

Congressional Testimony

Testimony of
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On Behalf of
The Travel Institute

To discuss visitation trends in the National Park Service

before the
House Subcommittee on National Parks

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Introduction

I am Scott Ahlsmith, CTC, Chairman of the Board of Trustees for The Travel Institute in Wellesley, MA and President and CEO of Magellan Travel Group headquartered in Glen Ellyn, IL. Mr. Chairman, and other distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, I am honored to be here today to describe for you how a balance of sustainable tourism and environmental management can improve visitation to the National Park Service and provide economic benefit to the overall economy.

Today, I am representing The Travel Institute, a 42 year-old nonpartisan, apolitical, and nonprofit organization that establishes professional standards, delivers education, and bestows professional certifications to more than 100,000 United States-based professional travel sellers. I don't have a research department, but I do offer 35 years of planning, selling, and managing corporate and leisure travel. I have my ear-to-the ground and listen daily to travelers and travel sellers.

Travel Trends

Overall 2006 will be a record-setting year for U.S. travel expenditures. This continues a trend that began at the end of 2002. Travel growth areas, family travel, soft adventure, affinity group, destination weddings, educational travel, and social cause travel. The only area showing significant declines is inbound tourist arrivals, or citizens from other countries visiting the United States. This decline has a significant impact on the U.S. economy.

Inbound Tourism's Impact

U.S. market share of inbound international travel is at an all-time low. Between 1992 and 2004, U.S. market share has dropped 35%.

International visitation creates more than entrance fees and revenues for businesses adjacent to our National Parks, it creates jobs, economic growth, and tax revenue. Every one percent (1.0%) increase or decrease in inbound international market share adds or subtracts 151,000 jobs, \$12.1 billion in expenditures, and \$2 billion more in tax revenues. Losing inbound international market share has cost the U.S. economy more than \$286 billion in revenue and an additional \$48 billion in Federal, State, and Local tax revenue. Travel and tourism is a powerful and potent economic force.

The Role of the National Park Service

After "walking the aisles of local grocery stores," the most popular and memorable attractions for inbound international travelers belong to the National Park Service. These attractions include the Grand Canyon, Bryce Canyon, Glacier Bay, Death Valley, Mt. Rainier, Yellowstone, and the Washington, D.C. monuments.

The Challenge

The National Park Service and the global retail travel industry do not talk with one another. In fact, even though tourist rank National Park Service assets high on their "must-see" destination lists, the travel industry generally views the National Park Service as uncooperative and the National Park Service views the travel industry as two-legged environmental disasters waiting to happen.

The Opportunity

Education and communication will attack the silo-mentality that presently exists between retail travel distribution and the National Park Service. Educating the National Park Service about recent trends and developments in sustainable-tourism and eco-tourism, while at the same time educating professional travel arrangers and sellers about the delicate balance needed to sustain and repair the precious and rare assets managed by the National Park Service.

A series of planning, marketing, and operation caucuses involving decision-makers from the National Park Service and the retail travel industry could help knock-down the ideological silos and generate incremental revenue while protecting the gifts nature has given us.

The Return on Investment

With billions of revenue and tax dollars at stake, the pay-off for communication and education dialogue will turn thousands of dollars into millions and millions into billions.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify here today, and I would be happy to answer any questions.