

Testimony for U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
Subcommittee on Competitiveness, Innovation, and Export Promotion hearing April 27,
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America the Beautiful: Promoting Our National Parks as Travel Destinations

Witness: Scott Bacher, owner and operator of Carlsbad KOA, New Mexico

Madame Chairperson (Senator Klobuchar), Distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on this important subject.

My wife and I own a KOA campground north of Carlsbad, New Mexico. Carlsbad Caverns National Park is the main tourist attraction in the area. About 90-95% of my customers are there only because they are going to the Caverns. There are several other attractions in the area, such as state parks and the national forest, that may keep them in the area, but it's the Caverns they come to see.

You can probably tell from my accent that I'm originally from New York. I purchased Carlsbad KOA in 2007 after looking at over 100 locations. I wanted a place near a national park so I felt secure in the cash flow. I have been very fortunate to have a successful business that has doubled in four years. Carlsbad KOA is rated the top KOA in New Mexico and in the top 300 of over 12,000 campgrounds in the nation. Business has been so good for us that we encouraged our daughter and family to move down and help us run the business. If you want to know more about our operation, please visit our website at www.CarlsbadKOA.com.

I was told to address what impacts the national park has on my business. A direct benefit, of course, is that the world famous site draws visitors who spend money on lodging, food, and other services. At Carlsbad KOA, we have about 50,000 visitors every year. Most of them go visit the Caverns which had over 432,000 visitors last year¹. From this steady income, we were able to build the business from 19,000 customers in 2007 to 50,000 last year. Indirectly, we benefit from the parks' impact on the local economy, such as the hospitality industry employing and spending money locally. The park helps make the area a better place to live. An economic study done in 2002 by Michigan State University states,

“Including secondary effects from the circulation of the park payroll and visitor spending through the economy, the total impact of the park is almost 1,000 jobs and \$17 million in income in the county.”²

Looking to the future, I feel positive that good changes are coming. In the near term, I think that the baby boom generation will continue to travel to national parks in steady numbers, which means a dependable income for me. At the local level, we will be happy when the four-lane highway construction is completed that links Texas and southwestern states to this corner of New

¹ Data from CCNP made up of the sum of ticket sales, an additional 10% for those who don't enter a cave, and backcountry permits. 15 year average is 460,000 visitors annually.

² *Economic Impacts of Carlsbad Caverns National Park on the Local (Eddy County, NM) Economy, 2002*; Daniel J Stynes, Michigan State University; February 2003

Mexico. Our roads have not been in good condition making RV drivers unhappy or uneasy. Good roads mean travelers are more likely to come and stay longer. The park also has construction going on right now designed to make the roads and parking lots better and safer. Lastly, there is currently a campaign to beautify Carlsbad. As a gateway community, to both the national park and my business, having a welcoming, clean town is critical for visitors overall perception of the area. As Carlsbad becomes more attractive to visitors, there is a greater chance they'll stay longer and spend more.

I look forward to these improvements, but there are other issues that need attention. The most critical to me is the need for the parks to advertise, or raise awareness of what they are and have to offer. National parks are great places to connect with our national heritage and nature and to reconnect with family and friends. I understand the restrictions that the parks can't advertise directly, but perhaps there could be ways to support businesses or help organizations, like the local Chamber of Commerce, advertise the parks. Secondly, there needs to be tourist friendly businesses in the area. This could be another awareness issue, but directed at gateway communities and business owners. How much money do we lose because the service wasn't good or the town looked uninviting? Finally, we need to attract more foreign visitors. Carlsbad Caverns National Park is a World Heritage Site. That's like naming it the eighth wonder of the world. We should capitalize on this designation and boost the chances of other national parks gaining the designation. For example, I've heard that White Sands National Monument has been nominated to be a World Heritage Site.

The collaboration between Carlsbad Caverns and KOA has been great. For instance, the national park makes their literature readily available which keeps customers informed and interested. Also, the park offers free programs that cannot be experienced elsewhere. For example, I love being able to tell visitors about the bat flight program that happens every night in the summer. The visitors have a great time if there are a lot of bats or not. It's one of those rare things to do unlike anything they'd find at home. Most often, I meet park staff through the Carlsbad Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber has a networking breakfast every Friday and we see each other at the local Tourism Council meetings. Lastly, I was invited to speak at a park-hosted conference for local business owners and community leaders to conservation efforts, "green" practices, and recycling because at the campground we have a wind powered generator and _____.

In summary, let me say that the park's impact on me and my business is significant. I know that if the national park closed for good tomorrow my business would dry up and blow away. I count on the Caverns to be there and provide the excellent services that they do and on having such a great working relationship with them.

Again, Madame Chairperson, Distinguished Members, thank you for allowing me to present testimony on this issue.