism market by ensuring parks are well protected and maintained and visitors have a safe and inspiring experience.

As the milestone 100th anniversary approaches, the parks will be more and more at the forefront of people's minds, and more and more Americans will be drawn to visit a national park or park unit. We hope they will be proud of what they find and take pride in their experience and heritage. Whether this happens or not is, in no small measure, a function of the actions this subcommittee and your colleagues in Congress undertake.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify.