

Testimony of Gretchen Long, National Parks Second Century Commission

**United States House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources,
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands**

Hearing on *Building on America's Best Idea: the Next Century of the National Park System*

May 25, 2010

Mr. Chairman, Thank you for inviting us to speak. My name is Gretchen Long, from Wilson, Wyoming, next door to Grand Teton National Park and Yellowstone. As a volunteer conservationist for the past thirty years, I had the privilege of serving on the Second Century Commission which Steve Lockhart just described. It was an extraordinary experience of 28 commissioners from around the country, many experts in their own field but with limited knowledge of our national parks, who came together to assess national parks today, and what the future holds.

We concluded our year long deliberation with an exceptional unity of outlook: Not only are national parks "America's Best Idea" as Wallace Stegner said, but the parks are positioned to be a leading force in meeting the 21st century challenges of accelerated loss of nature, public disengagement, and youthful disconnect.

The role for national parks to meet society's needs and to be a leader in broad scale ecosystem protection was especially evident in the discussions of the Science and Natural Resources Committee, on which I served under the able leadership of Dr. Rita Colwell, former Director of the National Science Foundation and current Distinguished Professor at the University of Maryland.

The committee noted that our national parks--Acadia, Grand Canyon, Yosemite, Yellowstone--are America's favorite icons, and as such have the support of most people in the country. As the best preserved public lands of our nation, they are beacons of stewardship. Traditionally the parks have been our translators of America's great outdoors and the wonders of nature. They are much of our remaining bastions of biodiversity. The committee views national parks as our nation's national heritage, an invaluable, irreplaceable part of our nation's patrimony.

But in the 21st century it is clear that the parks alone cannot sustain our nation's ecological heritage. National parks are neither fully representational of our national natural systems (which Deny Galvin will speak to following), nor are national parks, isolated islands, able to accomplish their mission of keeping resources unimpaired for future generations up against the modern pressures that abound.

The park service will need to grow in the manner in which they operate and work within a broader context. As one of the country's favored agencies, respected by our people for maintaining our precious landscape, the National Park System is well positioned to make these changes. Accordingly, the committee stated:

1. National parks are frequently in the fabric of multiple public lands managed by a number of different federal, and sometime state, lands. To combat the effects of habitat fragmentation, federal agencies need to work in a fashion geared to compatibility with the nation's long term protection of our natural heritage. The park service will play a major role in leading this comprehensive strategy and engage partners across agency lines.

The Committee recommends the President of the United States should establish a task force, including the National Park Service and other federal agencies involved in conservation, along with their state, local and non profit partners, to map a national strategy for protecting America's natural heritage and to identify protection of the nation's natural assets as a common goal for all agencies, while pursuing their respective agency agendas.

2. National parks, impacted by their surroundings, cannot endure alone. Ecosystem services, water air, wildlife, are dynamic. Parks are cornerstones of a larger system.

The park service has a long history in reaching out to communities and establishing partnerships, as well as engaging the visitor, often being the environmental translator. It sets a high standard in the way it manages its resources. Thus it is uniquely qualified to offer technical assistance and counsel to a larger public.

The committee recommends the creation of new legislation, modeled after the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, to enhance protection of natural heritage values on non federal lands. Such legislation would provide leadership opportunities for the National Park Service to provide technical assistance and counsel, encourage incentives for private land conservation, etc. It is not intended to convey any new management or regulatory authority.

3. In recent decades the science arm of the National Park Service has been weakened. To realize its promise, Dr, Cowell states, "The National Park Service must be a trusted scientific authority."

The committee advises science must be strengthened within the service, to support a science based foundation for building a 21st century system. The park service needs to build an internally directed research program which takes advantage of the data in its venue, and which also makes ecosystem and species restoration a hallmark of its applied science capability.

To conclude, our nation's natural assets will only be secure if there is a coordinated, comprehensive, scientifically based approach to ensuring our natural heritage. The National Park Service, with its outstanding system of parks, is eminently qualified to take a leadership role in this critical endeavor.

Thank you for your time