

# Committee on Resources

## Subcommittee on National Parks & Public Lands

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### Witness Statement

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**STATEMENT BY DAVID HUMPHREYS, PRESIDENT, RECREATION VEHICLE INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION, ON GENERAL ISSUES INVOLVING ACCESS TO NATIONAL PARKS, PRESENTED TO THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES, SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS AND PUBLIC LANDS, JULY 20, 2000.**

Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members, I am David Humphreys and I serve as President of the Recreation Vehicle Industry Association (RVIA) as well as Chairman of the American Recreation Coalition (ARC). RVIA is the national association representing over 500 manufacturers and component suppliers producing 95 percent of the RVs made in the U.S. Our products provide mobile accommodations and range from small camping trailers to large motorhomes and are enjoyed by an estimated 30 million Americans annually. ARC is a national federation of more than 130 national organizations actively involved in meeting the recreation needs of Americans and a sector of our economy accounting for more than \$400 billion in sales annually. ARC members produce recreational products ranging from canoes to motorhomes to tents, provide services ranging from campsites to downhill skiing and represent the interests of tens of millions of us belonging to individual membership groups such as the Good Sam Club, BOAT/U.S. and the National Off-Road Bicycle Association.

Both of the organizations I represent today have a keen interest in access to our national parks and other public lands and sincerely appreciate the interest of this subcommittee in this important topic.

Late this May, *USA Today's* editorial addressed the state of America's national parks, recalling the publication's previously expressed concerns that America's parks faced the danger of "being loved to death" by soaring numbers of visitors. Yet data over the past decade now show very little growth in visitations; should we be concerned, *USA Today* wondered?

The newspaper ultimately reaffirmed its position that visitors continued to represent the most serious threat to the future well-being of the national parks, a perspective we also hear from some of those within the National Park Service. This is not the view of RVIA and ARC. In an opposing editorial, ARC's President expressed our view that people are the best friends of parks. Copies of both editorials are attached to this testimony.

We are greatly blessed as a nation by both a wonderful Great Outdoors and a vision that has led this nation to protect some of the very best parts of this Great Outdoors as parks and wildlife refuges, forests and more. We can be proud that, as a nation, we have recognized and safeguarded the Grand Canyon and Yellowstone, the Grand Tetons and Acadia - and over the century-plus of this protection, we have also welcomed visitors by the millions.

These visitors, then, have served for decades as ardent supporters of protecting key portions of our outdoors, a tradition that continues today. Those who visit our public lands also contribute in tangible ways, volunteering millions of hours in diverse services to these lands. Those who come to gain physical, mental

and spiritual benefits from these visits are willingly paying hundreds of millions of dollars in entrance and recreation fees annually and contributing additional sums to hundreds of "friends" organizations as well.

We think it is extremely unwise and counterproductive to regard these visitors as anything but our parks' best friends.

That does not mean that the recreation community opposes management of visitors or restrictions on the activities that visitors should be allowed to pursue in our parks and on other public lands. In fact, we strongly support a continuation of practices which date back to the earliest days of the national park system which controlled visitor travels, by means that included road and trail systems, and offered the kind of interpretive programs that defined the ethic we demonstrated in our visits to the Great Outdoors.

In recent years, though, we have sensed an important new tension grow between the visitors to our national parks and the National Park Service, a tension reflecting a view by some that the agency must be the vigilant protector of the parks from the American people. How tragic! And what a tremendous and unnecessary burden to assume!

RVIA and ARC believe the welcome mat to our parks and the Great Outdoors must remain out for all Americans, and that agencies charged with protection of our priceless shared legacy of the outdoors need to see themselves as coordinators of the large and diverse network of organizations, corporations and individuals who share a passion for the Great Outdoors.

We are concerned that there has been a lack of growth in visitations to our parks, and especially that those who do visit our parks fail to reflect the ethnic and cultural composition of America today and tomorrow. The legacy of the outdoors will be protected best by those who know the outdoors firsthand. To ensure that knowledge we must increase, not reduce, access opportunities, including access for urban youth, for seniors, for families headed by single parents and for the physically challenged.

To accommodate increasing numbers of visitors, we must challenge agencies including the National Park Service to harness new technologies and management approaches that will distribute usage better - geographically, seasonally and by day of the week. We can and should separate visitors from the vehicles they employ to reach our parks - by offering them better transportation options, as the private sector does today at many ski areas, theme parks and other destinations. There are wonderful examples of such actions in our national parks. In Glacier National Park, for example, fragile alpine meadows at Logan Pass are protected with a boardwalk. And in the same park, management of the Going to the Sun Highway involves banning many of the vehicles produced by RVIA members and restricting bicyclists to certain times of the day.

Yet there are other examples of failure to pursue win/win strategies, including the recently announced action of the National Park Service to end use of snowmobiles on paved roads covered by snow in Yellowstone National Park, despite opportunities to work cooperatively with the recreation and tourism industries to encourage quieter, low-pollution snowmobiles and to use management strategies which would minimize wildlife and social conflicts.

In fact, Yellowstone offers two other examples of unfortunate policy-making. Four years ago, the park closed a popular campground despite the fact that it generated more revenue than it cost to operate. The superintendent's explanation noted that all of the camping fees are deposited in the general fund, whereas the operation of the campground was funded with appropriated dollars and, as a result, a full campground

meant higher costs but no new revenues. The superintendent's action ignored the fact the agency has been given fee demonstration authority by the Congress, allowing it to retain collected campsite fees, and further ignored the authority of the park to allow a concessioner to operate the campground. More recently, the same superintendent has been quoted in news stories as labeling law-abiding park visitors as thieves simply because they transferred entrance passes to others. Those entering the park pay \$20 per carload for a seven-day pass - the shortest duration offered - yet typical visitation patterns are far shorter. Nothing prohibits the park from selling shorter duration passes, thus visitor/agency friction.

We note with interest the upcoming Discovery 2000 conference in St. Louis, an unusual gathering of all National Park Service leadership and key constituents. We urge the agency leadership to utilize that gathering to establish clear goals and philosophies as we look ahead to what we hope will continue to be a love affair between the American public and the Great Outdoors.

Among the issues we urge the agency, and all other federal land-managing agencies, to examine is the role of the Great Outdoors in confronting a major national health issue - the growing number of Americans who fail to reach the minimum level of physical activity recommended by the Surgeon General. Some 60% fall into that category. The results are disastrous. We face a national "obesity epidemic," especially disturbing because of the pervasiveness of this problem among our youth. And each year, 300,000 Americans die prematurely from the consequences of inadequate physical activity.

In closing, we again thank this subcommittee for its interest in appropriate access to our parks and other public lands. It may be simpler for the agencies involved to regard visitors as threats that need to be attacked and avoided - but the organic acts of these agencies do not direct the agencies to take the simpler route. The National Park Service is charged with both protecting the parks *and* enhancing visitor experiences. We must demand that this mandate be followed.

Thank you.

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