

STATEMENT OF CHRISTOPHER JARVI, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR FOR PARTNERSHIPS, INTERPRETATION AND EDUCATION, VOLUNTEERS AND OUTDOOR RECREATION, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, HOUSE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES, REGARDING TRENDS IN VISITATION TO THE NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM.

SEPTEMBER 13, 2006

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide additional information on the subject of visitation to the National Park System and how we can build a stronger partnership with the tourism community that is mutually beneficial.

At no time in the history of the National Park System are we more cognizant of the need to work with our partners in the tourism community. In previous testimony before this committee, we offered several examples of successful partnerships between parks and our tourism partners in gateway communities. Because we share many common interests and goals relating to visitor satisfaction, we understand the importance of working together with these partners to keep the park experience relevant in a market environment where there are competing choices for consumers' leisure time. For example, the National Park Service (NPS) in conjunction with the tourism industry will continue to work towards highlighting opportunities in lesser-known park units and emphasizing experiences and activities that can take place during non-peak seasons.

At the previous hearing in April, we gave a comprehensive summary of what we know about the trends in visitation in our national parks, the complexity of the factors impacting those trends, and some of the things that the NPS is proactively undertaking to become more relevant in light of the changing economics, demographics, and visitor use patterns and preferences we have experienced across America today. It is not my objective to repeat that testimony today, but instead to update you on how we used that hearing as a springboard from which to build a stronger tourism strategy leveraged by the joint efforts of our partners in the tourism industry.

Near the end of the April 6 hearing, you facilitated a discussion among members of the two panels to begin a dialogue to address ways by which we could collectively boost visitation in our national parks. Specific reference was made to developing a better understanding of our potential customers so that we can offer more relevant programming and services, train our collective staff to help them work better together, learn to work more effectively with gateway communities, and create marketing strategies that focused on utilizing our facilities in a manner that maximizes public use while not degrading the intrinsic value of the parks.

A first step toward better understanding our potential customers is to expand and refine our visitor services survey program so that park managers can learn more about the public's preferences, experiences, and assessments of facilities and services. The President's 2007 budget request included \$250,000 for this purpose, but this proposed increase was not included in either the House-passed or the Senate committee-reported versions of the FY 2007 appropriations bill for the Department of the Interior.

Identifying and satisfying common objectives is at the heart of all successful partnerships. In response to your challenge, I am pleased to join the ad hoc Visitation Hearing Working Group sitting at this table today, whose members will issue a joint report on our activities since the first hearing on this topic.

This working group held nine meetings between May 24 th and September 6 th of this year. Our early discussions revolved around a continuation of the dialogue that began at the April hearing, initially centering on an interpretation of the individual and aggregated visitation figures across our various regions and an evaluation of the various underlying factors. We recognized the complexity of the issues collectively facing us and tried to avoid conclusions based on speculation derived from incomplete research. Our group members agreed that an additional year of visitation data and better visitor attitudinal survey research needs to be collected and analyzed before conclusions on specific trends can be drawn.

During this initial phase of the dialogue, working group members expressed confidence that visitation could be positively affected through a joint and well-coordinated effort rather than by working individually. Early in the dialogue, the working group identified five focus areas around which we could concentrate our work: communications, research, gateway communities, marketing, and cultural adaptation. Further, we thought it useful to engage in some pilot projects in each of these areas to test our ability to work together and to demonstrate how our partnership activities could bear results. Sub-groups of the larger working committee were formed to work on their respective projects. These expanded sub-groups held additional meetings, reporting their progress back to the overall working group.

Each focus area requires the identification of the relative roles of each party in addressing the topic and in determining activities requiring joint cooperation. These five focus areas have provided us with the framework for the meetings of the working group and for the resulting demonstration projects.

First, under the focus area related to communications, we discussed the kinds of messages that would reflect our common interest and resonate with consumers. We agreed the focus of these messages should be on the experience. We proposed an ongoing dialogue to focus on the issues relating to tourism partnerships and visitation to public lands. Our first effort in this area was a demonstration project called the "Forum on Tourism and Public Lands" that was held yesterday in this hearing room. We also talked about the role of coordinated efforts to provide information to media outlets who communicate to various consumer audiences. We reviewed ways that training on tourism could be incorporated into NPS employee training sessions and that communications tools could be offered in multi-lingual versions to the tourism industry.

Second, under the focus area related to research, we looked at joint opportunities to improve the questions asked of the respondents during the upcoming Comprehensive Survey of the American Public to be conducted in spring, 2007. In preparation for the next survey, we expect to gain additional knowledge and understanding of public attitudes about travel and their needs. We know there is an increasing set of consumer choices for leisure-time activities away from the home. Yet, as we contemplate 21 st Century relevancy, we need to be market-sensitive and pay close attention to our visitors and their impressions of parks relative to other forms of leisure-time activities. We also reviewed the research program conducted by the Travel Industry Association of America (TIA), identifying ways TIA and NPS can work together to better understand travel trends and the ways in which people relate to parks and outdoor recreation. The working group proposed that the NPS tourism office study secondary data obtained by private and academic institutions that relates to basic motivations for travel, which can in turn improve our joint communications efforts.

Third, under the focus area related to gateway communities, we discussed the concept of "sustainable tourism" and noted the linkage between sustainable communities and conservation of park landscapes. The NPS is very interested in working closely with gateway communities' tourism practitioners. This gateway dynamic highlights a close match with park-level visitor services programs. The working group considered how each party may contribute expertise towards cooperative marketing programs. In addition, we looked at methods of partner identification, recognition, and clarification of relative roles of each partner.

Fourth, under the focus area related to marketing, the group saw value in linking parks and gateway communities by shared stories and themes, as well as natural geographical loops. With this linkage established, sample itineraries can be created which may be offered to consumers as trip suggestions. One of the five demonstration projects is designed to highlight this concept and is expected to draw broad comment and review.

Finally, in the focus area related to cultural adaptation, the group discussed ways to recognize the differences and similarities between the cultures of tourism and park organizations. In an attempt to diminish some of those differences and to highlight the similarities, we looked at the possibility of setting up programs and systems to recognize and reward park employees who use innovative approaches to working with partners and achieving results that promote the parks. To help our tourism partners, concessioners, and other stakeholders to gain a better understanding of the National Park System and our agency's culture, the NPS has announced a free e-course entitled "Introduction of the National Park Service: Its History and Mission" that will be available to the public via the Internet.

I have been impressed and pleased with the enthusiasm and proactive spirit displayed by our working group members. The projects described in the joint presentation to follow my testimony represent tangible work that can be replicated in some fashion in all seven of our NPS regions. I would like to recognize and salute our tourism partners who participated in this working group. As business owners and managers of tourism destination marketing and related advocacy organizations, they have important jobs in a very dynamic industry. During nine group meetings as well as several sub-group meetings, they have maintained a steady focus and a high level of creative energy.

In a joint presentation to the committee, the Visitation Hearing Working Group will report on five demonstration projects. The first project will involve training and professional career enhancement opportunities for travel professionals. The second project will highlight the potential for joint marketing communications where sample travel itineraries link parks, other public lands, and gateway attractions based on a common theme. The third project will address tourism-related enhancements to the Comprehensive Survey of the American Public. The fourth project involves the working group co-sponsoring a joint meeting with a collection of state delegations coming to Washington, DC as part of the Travel Industry Association of America's National Leadership Summit.

The final project builds on the NPS' extensive record of employee training and continuing education for career professionals. Upon entry to the NPS, park employees take a course entitled "National Park Service Fundamentals" where they gain an overview of the National Park System and the various competencies they will need to acquire to be successful in their career. One of the working group's demonstration projects will add tourism materials to this course as part of this competency set.

The new National Park Service Management Policies, released August 31, 2006, include new fundamental principles critical to tourism and recreation, and to local gateway communities. Section 8.2.7 states: "The Service will support and promote appropriate visitor use through cooperation and coordination with the tourism industry." As part of this effort, the NPS will develop and maintain a constructive dialogue and outreach with public and private organizations and businesses, including state, tribal, and local tourism and travel offices. The NPS will continue to maintain positive and effective working relationships with park concessioners and others in the tourism industry to ensure a high quality of service to park visitors. The NPS will also collaborate with industry professionals to promote sustainable and informed tourism that incorporates socioeconomic and ecological concerns and supports long-term preservation of park resources and quality visitor experiences. Finally, the NPS will use this collaboration as an opportunity to encourage and showcase environmental leadership by the NPS and by the tourism industry, including park concessioners.

The mission of the National Park Service is to preserve unimpaired the resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations. As we contemplate the need to remain relevant into our 2<sup>nd</sup> century, we recognize the importance in working with our tourism partners to promote a seamless network of parks by linking outdoor recreation opportunities in parks and communities to tourism, health, and conservation.

Working together focused on our common interests, we can tackle the challenges of inviting minority group populations to visit our parks and find connections to a common heritage. We can invite baby-boomer grandparents to spend some of their leisure-time becoming reacquainted with national parks, while exposing their grandchildren to our history and all the wonders of nature. Together we can reinvent our destinations and package our services to be perceived as more attractive than alternative leisure-time experiences.

Mr. Chairman, it is the intent of the National Park Service to continue this dialogue with our tourism partners in the months and years to come. One example of this continuing effort can be seen in the proceedings of the Forum on Tourism and Public Lands held here yesterday. Each of our seven NPS regions has appointed a tourism specialist to serve on the National Tourism Council. This council meets regularly as an advisory group to our national tourism liaison function. With this network of tourism professionals in place to support our parks at all levels, the agency is organized to pay attention to tourism issues and opportunities for partnership. Continued engagement and close cooperation with our gateway community stakeholders is a key element of the NPS mission and it is in the best interest of our agency, our partners, and of our citizens.

Thank you for this opportunity to present our testimony and I will be happy to answer any questions you or other committee members might have. I look forward to participating in the joint presentation of the Visitation Hearing Working Group.