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**Testimony to the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
of the House Natural Resources Committee**

Hearing on “The Role of Partnerships in National Parks”

Thursday, September 23, 2010

Chairman Grijalva, Ranking Member Bishop, members of the House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands, thank you for the opportunity to testify today along with my distinguished colleagues on this panel. I’m honored to present perspectives at this Oversight Hearing on Partnerships and the National Park Service.

I serve as Executive Director of the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, as the Vice President of the National Park Friends Alliance (the network of 52 philanthropic nonprofits that collectively provide in excess of \$50 million per year to national parks across the nation), and as a Board member of both the Association of Partners for Public Lands and the Conservation Lands Foundation. These affiliations have given me a broad perspective on partnerships with the National Park Service and other federal and state public land agencies. My comments today represent our experiences at the Parks Conservancy and also reflect the ongoing discussions of the NPS and Friends Alliance organizations across the nation.

At the Parks Conservancy, we have provided about \$200 million of support to park projects and programs at the Golden Gate National Recreation Area since our inception more than 25 years ago. We have helped develop a volunteer corps of 22,000 annual volunteers providing 400,000 hours of service each year – the largest national park volunteer program in the nation. We have also raised significant philanthropic support and generated broad grassroots support for the parks through campaigns to restore and improve our parklands.

Working with the National Park Service has been an honor for us. We have enjoyed a long-term, well integrated, collaborative, and very productive relationship. We have worked strategically and seamlessly together to support and advance park priorities. We have built a broad and deeply committed community of park supporters as volunteers, grassroots donors, and major philanthropists. We receive gifts – small and large – for park projects and programs. Nearly a decade ago, during the campaign for Crissy Field, an elementary school class raised funds to plant native plants, and the lead donor of that project gave the largest cash gift ever given to a National Park Service project.

Nearly 90 years before that project, in 1908, the genesis of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area was a philanthropic gift – when a private donor purchased Muir Woods to save it from logging and damming, and then donated the property to the federal government as a national monument. And all of us know the power of contributing to

something we care about –America has a proud national tradition of service, volunteerism, and philanthropy. National parks share that heritage; in fact, the inceptions of many national parks tell a remarkable story of these national traits in action.

We should not think of philanthropic support to our national parks as being contrary to or in conflict with federal support and appropriations to our national parks. Since their beginnings, and for generations, national parks have been founded and made great by the American public – as taxpayers *and* as philanthropists. Partnership is not new to the national park system. Indeed it has long been vital to its existence and its greatness.

Yet as the subject of this hearing suggests, partnership work is not always easy – and everyone seems to acknowledge that there is room for improvement. Especially now, as Americans are being asked to be more generous than ever in their support of their national parks, all of us must work to refine and establish the benefits, policies, procedures, and legal authorities that support partnership work.

In this context, I have a few perspectives and accompanying recommendations:

Partnerships function best within a structure of thoughtful collaboration, versus rigid regulation.

The most successful partnerships in the Park Service result from true teamwork and collaboration. They thrive when both the Park Service and the partner embrace a common goal, recognize their strengths, weaknesses, and complements, and share the game plan for success. This is a collaborative framework. The Park Service asks the American public to help and is working to facilitate the public's contributions of time, expertise, and funds. Through a collaborative framework, an NPS partner can provide vital support to realize that vision.

For long-term success, though, there need to be rules of the road and clear partnership parameters. Too often the collaborative framework is superseded by a regulatory framework, which places a huge burden of time and expense on the NPS and partner. The result is a system intended to safeguard the government from philanthropy rather than invite and promote philanthropy. The partner is required to secure a wide array of approvals with multiple written agreements that can require inordinate time and resources; requiring review by solicitors and attorneys at the regional and national level whose opinions may differ; and requiring approvals from officials at the local, regional, national level in both the administration and Congress. This puts tremendous burdens on both the partner and the National Park Service and creates barriers to ultimate goal – the bonding of Americans to their national parks.

I believe a better balance can be achieved – weighing collaboration at least as heavily as regulation. My recommendation is establishing a joint commitment by the National Park Service and park partners to capture, disseminate, and formalize best practices in partnership management and to devote time and resources to training. Together we can

develop mutually acknowledged best practices as an effective alternative to more layers of complex partnership regulations.

Supportive partnership tools need to be developed and updated.

Partnerships in the National Park Service have blossomed in the past three decades, and more are emerging. But the authorities, policies, and legal interpretations – in essence the toolbox for promoting and nurturing partnerships – have not kept pace and do not always facilitate partnerships. There are too few custom-made tools for NPS partnership work.

To date, I don't believe there is legislation specifically endorsing the function and importance of partnerships to the National Park Service mission. There is no comprehensive legislation specifically supporting the valuable role of cooperating associations, friends groups or National Park Service partnerships, with the exception of the National Park Foundation. There are few specific instruments for NPS partnerships, other than cooperative agreement authority and memorandums of agreements, which are limited in their utility. As a result, NPS partners are sometimes seen as programs to procure through competition and federal processes, rather than durable, long-term partners of our national parks. Many Park Service partners have been operating for decades, some dating back to the 1920s.

Legislation such as Challenge Cost Share Authority seems to give the Secretary of the Interior broad authority to work with partners and share federal resources for common goals, yet we have been told by department and agency officials that more general federal law pre-empts the full utilization of that authority. As a result, we are not working as effectively as we can to combine federal and philanthropic funds to achieve a common result, and we are leaving untapped significant public goodwill and philanthropic interest.

As one solution, I recommend strengthening the purpose and intent of the Challenge Cost Share authority through legislative clarification that reconciles its specific intent with general federal law.

NPS partnership policies and processes can be cumbersome, overly cautious and time consuming.

National Park Service Director Jon Jarvis has said that, “Increasingly partnerships are essential and effective means for the National Park Service to fulfill parts of our mission and foster a shared sense of stewardship that is so crucial for our future.” The Park Service has recognized partnerships as important to its mission and has instituted some sound partnership principles as means to augment the agency's resources. But the policies that guide partnerships – and the procedures required to advance them – create barriers, lengthy delays, and uncertainty in how park-benefiting projects and programs can be delivered.

A current effort is underway to establish template agreements that meet mutual needs. I recommend that this effort continue with an explicit objective to prioritize, simplify, and streamline the agreements, policies, and procedures that underlie partnership development and management.

Philanthropy is a competitive environment.

The competition for philanthropic resources and volunteer support is very challenging, especially in today's economic climate. Environmental causes compete with social causes, and donors at all levels are bringing an unprecedentedly high level of selectivity and scrutiny to their giving decisions. More than ever, as donors are drawn by a cause, they are also determining which organizations can best deliver effectively, efficiently, and with the greatest degree of certainty and transparency in their projects and programs.

A clear commitment by the National Park Service and Congress to the work of park partners can give a significant boost to our case for philanthropic support. The National Park Foundation has the congressionally chartered role of sustaining the national legacy of private philanthropy for our national parks and has carried out that role admirably. I recommend that local organizations with proven track records, as well, be given the opportunity to earn appropriate recognition and authority for the critical roles they play in sustaining philanthropic interest and action on behalf of the national parks.

A one-size-fits-all partnership model cannot respond to the diversity of partnerships in the National Park Service.

Park partners can vary significantly in their scale of operations, the size and diversity of their constituencies, their expertise, tenure, and track record, and their relationship with Park Service leadership and staff at the park level. There are park partners with long tenures, significant project and program accomplishments, and close alignment with the National Park Service. There are also more nascent partner organizations that are newly establishing or growing their support programs and building collaborations with their partner parks. A Park Service support structure that recognizes this distinction and offers more streamlined processes for established partners, as well as training, support, and dissemination of successful efforts for all partners, would significantly improve the effectiveness of these relationships across the spectrum.

Chairman Grijalva, you have suggested that a Center for Partnership could be created within the National Park system to serve this and other functions, and we would be honored to assist in the development of that vision.

Federal and philanthropic funds should work together.

Philanthropic and public funding are often considered in isolation. But in many spheres, including our national parks, the commitment of public funds can leverage significant philanthropic investment to achieve common objectives and tangible public benefit. We see this at the Golden Gate National Recreation Area time and again, and past National

Park Service programs intended to leverage matching private support have proven very successful.

Yet this very effective leverage is compromised by a policy that forces the separation of these sources on park improvement projects. Under current policy, the NPS is constrained from providing federal funds to combine with philanthropic funds as partners complete important park improvement and construction projects. This problem stems partly from the lack of legislation and/or policy designed specifically for our partnerships.

I recommend and request that the Department of the Interior, the National Park Service, and Congress work with park partners to resolve the policy barriers to joining federal and private resources to accomplish National Park goals.

Chairman Grijalva and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting our perspectives on National Park partnerships and for considering these recommendations. It is my distinct honor to work with the National Park Service and members of Congress in ensuring the best possible future for what has been called “America’s Best Idea” – our national parks.



Partnership Projects – Lands End





Partnership Projects – Park Trails





Partnership Projects – Mori Point



Before



After





Partnership Projects – Dias Ridge





Partnership Projects – Muir Beach





Partnership Programs – Crissy Field Center





Partnership Programs - Volunteers In Parks

