

COMMENTS OF STATE REPRESENTATIVE JOHN HEATON

TO THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS  
JULY 9, 2005

RE: NATIONAL PARK SERVICE INVOLVEMENT IN BORDER SECURITY: IS  
IT THEIR RESPONSIBILITY?

I would like to especially thank Congressman Pearce for bringing this important committee to Carlsbad for this very timely hearing, and each one of you for taking the time from your busy schedules to be here as well.

I am now serving my fifth term in the New Mexico Legislature. Congressman Pearce and I entered the legislature at the same time as freshmen, but he was much wiser than I in that he only served one term in New Mexico and then chose to move on to a bigger and much more influential position. After all, who would want to serve in a state house of only seventy members when you can be one of four hundred thirty-five in congress? Congressman Pearce and I served on the appropriations committee and he was a superb steward of the tax payer's money.

Carlsbad is a unique community in that it has five solid industries contributing to its economic base – potash mining, agriculture, oil & gas, the waste isolation pilot project for the storage of TRU waste from our nuclear defense manufacturing and tourism from the Carlsbad Caverns. Tourism is a major industry in the state and it has been one of those core industries that has underpinned the economy of this city. Tourism is a marvelous industry; it's clean, it adds cultural diversity to an area, it provides an enormous number of jobs – restaurants, curios, art, entertainment, motels, etc. and the money from it turns five to seven times. If you would indulge me, I would like to comment on the status of the Carlsbad Caverns, which as you know, is the only national park in the state and it is the single major tourist attraction in southeastern New Mexico.

We have been seriously concerned about the drop in Cavern's traffic in the last ten to fifteen years. In 1988 the visitation was 781,300 people and in 2004 the visitation has free fallen to only 419,600 people, and of that number only 365,651 actually went into the cave.

There are many reasons for the decline; theme parks, Las Vegas, glitzy destination resorts and other competition. And, I understand this is not just a phenomenon with the Caverns, but with almost all the parks across the country. This saddens me deeply that we have drifted so far away from an appreciation of nature and its natural beauty that can never ever be replicated by man. Whole generations now have never visited a national park, camped by a gorgeous stream or admired the grandeur of a spectacular vista from the top of a mountain. Perhaps the loss as a nation of our commune with nature is part of the loss of our spirituality.

Other specific reasons for declining attendance not related to our culture are:

- Frequent and rapid changes of superintendents:

Over the same period of time superintendents have come and gone in rapid fire. They rarely stay over 18 months and frequently as short as 6 to 8 months. They weren't interested in the Caverns when they came and had other ambitions. The present deputy superintendent has been known to say he will be gone as soon as he can and he'll never look back or won't care. This kind of attitude must be eliminated.

- Creation of a hostile visitor environment:

Treating visitors as intruders rather than welcome visitors is pervasive. There is no planning for high visitation days and staffing is always short.

They allow long ticket and elevator lines to drive visitors away.

Automated ticket equipment always fails during high visitation days.

They enforce rigid cut-off times of a few minutes for distant travelers.

One can walk the whole tour and never seeing a ranger.

Some rangers and volunteers never speak or are friendly to visitors.

NPS personnel concentrate more on their needs than the visitors.

There is a reduction of visitor services in the remodeling plans, but there is an enhancement of the facilities for the NPS employees.

Interpreters are given one hour discretionary time off per day when they are needed to help visitors.

- Removal of restaurant facilities from the park:

There are plans to eliminate the underground restaurant and shopping as a result of lint from merchandise as opposed to lint from clothes of visitors and rangers.

Restaurant seating is being reduced from 200 down to 20 or 30 seats.

- No outreach to the community:

There is no communication with community due to the revolving door with superintendents.

When a ranger was writing frequent stories about the Caverns he was stopped by the previous superintendent

- No public relations by park:

The park should be promoting itself through presentations everywhere.

The cave and karst geology and research should be in the forefront of scientific and educational presentations.

Bats are also intriguing to kids and adults alike and should be included in presentations.

Solutions for improving the park and its attendance:

- The caverns is a resource to be respected yet visited, seen and appreciated. The park attitude of "its mine and I don't want anyone to see it" must change.
- Stop the revolving door of superintendents and make sure the superintendent wants to be at the park and is motivated to improve it.
- Allow the superintendent to remove the dissident employees that propagate the negative attitudes.
- Keep the underground visitor center, and additionally allow it to be used for such dignified spiritual ceremonies as Masonic degrees that bring people from far and wide.
- Remodel the surface visitor center to serve the visitors and their needs – food, gifts, museum, geology interpretation, etc.
- Implement a public relations campaign.
- Congress intended for park resources to be seen and appreciated by everyone, not just the park employees. Park resources can be seen and appreciated by visitors and yet preserved for future generations.
- Visitors should be treated with respect, catered to and educated. It is that educational environment of seeing and being told at the same time that indelibly imprints in our memories.

And, finally the interaction of the park service with border security and homeland security:

- From the above comments it is clear that the park does not have enough personnel to care for the visitors, much less, be concerned with illegal immigrants or border issues. It is hard to believe a terrorist would focus on a national park, and especially one with only one exit.
- Park rangers are not trained as anti-terrorists, anti-riot personnel or anti-immigration personnel, and if they are, why are we wasting their time when it is needed for the visitor experience. It makes no sense to arm park rangers where there is no threat – leave it to the Border Patrol.
- Park rangers are not equipped adequately to put down a terrorist assault or to capture and retain illegal immigrants until the Border Patrol arrives.
- Park rangers may not have the authority to become involved in immigration issues.
- Mexico is the source of one of the largest visitor groups. If park personnel become known as immigration inspectors, the park will have an even greater reduction in visitors. No one wants to go where they will be harassed and are not wanted.
- The park is already short handed and has an attitude of not wanting visitors. To get the park service into the business of immigration control will reduce visitors, further the attitude of not wanting visitors, reduce the personnel desperately needed to enhance to park experience, and, frankly, make the park a less desirable place the visit.
- In general, law enforcement in New Mexico does not get engaged in immigration when detaining or apprehending a violator because of the enormous amount of time involved with that issue alone. They leave immigration to the Border Patrol and so should the National Park Service.