

*Statement of David MacDonald – President, Friends of Acadia
Before the United States House of Representatives, Committee on Natural Resources,
Subcommittee on Federal Lands
Legislative Hearing on discussion draft of “National Park Service Centennial Act”
December 2, 2015*

Chairman McClintock, Ranking Member Tsongas, and other honorable members of this committee, thank you for the opportunity to be part of today’s discussion regarding the proposed legislation, which I believe is an exciting development and a very positive step toward sustainable funding for our national parks in the coming centennial year and well into the future.

My name is David MacDonald and I have lived most of my life on Mount Desert Island, Maine, home to Acadia National Park. I currently serve as President and CEO of Friends of Acadia (FOA), a private, not-for-profit organization with more than 4,000 members that has worked in close partnership with the National Park Service since our founding in 1986. Our members love Acadia and are proud to give back to the park through our organization with philanthropic donations and thousands of hours of volunteer work.

One recent example from just last month is our annual Take Pride in Acadia community work-day, when more than 400 volunteers turned out to help rake leaves from the drainage ditches of Acadia’s carriage roads, and help park staff put these historically significant roads to bed for the winter. This one morning of volunteer labor saves the park tens of thousands of dollars in labor and many times that if preventative maintenance did not help avoid the very costly storm damage and winter washouts that have taken a heavy toll on these gravel roads in the past.

So although Acadia is relatively quiet this time of year compared to summer or fall, the work of protecting this park continues round the clock and throughout the year, and FOA is very honored to be part of the partnership that accomplishes this work which has helped inspire some amazing accolades of late for our park, including readers of *USA Today* voting Acadia America’s Best National Park last year, as well as viewers of *Good Morning America* voting Acadia America’s Favorite Place.

While I hope that my role here today will be to help provide some tangible and specific recent examples from the “front lines” of a park like Acadia of how a centennial matching program like the proposed Centennial Challenge Fund would inspire additional philanthropy and accomplish

priority projects, I would also like to stress three broader messages that I hope Acadia's on-the-ground projects convey:

- 1) First, national parks are incredibly powerful settings that truly represent our country at its best and have the ability to inspire those who experience them to donate toward their maintenance and improvement. And at Acadia we are finding that the centennial, in particular, is resonating as an opportunity for residents and visitors to be part of this historic parks legacy.
- 2) Second, it has been my experience that donors absolutely respond to the opportunity of a challenge grant and matching funding. FOA supporters ranging from the very large, sophisticated donors to those sending a \$35 check as an annual membership donation like to see their dollars stretched and leveraged.
- 3) Third, throughout our thirty-year history of doing this kind of work at Acadia, donors have consistently stressed that they do not want their contribution to become a substitute for the federal government itself continuing to invest in national parks. So as you pursue worthwhile legislation like this to create new revenue, please do not forget the critical importance of the fundamental Congressional appropriations that are essential to maintaining these national treasures unimpaired for future generations to enjoy.

Acadia National Park is a conservation gem and economic powerhouse that I am honored to serve. Relatively small in size, at only 35,000 acres, Acadia is within a day's drive of major cities of the northeast and therefore is one of the most heavily used parks in the nation, with more than 2.6 million visitors each year. Visitation has been growing steadily in recent years, up 13% last year and another 7% so far this year.

At the same time that the number of visits is growing, so is the range of services and experiences sought at a park like Acadia. Whether it is internet connectivity, or search and rescue operations, or accommodation of activities like paddle-boarding or mountain-biking that Acadia's founders could not have even dreamed of, the public is asking more of a park like Acadia than ever before. Local businesses in the surrounding communities also see their livelihoods closely tied to the park's successful operations; during the government shutdown two Octobers ago, our communities lost more than \$1 million per day in economic activity. Many of my friends and peers are among the restaurant owners, guides, and shop-keepers who make up some of the 3,000 jobs and \$200 million of annual economic benefit driven by Acadia National Park.

Acadia was also the first national park created entirely through private donations of land from neighboring landowners, when visionaries such as George B. Dorr and John D. Rockefeller Jr. and dozens of others assembled strategic tracts of land with bold Atlantic coastline, mountain-tops, remote ponds, and pristine woodlands and granted them to the federal government nearly 100 years ago. Indeed, there is a very long history of private initiative, philanthropy, community pride and investment, and volunteerism in our park – as these very principles will be essential to our ability to prepare the park for its second century.

As you know, an initial phase of a centennial challenge program was approved and funded by Congress last year. \$10 million was made available, and despite the very short notice and call for proposals for FY15, FOA and our partners at Acadia National Park submitted six projects. Three of them were ultimately selected to be among the 106 proposals funded nationwide that together involved 90 different partner organizations contributing nearly \$16 million in private matching funds. These significant investments in our parks were stitched together with barely more than a couple of weeks' notice. In looking at your proposed NPS Centennial Act, I believe that the number of projects, the amount of match, and the impact of the projects could all be enhanced with the benefit of a reliable, established program with lead time and dependable funding. Thank you for considering ongoing funding sources that will help keep this model from being a one-shot deal in the centennial year only.

At Acadia, we were able to tackle a variety of projects that were part of the park's maintenance back-log, but also provided tremendous opportunity for visitor engagement and public benefit. The largest project involved the restoration of historic scenic vistas from the park carriage roads and motor roads that had grown in with vegetation over time. Careful planning and documentation was done to understand the original scope and purpose of the vistas as planned by noted landscape architects Beatrix Farrand and Frederick Law Olmsted nearly a century ago. Skilled park sawyers were complemented by citizen volunteers willing to drag brush up to the chipping operation at the roadside. Certain plots were selected for small experimental burns thought to be more effective for some vegetation, and interpretive panels engaged the public in the purpose and methods of the project.

To come up with our \$85,000 share of the match for this project, given the short notice of the opportunity in the spring, FOA quickly decided to draw on existing reserve funds, with the hope of replenishing them with new donations raised over the course of the summer. This strategy paid off when by August we had raised more than 50 gifts toward the project ranging in size from \$35 to \$75,000 and shattering our \$85,000 goal. I am confident that the fact that we were able to tell donors that the federal government was matching us dollar for dollar made all the difference in motivating the number and scale of donations we received in such a short time.

Another centennial project at Acadia involved the rehabilitation of the Deer Brook Trail, an extremely popular hiking trail that runs west from Jordan Pond up toward the summits of Sargent Mountain and Penobscot Mountain. The trail had become severely eroded, diminishing both the hiking experience and the environmental health of Deer Brook as it cascades down the mountains toward Jordan Pond, one of the clearest ponds in the state of Maine and which serves as the public drinking water supply for the village of Seal Harbor. In this case, we had been in discussions for quite some time with a family that had expressed interest in seeing this trail repaired. After making an initial donation two years ago, the family was reluctant to fund further work unless the Park Service itself had "skin in the game." When we let this family know of our ability to propose the trail work as a Centennial project earlier this year, this spurred them to pledge a second gift of \$70,000 to cover the private portion of the project. The work that was done this summer involved park trail crews, volunteers, as well as local teens hired on to the Acadia Youth Conservation Corps, a joint program of FOA and the

Park Service that allows us to hire 15 high school students each summer to tackle ambitious work projects, while also providing the kids with opportunities to learn about and connect with their park.

These recent Centennial Challenge projects build on a long history at Acadia of blending private philanthropy with federal dollars to benefit the park and its visitors. In the early 1990's we undertook a public-private partnership to restore Acadia's 45-mile network of gravel carriage roads following decades of government neglect. We worked with Congress to commit \$6 million of federal appropriations while agreeing to raise \$4 million in private contributions that would serve as a permanent endowment held at Friends of Acadia to ensure continued maintenance of the roads over the long-term. Friends of Acadia annually grants funds to Acadia under the terms of a memorandum of understanding regarding the endowment, which has helped spin off a total of more than \$5 million since its establishment. So I endorse the concept in your bill of an endowment at the National Park Foundation, as this is a tool that has helped greatly at Acadia in smoothing out the inevitable peaks and valleys of annual funding cycles.

A decade later, Friends of Acadia undertook another campaign that similarly matched private donations with public funds to help restore and endow the maintenance of Acadia's historic hiking trail system. This time, the government's share came largely from revenue collected at Acadia through visitor entrance fees (and I know that your committee has recently taken up important work to re-authorize the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act). This campaign went on to be a model for other parks and friends groups around the country. Yet I don't believe that it would have been possible if we had not been able to tell our private donors that the federal government was coming to the table with a significant investment in the project.

All of us at Friends of Acadia are proud of our long history and strong partnership with the Park Service, however we are also firm in our conviction that we, the people of the United States, through our federal government, have a perpetual responsibility to assure the conservation of Acadia unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations. Private philanthropy has a critical role to play in the future of our parks, but there are limits to that role. Friends of Acadia works hard to add value to our national parks rather than fund core operations, which are ultimately the responsibility of Congress.

At Acadia, it is alarming to realize that despite the park's growing visitation, popularity, and expectations from the public, the Congressional appropriation for park operations last year was basically the same as it was in 2009. Given the rising cost of doing business, this flat funding has meant that park staffing has inevitably taken the hit, and Acadia has fewer FTEs than it did seven years ago. On top of that, a growing percentage of these FTE's now consist of seasonal hires, who while very important to visitor services, cannot be expected to tackle the longer-term planning and prioritizing needed to prepare the park for its second century. Viewed at the national level, there has been a 12% decrease or \$370 million reduction in the total budget for the National Park Service over the last five years in today's dollars.

The concept of a centennial challenge fund has been discussed since at least 2007. Now is the time to build upon lessons learned from the past efforts and to create an opportunity for Congress and private partners to design a fund that will inspire private donors to look invest in the Park Service's second century. In particular, we encourage a program that would be inclusive of a wide array of possible ways to give, and as you look to finalize this discussion draft, I am interested in working with other partners and colleagues to discuss how the Centennial Challenge Fund might be strengthened and further leveraged by enabling friends groups like FOA to directly implement signature projects and programs. Friends of Acadia and other groups like us around the country have shown that partners to the Park Service can provide critical flexibility, innovation, cost effectiveness, and a trusted broker for donors wanting to add to our national parks legacy. Of course, we see this at the national level with an organization like the National Park Foundation's great work. And in light of my previous comments about the importance of Congressional appropriations to support park operations, I would urge each of you to remember that legislation such as that proposed today should be providing sustainable, *supplemental* funding for parks, not funds that would be considered a *substitution* for funds lost as part of sequestration or shrinking park appropriations.

With 2016 just a few weeks off, it is important to note that Acadia National Park shares that same centennial year with the broader National Park Service (NPS). In fact, President Woodrow Wilson signed the legislation authorizing federal protection of the initial lands within Acadia on July 8 just a few weeks before he signed the Organic Act establishing the NPS at the end of August, 1916. We are certainly prepared and motivated to bring our best thinking and resources to bear to ensure that Acadia's second century is launched with the same level of inspiration and leadership exhibited by the park's founders one hundred years ago. We are working together with more than 220 centennial partners from throughout the community – businesses, schools, libraries, art galleries, museums, gardens and more – each of whom will embody our centennial slogan which is “celebrate our past and inspire our future.”

I greatly appreciate the opportunity to share testimony with your committee today, and hope that you will not hesitate to let me know if I can assist with follow up questions or suggestions. And in conclusion, I invite each of you to pay us a visit at Acadia during the coming centennial year, when you will find a community-driven, world-welcoming celebration of our park unfolding all year long. I know that members of Maine's congressional delegation including Congresswoman Pingree and Congressman Poliquin would be glad to join me in helping to host you or your staff in experiencing Acadia first-hand. In the meantime, thank you for your work on the National Park Service Centennial Act.

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