

Testimony of Donna Asbury
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Committee on Natural Resources
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Introduction

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, I thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the role of partnerships in national parks. My name is Donna Asbury, and I am Executive Director of the Association of Partners for Public Lands (APPL) which has a history since 1977 of cooperation with the National Park Service. Our membership is comprised of 82 nonprofit organizations, 83% of which serve National Park Service sites. In 2008, these organizations provided more than \$70 million in aid to national parks inclusive of major projects, programs and services that respond to the agency’s priorities.

Through their on-site presence in national park visitor facilities, and in communities nationwide, our member organizations serve as front line ambassadors to the public, building constituencies that care for our nation’s finest natural and cultural areas. Their work is based upon a living partnership with each site, anchored in an agreement founded upon the purpose and management plan for the park as well as its rich natural, cultural and historic resources.

APPL’s efforts have concentrated on the tradition of membership, volunteerism, education and philanthropy that characterize the best of nonprofit entities. All of our members are nonprofit organizations with both IRS nonprofit 501(c)(3) status and written agreements with one or more public lands agencies. These nonprofit partners enable the National Park Service and its sister public lands agencies to accomplish what they cannot do alone, by engaging the American public in philanthropy and volunteerism and helping to protect, enhance, and interpret park resources.

As the June 2009 GAO report on *National Park Service Donations and Related Partnerships* acknowledges, these mission-based nonprofits are essential and increasingly valuable partners to the National Park Service, providing significant services in addition to monetary contributions. However, it should be noted that philanthropy and partnerships within the parks are not new. Thirty national parks were created through private donations, and many more are enhanced by the contributions of people who care about them. Several park partner organizations, like the Grand Canyon Association, Mesa Verde Museum Association, Mount Rushmore Society, Rocky Mountain Nature Association, Yellowstone Association and Yosemite Conservancy have been partners with individual national parks for more than seventy-five years.

I have organized my testimony around the key questions posed to panelists as being of interest to Subcommittee members, highlighting success factors in NPS-nonprofit partnerships as well as

barriers to success most frequently expressed by our membership. Additionally, I have suggested recommendations for consideration that may address, at least in part, the concerns and barriers that can impede these partnerships.

What have been some of the key components that have made your partnerships with the National Park Service so successful?

When asked, our APPL members consistently relate the following factors to be central to the success of their partnership with the National Park Service. To illustrate, I have included direct quotes from executive directors of APPL member organizations relative to these partnership success factors:

- Communication, trust, and a shared vision of our collaborative mission...
“Probably the key component of success for our organization and NPS throughout the years has been a mutual respect for the missions of our organizations and an appreciation for the work we do in the very broad scope of caring for our nation’s cultural, historical and natural resources. Always we keep this mind as we work through any ‘roadblocks’ and challenges.”

“As an association, we do not have any agenda that does not include our partner, and we feel confident that our partner values us and trusts us and sees us as a crucial player in their future.”
- Frequent interaction, joint planning, and making a concerted effort to “be there” for the other partner...
“We confer together regularly, participate in joint meetings, and as a result we are able to stay on the same page and have mutual buy-in on decisions. We feel valued by park staff and no one has any hidden agendas.”

“We are very fortunate that our offices are under the same roof as the park administration, enabling us to confer daily on big picture issues as well as details.”
- When the park, the resource itself, is the focus – for why individuals give, for why partnership decisions are made, and for which projects are pursued...
“When nonprofit partners and agency staff decide that the priority is the resource, human dimensions change. The focus is moved from the nonprofit or the agency to the park, enabling personal agendas to be put aside in favor of developing solutions, projects, and programs that are meaningful and sustainable.”

“Fundraising success is best achieved when both the nonprofit partner and the National Park Service fully embrace the importance of the goal/project and strongly believe the goal/project will benefit both the partner and the NPS.”
- When park management, from the top down, recognizes and communicates the relationship with the nonprofit partner as critical to success...

“The full potential of each partner is realized when communication, cooperation and collaboration between all nonprofit partners at an NPS park or site is encouraged and nurtured.”

“The potential for partner success is enhanced when the National Park Service is consistently pro-active in providing generous (and always tasteful) acknowledgment of the support being provided by the nonprofit partner -- whenever possible and in as public a way as possible -- in order to encourage future support.”

- A mutual understanding of the tremendous potential of moving people along a continuum in their support for a park...

“While it is the big projects that get the attention, the sustaining value is the postcard or \$3 trail guide purchaser, or the thousands of donors who give modestly. These purchased memories, and the opportunity to give, become the building blocks, the glue that binds the public to the national parks.”

“Making that very personal connection with park visitors is one of the best ways nonprofit support groups are able to add value to their park’s operations. A casual visit to a park visitor center can result in a low level annual membership with a cooperating association. A follow-up newsletter can generate more interest – perhaps in attending a site-based educational program presented or sponsored by the nonprofit partner. This program presents the nonprofit partner the opportunity to develop a personal relationship with the member/donor and can lead to additional participation in park events or volunteer activities, with NPS staff present to convey the park’s story. This continuum leads to a much higher level of financial support for the park, and results in a very efficient use of park management’s time in conveying the park’s story and supporting the fund raising effort.”

- Building upon established partnerships, with realistic expectations for what nonprofit partners can achieve...

The superintendent began discussions with us about whether or not we would be willing to pursue fundraising in behalf of the park. We agreed to form a foundation under the umbrella of our association and take some small, project-specific steps into the fundraising arena. We maintained our same board of directors and formed a foundation committee to oversee the new fundraising component of our operation. With existing staff we moved forward with annual project-specific goals, starting by raising \$50,000 to help rehab a historic building in the park. The superintendent was sensitive to our need to start small and we have been able to continue to raise more money each year for specific projects decided upon mutually by the Park Service and the Foundation.

What types of roadblocks have challenged or prevented your organization from fully benefiting from your partnership with the parks?

Nonprofit organizations work in partnership with the National Park Service to realize common goals and to provide a public benefit. Roadblocks are mostly bureaucratic, and relate to what is seen as a burdensome and time consuming agreement process; the challenges of bridging

nonprofit and public agency cultures; and uneven interpretation of policies across and between levels, locations and functions of staff.

Specifically,

- NPS policies and agreements frequently fail to acknowledge that federal and state law regulates nonprofit organizations, requiring them to operate according to their tax-exempt mission. As a result, NPS guidelines and provisions in agreements sometimes overstep boundaries, and attempt to add additional levels of unnecessary regulation of the nonprofit.
- There is a lack of uniformity in how agreements and policies are applied throughout the Department of Interior and the National Park system. Policies and requirements for entering into agreements are understood and implemented differently at various levels and locations throughout the agency. This is especially problematic for nonprofit organizations that work with multiple agencies, that work across park or regional boundaries, or whose activities are at a level requiring multiple agreements or multiple layers of approval.
- Partnership relationships are treated like contracts and managed through procurement specialists instead of partnership agreement specialists, sometimes with the perspective that partnerships should be competitively bid. Nonprofit partnerships are, as a whole, neither grants nor contracts. They are voluntary, ongoing, mutually beneficial relationships established for the public good and for the benefit of the resource. Even in situations where a contract is the appropriate vehicle for accomplishing a goal, the parks often do not have the trained personnel on-site that know how to handle these contracts.
- There is a lack of understanding by many agency staff, including solicitors, contracting officers and procurement specialists, as to how nonprofits work and how they are regulated. In the words of one association executive: *“Typically the contracting officers that are assigned to work through the complexities of building these agreements with us, and getting funds to us, do not understand the mission of our organization and our ties to the parks.”*
- As the 2009 GAO Report on *National Park Service Donations and Related Partnerships* notes, there is a need to improve NPS employees’ knowledge, skills and experience about fundraising and partnerships with nonprofit organizations, and to improve nonprofits’ understanding of Park Service policies and procedures. Meeting this need for targeted and comprehensive training and reference materials requires collaboration and involvement of the nonprofit sector to ensure accuracy of content, and understanding of the business and culture of each entity. Too frequently, training and guidance are developed separately from within each sector rather than collaboratively.
- Care must be taken not to create agreements and policy that attempt to address every possible situation, or to cover any and all potential partnership risks, regardless of the level or scope of the activities to be conducted by the nonprofit partner. This creates

unnecessary paperwork and oversight, discourages partnerships from developing, and drains time and energy that could be directed to the agency's and the organization's missions.

- The agreement approval process, and the inability of the agency to move agreements quickly through the process, is the most often sighted frustration among nonprofit partners to the National Park Service. These process delays can result in escalating project costs, loss of donor support, and in some cases the delay or abandonment of viable projects and initiatives.
- The practice of rotating NPS leadership among and between parks results in a lack of consistency and institutional knowledge relative to the park's partnerships; and is disruptive of the type of long-term relationships that characterize the most outstanding examples of NPS partnership success. Nonprofit partner organizations and their staff are often the point of continuity between the park, the local community, volunteers and donors – and the point of continuity relative to the agreements and procedures that define their partnership functions with the agency. Because of the inconsistencies in training and interpretation of policies throughout the NPS system, park partners comment that they spend a disproportionate amount of time having to “start over” in addressing the type, scope, and paperwork necessary to effectively co-manage partnership expectations.

Have policy changes from within the National Park Service affected your ability to have successful partnerships?

A continuing focus on “trouble cases” tends to result in a reactionary response within the agency that overshadows the ongoing positive accomplishments that happen daily through NPS partnerships. The more emphasis placed on successes through nonprofit partnerships, the more burdensome the policies and procedures have become. Policies are often in a state of change, and the information regarding these changes doesn't flow effectively through the system to field staff and partners – resulting in confusion, delays, and at times a negative impact on the ability to implement a program or project.

The time it takes to develop agreements, especially cooperative agreements, consumes valuable agency and nonprofit partner resources that could be applied to meeting park and visitor needs. While APPL itself is not a fundraising partner for the parks, we do at times collaborate under project specific cooperative agreements to conduct training, facilitate meetings, or develop partnership resources and tools. As a result, we have experienced first-hand the variations in how agency staff interpret policies, and the delays that accompany the agreement process. This has become amplified in recent years as cooperative agreements have come under more scrutiny.

What can be done to address the challenges and roadblocks noted above?

APPL member organizations endorse the importance of agreements that clarify and support the role of NPS and its partners. However, partnerships are at their core about relationships, and there is therefore no such thing as a “no risk” partnership. But when nonprofit partners and agency staff decide that the priority is the resource, the focus is moved from the nonprofit or the

agency to the park, enabling personal agendas to be put aside in favor of developing solutions, projects, and programs that are meaningful and sustainable.

A cultural change from viewing partnerships in a “facilitative role” rather than a “regulatory role” can move the focus to one of supporting and empowering partnerships without increasing risk to the agency. The following opportunities exist to further advance partnerships within NPS, and to help ensure a sound foundation for future partnership successes:

- Develop partnership agreement specialists as a discipline and a career track within Interior and within the NPS. Ideally, if nonprofit partners and agency staff were assigned one NPS partnership agreement specialist – even if it was one in each region – this could result in more efficiency in completing the agreements with parks, and more consistency throughout the park system.
- Encourage inter-agency collaboration in developing supportive structures and policies that enhance nonprofit partnerships. This will help to reduce the agreements and reporting requirements burden for nonprofit partners working with multiple public lands agencies.
- Work with nonprofit partners to provide reciprocal training for agency staff and nonprofit representatives so that all partners carry out their work in productive relationships that are characterized by a high degree of mutual understanding, transparency in management policies, shared goals, and effective communication.
- Streamline requirements within public lands agencies for nonprofit partners to work under mutually beneficial cooperative agreements.
- Involve nonprofit partners at the earliest possible stages in planning and decisions affecting their relationship with public lands.
- Engage public and private partners in forums to discuss emerging issues, share the impacts of external trends and internal policies, and develop workable solutions through facilitated discussion and follow-up.
- Exempt established cooperating associations and friends organizations from competitive bidding of their general agreements. Nonprofit partners to the National Park Service bring durability and tenure not only to the agency but to its donors. Competitive bidding for cooperative agreements and their components sends a contrary message and imposes unnecessary and potentially damaging disruption to these partner relationships at a time when they are most needed.

What types of accomplishments has your organization achieved that directly benefits parks and their mission?

APPL helps serve as a bridge to increasing partnership understanding among nonprofits and public lands agencies. We facilitate dialogue through in-person meetings, conference call forums, newsletters, workshops, training materials and site-based consultations.

Among our member nonprofit organizations, the benefit is realized through contacts made with park visitors that reinforce the theme and purpose of the park, the number of site-specific publications now in print because of cooperating association efforts, the educational seminars, field institutes, and the events that connect people to their parks, and the philanthropic dollars raised in support of park priorities.

The following are just a few examples of the variety and impact of these partnerships:

- Through the Acadia Trails Forever program, Friends of Acadia supports maintenance of Acadia's 130-mile footpath system, used by hundreds of thousands of people each year. Some trails have been made wheelchair accessible. Some abandoned trails are being restored, and new village connector trails are being established to encourage people to walk (rather than drive) from island towns into the park.
- Alaska Geographic works with NPS and a concessionaire to distribute a tour booklet program developed collaboratively and provided by the concessionaire to all of its tour participants. Revenue from this initiative supports educational programming at Murie Science Center at Denali as well as throughout the parks of Alaska.
- Pacific Historic Parks (formerly Arizona Memorial Museum Association) has raised nearly all of the significant funding for the new Pearl Harbor Museum and Visitor Center. Phase I of the project was opened to the public on February 17, 2010 and dedication of the completed project is scheduled for December 7, 2010. The completion and success of this project will ensure that millions of visitors each year will better understand the history of Hawaii, Pearl Harbor, and WWII as well as appreciate the sacrifices made by many at Pearl Harbor.
- Friends of Big Bend raised over \$250,000 for the new educational exhibits that grace the walls of the newly re-opened Panther Junction Visitor Center in the park. Other support to the park includes a \$10,000 project to lay the foundation for future Big Bend National Park podcasts and other multimedia video materials.
- Over the last twenty years the Rocky Mountain Nature Association has tackled 44 special improvement projects benefiting the park, ranging from educational exhibits to visitor centers, from wheelchair accessible trails to land purchases, from publications to saving historic buildings.
- Sequoia Natural History Association (SNHA) works with NPS to educate the public about environmental issues, not just through interpretive programs and materials, but through their own actions. Two years ago, SNHA began eliminating plastic bags in visitor center stores, asking visitors to hand carry small purchases or consider buying an inexpensive reusable bag. This effort has taken an estimated 50,000 plastic bags out of

the waste stream annually. Last year the association partnered with NPS to obtain grants and donations to make Crystal Cave interpretive tours, operated by SNHA in Sequoia, the first cave tour operation to be operated 100% on solar power. Through interpretive signage, this project is also a visible message to the 55,000 annual cave visitors.

- Western National Parks Association – operates educational bookstores in 66 national park areas in 12 states and then returns proceeds of sales to their NPS partners for interpretive, educational and research projects. Eastern National operates in 150 national park areas in 30 states. These cooperating associations, by applying shared resources, enable parks that could not support their own independent bookstore operation, or that are not viewed as “commercially viable” to have high quality park specific themed items that convey the story of the resource to the visitor.
- Yosemite Conservancy over the last 22 years has funded over 300 projects totaling more than \$55 million in support. Many of these projects have improved the infrastructure supporting visitor enjoyment. As one example, support for the Junior Ranger program provided the opportunity for 27,000 kids to get their badge in 2009.

How does your organization benefit from your relationship with the parks?

Our organization, as well as our member organizations, benefit from the ability to fulfill our nonprofit mission – which complements the mission of the National Park Service. Nonprofit partners bring expertise in areas that balance agency staff members’ expertise, and vice versa. Nonprofit partners benefit from the credibility and expertise of their agency partners, as the agencies benefit from the business, philanthropic expertise, and community connections that the partner organizations bring through their staff and nonprofit boards. Together, we are better able to advance innovative ideas, ensure the relevancy of national parks to diverse populations of park users, and ensure that parks continue to be conserved, enjoyed, and valued by the public.

In most cases, cooperating associations and friends groups were formed to support a specific park or a group of parks. Therefore, they view their organizations as existing to benefit the park(s), not the other way around. As one association executive director put it, *“the only benefit is seeing projects and programs funded for the protection of the resource and the enjoyment of the visitor.”*

In working with parks, how are projects determined? Are project ideas driven by park needs or are they more likely to originate with your organization?

National park partners agree that projects are driven by park priorities and needs. However, ideas are often spawned because of the strong partnership, planning and dialogue that enable nonprofit partners to bring ideas to the table for consideration.

The nature of philanthropy and earned revenue requires significant advance planning to ensure that staffing and resources are dedicated to activities that will have the most impact; and to ensure adequate time to plan for business operations and to nurture philanthropic support.

Typically the park submits its requests to the board or a project review committee of the cooperating association or friends group, which then selects or approves projects for a given year based upon the park's recommendations and the capabilities of the partner to achieve the requested level of support. Depending upon the type of project or program, and the capacity of the partner or the park to manage the project or program, decisions will be made as to how the project will be carried out. In some situations the association or friends group will fund the project to be carried out by the Park Service. In other instances, the association or friends group collaborates with the park to accomplish specific projects or programs. This collaboration spawns creativity, better planning, and more productive and sustainable projects.

The following example is illustrative of how a program need was articulated by park leadership and then implemented collaboratively with the Park Service. *"In the case of our Field Institute, the superintendent laid out his vision to us, then charged us to move forward and create a business plan. Initially, our association's vision for the Institute was markedly different from that of the Park Service, but both sides kept their doors and minds open and trust and cooperation prevailed, resulting in an institute that has worked for everyone."*

Summary

Americans have always treated their public lands generously. Today, more than ever, the means to do this rests with the nonprofit partners of those public lands, as the nation wrestles with multiple demands upon the federal budget and public land agency budgets are stretched. APPL and its members are at the nexus of the connection to public support for public lands.

The time has come to fully acknowledge, encourage, and foster the partnerships that provide the heart and soul of our stewardship efforts to protect our world-class natural, cultural and historical resources. The key to the long-term health of our nation's treasured public lands is partnerships.

APPL provides information, facilitates communication, and delivers training to build the capacity of these organizations and their agency partners to deliver the highest quality programs, products, and visitor services. APPL fosters standards of excellence for nonprofit partners and helps agencies understand how to approach productive relationships that extend resources and serve visitors. We have developed organizational assessment tools to assist parks and partners in determining their strengths, potential obstacles, and capabilities to increase their programmatic, fundraising, and earned income benefits. We stand ready to work with NPS to implement the recommendations within this testimony.

We believe that caring for our national parks is a shared responsibility. The job is big and resources are limited. As more and more Americans turn to national parks for their recreation and green space, as more and more schools seek laboratories for learning, as communities and citizens look for volunteer and economic opportunities, nonprofit partnerships grow increasingly necessary.