

TESTIMONY OF JOHN SCHOPPMANN  
Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation, and Public Lands  
Oversight Hearing: Visitation Trends in the National Park Service

April, 6, 2006  
1324 Longworth HOB

Good morning Mr. Chairman and other members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for inviting me to testify on this Subcommittee's oversight hearing dealing with visitation trends to our national parks. I am here today not only as a spokesman for Forever Resorts, with whom I work and which has 17 concessions contracts with the National Park Service, but also as a representative for the many concessioners who have a long and proud history working with the National Park Service and of providing great service to the park visitors.

Of course, the subject of visitation trends to our national parks is one that is very important to the concessions industry. Whether the trends are increasing or decreasing, they still have impacts to the concessions industry and specifically to our businesses. But more than this, we also see trends in visitation to the national parks as an important bellwether as to how both the American and international visitor alike might be changing their attitudes and patterns towards recreational activities in general and visiting the national parks in particular.

Unfortunately, after peaking some years ago, recreational visitation to the national parks has declined or, at the very best, remained flat. Although the visitation for any particular year may have increased or decreased, the general trend in recreational visits is declining. Furthermore, this decline is coming despite an increase in park units and an ever-increasing National Park Service budget.

From 1999 through 2005, Congress added 12 units to the national park system and increased the size of many more existing park units. In the same time period, the Park Service budget increased approximately 35%. One would assume and logic would dictate that with more park units in the system and with a substantial increase in budget that visitation to our parks would be rising from 1999 through 2005. However, this is not the case. During these same years, recreational visits to national parks has fallen nearly 8%, based on a Park Service forecast for 2005. This decrease in recreational visits causes us great concern and we hope, through the work of Congress, the Administration, and concessioners, that these trends can be reversed.

Mr. Chairman, I would like now to give a few examples that I am familiar with that conclusively shows that recreational visits to many national park units are in decline. The first is Lake Mead National Recreation Area (NRA). Lake Mead NRA includes both Lake Mead and Lake Mohave and its 1.5 million acres located along the border of Nevada and Arizona. Lake Mead NRA is the fourth most-visited unit of the 390-unit National Park System and gets twice as many visitors as the Grand Canyon. The reason for its popularity is that Lake Mead provides a wide-range of recreational experiences with its warm water, scenic setting, and high-water quality, as well as the diversity of natural and cultural resources. Indeed, Lake Mead National Recreation Area can claim to be one of the premier inland water recreation areas in the west.

Furthermore, according to a 1990s economic impact study, the annual economic impact of Lake Mead NRA and its 8-10 million visitors to the region exceeds \$500 million. However, when making decisions about the Colorado River and its reservoirs, power producers, water suppliers, and agriculture get an equal seat at the discussion table. Sadly, recreation does not have an equal seat at the table despite the effect it has on the regional economy. We, of course, would like to see this changed.

The continued drought and the subsequent lowering lake levels on Lake Mead are creating significant management, operational, and financial challenges for the National Park Service and park concessioners and, undoubtedly, have played a role in declining recreational visits. Due to drought conditions, Lake Mead has dropped more than 70 feet (40-year lows) to a current lake level of 1,138. During the summer of 2004, the lake level dropped to 1,125. Currently, the projections show a level of 1,128 for summer 2006 and down to a projected record low of 1,118 in the summer 2007. This will have significant adverse affects on NPS and concession facilities at Lake Mead. Since 2000 visitation has dropped approximately 12%, from just over 9 million visits to 7.97 million visits and with the water level at near record lows this trend will probably continue.

In 2003, the receding lake levels on Lake Mead resulted in the closure of three public launch ramps (Pearce Ferry, Government Wash and Las Vegas Bay) and the relocation of two major marina operations ( Las Vegas Boat Harbor and Lake Mead Ferry Service). Today the lake level for Lake Mead is 1,139. Bureau of Reclamation projections anticipate an additional drop to 1,128-feet in 2006. Obviously, this will have a significant affect on future recreational visitors to the Lake Mead NRA.

Furthermore, over the next one-year period, lake levels are projected to drop low enough to result in the closure of the Overton Beach Marina at its present location. Options for relocation include locating the marina in a new and undeveloped shoreline area or combining the marina facilities with another marina operation. Moreover, during the next two-year period, lake levels are projected to drop low enough to result in the closure of three additional ramps (South Cove, Hemenway and Callville Bay). Callville Bay is the busiest launch ramp on Lake Mead with 15 launch lanes and closure of these public facilities will have significant impact not only on public access and visits to Lake Mead, but also have a severe economic impact to the region.

Park Concessioners have spent millions of dollars in nonrefundable costs related to 40-year low reservoir levels on Lake Mead. It is estimated that for every 20-foot vertical drop in lake elevation the NPS spends \$5-6 million. Moving or relocating marinas are expensive and complicated requiring specialized equipment and extension of utilities including power and water. Park concessioners have gone far beyond their normal maintenance operations in providing quality visitor services under extreme low water conditions. (The concessioners at Callville and Las Vegas Boat Harbor have spent about \$6 million to date on reconfiguring or moving facilities.)

The continued drought in the western United States has had direct affects on water levels at Lake Mead NRA and elsewhere, hence, has led to a corresponding decrease in recreational visits. Let us now turn to a park unit where decreases in visitation are not so obvious – Mammoth Cave National Park.

Kentucky's Mammoth Cave National Park, established in 1941, is designated as a World Heritage Site and also a World Biosphere Reserve. The park is renowned for its extensive cave system – more than 350 miles long – and for its scenic river valleys. Park visitation peaked in 1994, with almost 2.6 million visitors, but now has fallen off to 1.97 million visitors for 2005. Interestingly, the visitation to the cave itself has been steadily declining since 1973. In that year there were just over 675,000 cave visitors to today's number of 347,000 cave visits. That represents almost a 50% drop in people coming into the cave. Direct causes for these declines in recreational visits is simply unknown.

Padre Island National Seashore shows a similar story. Padre Island is a beautiful 80.5 mile stretch of beach, actually a barrier island, along the Gulf of Mexico shore of Texas. It is known for its spectacular beaches, excellent fishing, and abundant bird and marine life. Recreational visits to this park unit peaked in 1991 at 972,000. The numbers for 2005 show a substantial decline to just over 666,000 recreational visits – over a 30% decline. Although we recognize that the annual visitation bounces around, that is, increases and decreases from one year to the next, there seems to be a generally declining trend similar to the national decline in recreational park visits.

Declines in park unit visits are also occurring in many of our premier national park units. Data supplied by the National Park Service shows that declines have occurred in: Grand Canyon National Park – 4.1 million visits in 2003 projected to be 3.7 million in 2005, a 10% drop; Yellowstone National Park – 3 million visits in 2003 projected to be 2.9 in 2005, a 4% drop; Yosemite National Park – 3.4 million visits in 2003 projected to be 3.3 million in 2005, a 3% drop; Everglades National Park – just over 1 million visits in 2003 projected to be 988,000 in 2005, a 2% drop; and finally Great Smoky Mountains National Park – 9.4 million visits in 2003 projected to be 8.6 million in 2005, almost a 10% drop. The list goes on and on. In fact, when looking at data for the entire park system, almost half of all the national park units are projected to experience declines this year from 2003. The implications of this data causes us great concern.

So what is happening to cause visitors to abstain from recreating in our national parks? This is not an easy question to answer and probably is the result of a number of factors. Gasoline prices, to be sure, must be factored into the equation. As we all are aware, the price of gas across the country is at all-time highs. As an example, currently a gallon of gas in northern Virginia is around \$2.70, double the price just a few years ago (or is it few weeks ago? The price of gas goes up so fast it is hard to tell anymore!).

Without a doubt, the price of gas has had an affect on the American public wishing to travel in their car or RV to visit one or many of the national parks. In fact, a recent survey by the National Association of RV Parks & Campgrounds indicates that nearly 40% of RV owners mention gas prices behind their intention to take fewer trips in the next year. Interestingly though, 25% said they would not re-evaluate their travel plans until the price of gas hit \$4.00 a gallon. Obviously gas prices has had an effect on travel, both by vehicle and by air. However, this is countered by the fact that declines in park visitation was occurring even when gas prices were lower, so gas prices alone are not the only cause of decreasing visits.

Another factor that must be looked at is the international visitor, who used to make up a significant portion of national park visits. According to the Global Insight Forecast of the Office of Travel and Tourism Industries, visitors from countries who we typically would see in national parks is down significantly from 2000 to 2005. In particular, visitor arrivals from the United Kingdom is down 8%, from Italy – down 11%, from France – down 19%, from Germany – down 21%, and from Japan – down a whopping 23%. This may be for a number of reasons: the United States has an image problem world-wide, the

United States doesn't promote well overseas, and many people avoid U.S. air carriers. In fact, 57% of Japanese, 42% of French, and 38% of the UK avoid flying U.S. air carriers (GMI World Poll, The Pew Center for People & the Press). Clearly, we need to look at our marketing strategy in order to pull the international visitor back into the United States.

Yet another factor might be found in the changing lifestyles of the American public. With the advent of home video games, hand-held video games, and "surfin'the net" many people simply are not motivated to get out of the house, let alone go visit a national park unit. This is evidenced by the high incidence of obesity in the United States, especially among children and adolescents. Part of the problem may be found in a diminishing awareness that people, especially children, have in regard to knowing about our national parks. For example, many school students are unaware that national park units are close by and that parks can refresh their spirit and contribute to a more healthy lifestyle. We need more programs like "Lessons in the Lake" found at Lake Amistad National Recreation Area in south Texas where over 6,000 students, thus far, have learned about and to enjoy this national park. Similar programs could be initiated in public schools throughout the country.

Adding to the problem, Americans have many more recreational choices now than they have had in the past. There are more theme parks, hotels with water parks in them, and casinos seem to be springing up everywhere – all vying for the tourism dollar. These places, and many others, draw people away from visiting national parks. We believe that the federal government must do a better job of marketing this country and our national parks not only to the international visitor, but to our own citizens as well.

The federal government needs not only to advertise and market the national parks better, they also need to use available technology to draw more visitors into the parks. For example, I-pods and similar devices are used by millions of people, especially the younger crowd. The Park Service should be responding to this heavily-used technology and could be using devices like these as part of their interpretive and other programs. We believe that this would have great appeal to the younger park visitors and, hopefully, would have them coming back to visit the national parks again and again.

There is one other reason that must be looked at closely and this is one that the National Park Service has direct control over. The recreational visitor must be afforded access to our national parks. Yet the Park Service, through rule-making or management policies, had been restricting access to thousands of park visitors who traditionally used the parks for their particular recreational pursuits. In short, the Park Service has been attempting to limit or eliminate traditional motorized recreational pursuits. We see this as another factor contributing to the declining trends of the recreational visitor in our national parks. Obviously, if a traditional park use is no longer available for a visitor they will go somewhere else to pursue the activity. I do want to add, however, that on a more local level we have had success working the Park Service personnel in addressing motorized recreational use issues.

Consider what happened to the recreational use of personal watercraft. Responding to a simple petition by an extreme environmental group, the National Park Service began rule-making for 21 national park units to restrict personal watercraft use or to eliminate their use entirely. Five park units immediately ended personal watercraft use. Sixteen of the twenty-one units followed the rule-making course. Eleven units have finished the rule-making and five units still have not completed the environmental work nor the final authorizing rules. According to Park Service data, recreational visits are down in 10 of the 16 park units involved in the rule-making. Now granted, we recognize that there may be other factors involved in the decline of recreational visits to these units. However, restricting access to, heretofore, traditional recreational use in the park unit cannot help and most probably exacerbates the declining trends. It is also important to note that a recent report by the Trade Partnership, an economic consulting firm, indicates that the ban and restrictions on personal watercraft in park units has cost the nation's economy \$2.7 billion over the last decade. So, not only do these types of recreational restrictions lead to declining visitation in park units, but they also lead to significant negative economic impacts.

Snowmobile use in Yellowstone National Park followed a similar storyline, the result being that private recreational use of snowmobiles in Yellowstone was severely restricted. It is no surprise, then, to see that recreational visits to Yellowstone are also declining, especially in the winter season. The Park Service just cannot eliminate or restrict traditional recreational access and use in our national parks and expect no consequences to their actions, i.e., less park visitation.

Finally, there are a couple of other reasons that may be contributing to park visitation declines. One is the negative publicity that the media tends to print or broadcast when a perceived problem exists in a national park. For example, there might be a fire nearby, or low water, or summer crowds and congestion for just a few days, but the media unfortunately sends the message intimating that it would be a bad idea for the public to visit and to stay away from the parks. The second reason is fee stations. The fee demo program, now permanent, has been very successful for the Park Service insofar as raising needed revenue, most of which stays in the host park. However, many people find the fees excessive and will turn away either because they cannot afford it, is too expensive, or feel that it is unfair to charge anything for people visiting federal property.

Recognizing that recreational visits to park units are decreasing, we believe there are some good things that the Park Service is doing and can be done to help reverse these downward trends. A good first step was taken by the Park Service when

it decided to review the Park Service Management Policies. We believe that the old 2001 Management Policies divided the dual mission of conserving the park resource while allowing the same resource to be enjoyed by the people. We are glad to see the movement by the Park Service to reinstate the Congressionally mandated mission to let the people enjoy the very resource that warrants conserving. We hope this will go a long way in restoring access to the recreational visitor to park units.

Another thing that may help alleviate declining trends is the Park Service recognition that health and wellness can play a part in getting the American public out of the house or office and into the outdoors, particularly into our national parks. In 2004, the National Park System Advisory Board formed the Committee on Health and Recreation whose duty it was to see if there was a way the Park Service could respond to the national need for outdoor physical activity. This Committee recently published its report (March 21, 2006) and is in the process of implementing a pilot program in seven national parks to increase the level of physical activity for visitors to those units. The program also seeks to change the attitude of park visitors in regard to a sedentary life which will, hopefully, manifest itself in people visiting our national parks again and again. Although just underway, this program has great potential and we look forward to working with the Park Service with it.

We also are glad to see the Park Service once again employ a National Tourism Director. This position was vacant for far too many years and now was a good time to have it filled. As indicated earlier in this testimony, the federal government needs to actively market the great natural and cultural resources that make up our national parks. We are hopeful that the Tourism Director will help with this needed effort and we support a full and increasing budget and staffing for this office.

Finally, it is worth noting that over the past few years we have seen a good change in how the Park Service is working with us. Fran Mainella, Director of the Park Service, has done a good job in has filling key positions, like Regional Directors and Park Superintendents, with very competent staff who we find are good to work with. This helps and identifying and solving problems like park visitation. We want to add that we hope the Park Service will be fully funded by Congress in order to keep interpretive programs fully staffed and park tours fully operating. We believe doing so will help draw park visitors in, add to the enjoyment of the visitor experience, and also keep them coming back to visit other park units.

In summary, by observing the data over an extended period of time we have to conclude that, indeed, there is a general trend of declining recreational visits to the national parks. In fact, some park units are seeing a drastic reduction in visitation. We would like to see this trend reversed and we believe it can be. It can only be done, however, with the recognition that there is a problem and that it needs to be corrected. We need to identify the causes of the declines and address them. We cannot just sit idly by and do nothing but hope the trends will reverse themselves.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to testify before your Subcommittee today. I, along with all other park concessioners, appreciate your interest in this subject and are very grateful that you have taken action in the form of this hearing in order to assess the problem of visitation declines in the national parks.