

STATEMENT OF WILL SHAFROTH, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR FISH, WILDLIFE, AND PARKS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON COMPETIVENESS, INNOVATION, AND EXPORT PROMOTION OF THE SENATE COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE AT THE OVERSIGHT HEARING ON AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL: PROMOTING OUR NATIONAL PARKS AS TRAVEL DESTINATIONS.

APRIL 27, 2010

Madam Chairwoman, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to present the Department of the Interior's views on tourism and national parks. The National Park Service is proud to be a steward of our nation's most revered natural, historical, and cultural sites and to welcome visitors from across the nation and all over the world to enjoy these special places.

Visitation levels for the National Park System demonstrate the public's great interest in these national treasures as tourism destinations. In 2009, there were over 285 million visits to national parks, recreation areas, historic sites, and other units — a 3.9 per cent increase over the previous year. Our national parks are important to local and regional economies. In 2008, visitors spent \$11.6 billion in communities surrounding national park units and supported 205,000 local jobs.¹ The economic sectors most directly affected by this visitor spending include lodging, restaurants, retail trade, transportation, and amusements.

The levels of visitation and economic impact vary significantly by park. Yellowstone National Park, a premier tourist destination, attracted almost 3.3 million visitors in 2009; Voyageurs National Park, which is less well-known, attracted about 222,000 visitors. In between, to give a few examples, were Mount Rushmore National Memorial, with 2,260,192 visitors; Shenandoah National Park, with 1,120,981 visitors; Everglades National Park, with 900,882 visitors; Castillo de San Marcos National Monument, with 667,783 visitors; and Carlsbad Caverns National Park, with 432,639 visitors.

Generally, the more visitors a park has, the greater the economic impact. Economic analyses from 2008 show that those same parks mentioned had economic impacts as follows: Yellowstone, \$345 million in visitor spending and 6,300 jobs; Everglades \$84.7 million in spending and 1,551 jobs; Shenandoah, \$65.7 million in spending and 1,170 jobs; Mount Rushmore, \$60.4 million in spending and 1,146 jobs; Castillo de San Marcos, \$41 million in spending and 719 jobs; Carlsbad Caverns, \$22.3 million in spending and 437 jobs; and Voyageurs, \$11 million in spending and 200 jobs². One study found that communities surrounding the largest units of the National Park System had, on average, almost four times faster population growth, almost three times faster job growth, and two times faster growth in real income than the nation overall.³

¹ Stynes, D.J. "National Park Visitor Spending and Payroll Impacts: 2008." National Park Service, 2009.

² Ibid.

³ Power, T.M. "The Economic Foundations of Public Parks." *The George Wright Forum*, 2002.

Within overall levels we have no estimates of international visitation for the National Park System as a whole. However, estimates do exist for certain parks. For example, international tourism accounts for approximately ten percent of all visitation at Yellowstone National Park, with over two-thirds of the international visitors coming from Canada, the Netherlands, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Italy. At Voyageurs National Park, on the other hand, international tourism accounts for only about one percent of all visitation, with almost two-thirds of the international visitors coming from Canada, Germany, and the United Kingdom.

In 2008, the National Park Service approved a national tourism plan titled “Strategic Alliances for Sustainable Visitation.” The plan addresses the need for national park experiences to be as relevant to our new audiences in the 21st century as in the past. To accomplish this goal, individual parks and the National Park Service as a whole are encouraged to take advantage of the significant partnership capacity available among people and organizations in the tourism community.

When we engage our tourism partners to invite Americans and overseas travelers, we expand our capacity to inform audiences about a myriad of enjoyable experiences and environmental stewardship which are the cornerstones of the National Park Service mission. We analyze and leverage common interests through tourism partnerships. Common interests include a desire to reach target audiences such as families who travel with children, diverse demographic groups that travel more often if their awareness is increased, and travelers who may prefer to visit during off-peak periods. In this way, we can highlight the special experiences and opportunities in visiting some of the “hidden gems” in our collection of lesser-known park units. Working in concert with our tourism partners, we can also leverage our communications resources to expand the reach of our conservation messages.

The National Park Service also promotes a sustainable tourism project, referred to as GeoTourism, which is compatible with the National Park Service mission of preservation and education. An example of this can be found in a new and innovative marketing project in the “Crown of the Continent” GeoRegion, where Glacier National Park is located. In an effort that began with the formation of a local stewardship council, the gateway communities and state tourism office in Montana and the provincial tourism office in Alberta tell stories about visitor experiences that include cultural, historical, tribal, and recreational activities in a way that respects conservation and community values and asks the visitors to do the same. While the impetus and communications concept came from the community, the federal land management agencies, including the National Park Service tourism program and Glacier National Park staff, played an important role in facilitating the project. Another key partner in GeoTourism projects is the National Geographic Society’s Center for Sustainable Destinations.

The National Park Service manages 17 World Heritage Sites, which hold special appeal with international travelers. The significance placed on a World Heritage Site experience is a strong factor in influencing destination decision making by prospective international visitors. The United States is fortunate to have 20 U.S. sites included on the UNESCO World Heritage List, which includes almost 900 important cultural and natural treasures around the globe. World Heritage Sites such as the Great Barrier Reef, the Serengeti plains, and the Taj Mahal give the World Heritage List great prestige and make the designation greatly sought after by many

countries. The National Park System sites include the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, the Everglades, and the Statue of Liberty, but also some lesser-known destinations such as Chaco Culture National Historical Park in New Mexico and San Juan Historic Site in Puerto Rico. Many countries, particularly those in Europe, Latin America, and Asia, have taken advantage of the World Heritage designation to market and promote their heritage to the global community. Promotional campaigns based on National Park Service-managed World Heritage Sites geared towards international tourists could help increase international tourism to the U.S.

Two current activities may have implications for promotion of national parks to international travelers. One is the U.S. Travel Association's annual business-to-business marketplace known as the International Pow Wow. This year, during the four-day event in May 2010, the association will use one day to celebrate "America's National Parks." It will be an opportunity for 5,000 buyers and suppliers of U.S. package tours, as well as over 100 members of the international media, to focus on national parks. Several park professionals will be on hand during the event to meet with members of this influential group.

The other undertaking is the National Park Service's involvement in commemorative activities related to the sesquicentennial of the U.S. Civil War, and its causes and consequences for our nation's development. A Servicewide working group has completed a vision statement for the commemoration as well as a set of public events covering all facets of historical consideration—battlefields and beyond. Over the next five years, the Service, along with tourism partners, intends to encourage Americans and international visitors to visit our more than 75 park units that interpret the Civil War battles, the Civil Rights struggle for freedom and equality, and home front stories emanating from the era such as the expansion of the west. Most of the national park units involved in this effort are among the lesser-known parks, but include well-known parks, such as Gettysburg National Military Park

The recent passage of the Travel Promotion Act could provide greater opportunities for attracting more international visitors to national parks. International visitors typically spend at least \$4,000 per visit, contributing \$4 billion to the U.S. economy. According to a recent survey compiled by the Commerce Department's Office of Travel and Tourism Industries, of the estimated 23.8 million overseas travelers to the United States, approximately 4.5 million, or 19 percent, are said to have visited a national park. These visitors have a large role now, and could have an even larger role in the future, in the economic support of national park gateway communities. The new Corporation for Travel Promotion could potentially contribute to the growth by showcasing the units of the National Park System—the icons and hidden gems alike—in its efforts to attract visitors from abroad.

Madam Chairwoman, this concludes my prepared statement. I would be happy to answer any questions you or other members of the subcommittee may have.