

Visitation to Our National Parks in the 21st Century – Meeting the Challenge  
Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives –  
Subcommittee on National Parks, House Resources Committee,  
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The above listed panel members now known as the Park Visitation Working Group (Working Group) presented a *PowerPoint* presentation to the Subcommittee on National Parks, on September 13, 2006. Following is a bullet point recap of that presentation, with some specific clarification of the major points of discussion, without the graphics.

America's National Parks, with more than 276 million visitors annually, are not only an important component of our nation's social fabric, they are often the driving force in the economies of many rural communities. No other nation on earth has made the commitment the United States has to preserving and protecting its national treasures with National Park designations, and because of our foresight, millions of both domestic and international visitors make America's National Parks a "must see" attraction. Tourism continues to provide a positive balance of trade component to our nation's economy.

The Subcommittee, after accepting testimony from the panel on April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2006, invited the group to begin working together with the Park Service, and accept the challenge of developing ideas that could become pilot projects to help with the issue of declining Park visitation.

- At the April 6<sup>th</sup> hearing, you asked us to "put our heads together", and see what solutions we collectively could agree would help National Park visitation
- Between May and September, 2006 the Working Group held nine conference calls, and contributed countless hours, working to develop several pilot programs

The Panel focuses on five areas, and proposes pilot programs in the following areas:

- 1.) Communications
- 2.) Research
- 3.) Gateway Communities
- 4.) Marketing
- 5.) Cultural Adaptation

1.) Communications efforts by the Working Group include the following:

- The Western States Tourism Policy Council and the National Alliance of Gateway Communities, in conjunction with its Federal land management agency partners, held the first ever "Forum on Public Lands" in Washington D.C. September 12, 2006. The forum included: Agency Perspectives, with key staff from the National Park Service, Forest Service and BLM; Congressional Perspectives, with key staff from the House and Senate public lands subcommittees and Private Sector Perspectives, representing gateway communities, outdoor recreation services providers, and the outdoor recreation industry
- Tourism Training Module for National Parks Service Employees
- Interactive, web based multi-lingual training program under development for travel agents
- NPS develops visitors enjoyment training module for new employees (August, 2006)
- Travel Agent's education program slated to increase understanding of National Parks product.
- Program to begin with the basics, and provide general information about the National Park Service, as well as specific information about Park units
- Training modules to be on the web, interactive and multilingual
- Certificate program for successful completion

2.) Research – The Working Group has proposed adding additional survey questions to the NPS "Comprehensive Survey of the American Public"

- NPS conducts a major review of public impressions and attitudes of both visitors and non-visitors of National Parks every five years

- Dr. Suzanne Cook, representing the Visitation Hearing Working Group, has been named to the advisory committee for the upcoming survey in the spring of 2007
- A tourism module will be added that would be a special inquiry of considerable depth and detail

The NPS Visitor Survey's tourism module will ask:

- What leads to trip motivation
- Basic needs consumers respond to when planning leisure travel - gateways for stress recovery, education, self improvement, reconnection with nature, peace and solitude, and activities promoting family unity and bonding
- Perceptions as to how well National Parks satisfy needs
- Investigate how other out-of-home leisure experiences may compete with Parks for the consumers attention
- Attempt to understand attitudes toward the park experience in terms of modern day relevance
- Explore opinions as to how much time or distance is expected to be involved in a park related trip
- Discover to what degree visitors relate park experiences with their personal and family health and fitness objectives

### 3.) Gateway Communities Seek Cooperation with the Park Service

- Gateway Communities most often provide critical services for National Parks
- They share the same mission: sustainable tourism
- Gateways along with State tourism offices are charged with tourism marketing of the Gateways and adjacent National Parks

Gateway Communities seek cooperation from the Parks in:

- Considering Gateway Communities as partners
- Access to Park's management, with them exhibiting interest in the concerns of the Gateway Communities
- The Gateways would like to explore ways Parks can participate in cooperative marketing programs with Gateways and State tourism offices
- Providing input from Gateway Communities marketing organizations when selecting park concessionaires – the Gateways work with the concessionaires as much as the Parks work with them

### 4.) Marketing The Working Group proposes marketing themed itineraries

- Gateways community destination marketing organizations around the country use itineraries to sell motorcoach operators, and international tour operators (travel trade) on the visitation value of their region. Some of these Gateways have developed themed Park itineraries, and are attracting visitors with these preplanned trips.
- The Park Service has also developed numerous themed itineraries, but as of yet, have not formally distributed them to the travel trade.
- The Working Group plans to "formalize" these developed itineraries, and distribute them to the travel trade, on such themes as: *Presidents of the Heartland, California's Desert Discovery, Frontier Buffalo Soldiers and Cotton Fields to Jazz*

Case Example: Alaska Develops Successful Parks Cooperative Marketing Program The Alaska Travel Industry Association, in conjunction with the National Parks of Alaska, collectively saw the potential of working together to increase visitation to Alaska and its National Parks.

### Alaska Gets Major Support in Cooperative Marketing Campaign

- Congress approves \$750,000 for cooperative marketing campaign between the Alaska Travel Industry Assn.(ATIA) and Alaska's National Parks. The monies were used for the following:
  - Direct mail. ATIA sent a letter from Gov. Frank Murkowski to over 500,000 potential visitors, asking if they would like to receive a free parks guide, and 40,000 responded and guides were mailed
  - Ads. ATIA placed ads in Backpacker, Outdoor Photographer, etc. with about 15,000 readers responding
  - Guide design/printing. Printed 100,000,
  - Familiarization trips. Worked with ATIA on "Fam" trips for industry folks
  - Media efforts. Sponsor activities at the ATIA's "Media Road Show"
- Alaska's National Parks have shown major visitation increases Although increases have been posted, some of the credit goes to a rapidly expanding cruise industry, anxious to promote to their guests the National Parks of Alaska.

The Working Group does have some concerns about marketing our National Parks, Specifically What is the Role for Our Parks and Congress?

- Currently, there is an inconsistent message from the Parks about their role in tourism marketing. Can Director's Order #17 be renewed and updated to clarify the message about advertising, etc.
- Congress can, and has provided on occasion (but inconsistently) provided marketing funds for promotion and advertising. (the Alaska example) How can efforts be more consistent and national?
- Park Service has appointed a Director of Tourism, but with no budget to develop partnerships or promote the Park System. How did they expect this to work?
- The Park Service has a tremendous capacity to produce quality collateral material, but often no funds to get them to the potential consumer. Resources need to be dedicated to this most basic marketing strategy.
- If Gateway Communities are important partners to our Parks, why are they not typically mentioned or listed, along with their services on individual Park websites. The Gateway Communities always mention adjacent Parks on their websites. A true partnership offers reciprocal support.

#### 5.) NPS Cultural Adaptation is seen as a challenge

- Greater demand on fewer financial resources have lead to partnerships becoming increasingly more important for the Parks, Gateway Communities, and the private sector
- NPS is planning to develop a rewards program for employees who develop innovative programs for working with partners
- New "Importance of visitors and tourism" training module for new NPS employees is just about to be released
- NPS has recently developed a new online e-course, "**Introduction of the National Park Service: Its History and Mission**" for the public
- National Alliance of Gateway Communities and the Western States Tourism Policy Council, as opportunities become available, will conduct "Cooperative Tourism Marketing" Seminars to senior Park Service unit staff members. It is anticipated these opportunities will be when the Park Service holds regional meetings for their senior staff.

In conclusion, we've attached to our testimony, a white paper by the U.S. Travel and Tourism Advisory Board, which was just released last week, and directed to the U.S. Secretary of Commerce, Titled, **Restoring America's Travel Brand, National Strategy to Compete for International Visitors**. This report provides such disturbing news that in just the last decade, the United States has fallen from 1st to 6th among dream destinations for international travelers, and since 2000, the U.S. has captured 0% of the nearly 20% growth in country-to-country travel worldwide. Also, the U.S. share of revenue from international travel has fallen 29% since 1992 – costing our economy an estimated \$43 billion in 2005 alone! This one year hit to our economy equals almost 500,000 lost jobs. Additional research shows that those who have visited America are 42 percent more inclined to have favorable opinions of America compared with those who have never been here. Our National Parks can play a vital role in winning the hearts and minds of people around the world.

And finally, we on this panel would be naive to think that what we are proposing here today is a "fix all" for the declining visitation to some of our nation's parks. What this Subcommittee and our small Working Group will be able to accomplish on this issue must be part of a national strategy to make the promotion of travel and tourism a major priority for our Parks, Congress and our nation. On every front, including what we are discussing here today, must be seen as an individual battle, that is part of a campaign, to restore the United States position as a vibrant and growing tourism economy. Visitation to America can be an important component to restoring our image abroad, and by affectively promoting our nation's treasures, the results can be a compelling part of our national effort to attract more foreign travelers. These results will not occur without Congress and our Parks being fully engaged in the effort, so we do need your help. Our panel wishes to thank you for making this issue, of declining visitation to our National Parks a priority of yours, and we are collectively committed to working together with you towards a common solution. All of us are prepared to now answer your questions.