

REMARKS OF
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THE STUDENT CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION [SCA],
TO THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS & PUBLIC LANDS OF
THE HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE ON
THE PUBLIC LAND SERVICE CORPS ACT OF 2009

APRIL 2, 2009

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman, and the other distinguished members of the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands.

My name is Dale Penny, and I am president of the Student Conservation Association – SCA – a nationwide nonprofit organization which since 1957 has engaged more than 50-thousand diverse college and high school students in meaningful, hands-on conservation service in the very parks, forests, and other public lands within the purview of this committee.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak with you today. I applaud the committee for recognizing both the potential and the need for an expanded Public Lands Service Corps and for hearing testimony on what SCA believes is a particularly timely and effective legislative initiative.

I should begin by noting that SCA was originally modeled after the old Civilian Conservation Corps. More than a half century ago, a college student who would become SCA's founder, Elizabeth Cushman Titus Putnam, saw young volunteers as the solution to helping overburdened national parks. Liz wrote her senior thesis on "A Proposed Student Conservation Corps" and soon, with the aid of allies including Horace Albright, the then-retired director of the National Park Service, the first SCA corps members reported for service at Grand Teton and Olympic National Parks.

Today, SCA is America's leading national conservation service corps, annually engaging thousands of young adults and teenagers in national parks, marine sanctuaries, and urban communities in all 50 states. This year alone, SCA members will render more than two million hours of service to their nation and neighborhoods: aiding endangered species, restoring threatened habitats, and addressing the factors behind climate change, among many other practices, all to preserve our natural and cultural treasures.

The impact these young people have on the land is as profound as it is immediate, but their influence extends well beyond the here-and-now. SCA exists to inspire lifelong stewardship in new generations of conservation leaders...and with a track record that stretches for more than five decades, the evidence that conservation services does, indeed, produce ardent stewards is quite convincing.

SCA's alumni surveys reveal some 60% of our members move into conservation-related professions and/or volunteer in conservation endeavors in their home communities.

A landmark study of SCA programs and those of other outdoor organizations by Dr. Stephen Kellert of Yale University showed that 78% of participants declared themselves "more environmentally aware" as a result of their experience and 72% noted becoming "more environmentally responsible."

And a review of the workforce at the Departments of the Interior, Agriculture and others, and throughout the private sector, reveals thousands of SCA alumni employed as rangers, scientists, environmental educators and more. In fact, the National Park Service alone estimates that 12% of its uniformed employees launched their careers through SCA internships, and just last year then-NPS Director Mary Bomar declared that "SCA is a real movement in America."

Ensuring our young people enjoy a healthy, informed and enduring connection to their natural and cultural heritage is essential for their own continued well being as well as that of nature itself. Thus, the current call for an expanded Public Land Service Corps could not be more relevant or responsive. Yet this legislation stands to yield many other benefits as well.

One does not have to spend too much time surveying the American landscape to conclude that our economy, as well as our environment, is in crisis. Young people, in particular, face suddenly daunting odds. Family savings have eroded, household incomes are in jeopardy, and student loans are difficult to obtain. All this has put a college education – the very foundation of a prosperous adulthood – beyond the reach of many. And those fortunate enough to be able to go to school are at once confronting the most competitive job market in recent memory.

These same young men and women face bleak environmental prospects as well, with the increasing effects of climate change; continuous threats to clean air, water and wildlands; and increasing competition for our finite resources. Today's generation knows unless we are able to address these issues, and soon, they will inherit a host of problems that grow more acute by the day.

At the same time, however, there is ample hope. We know, for example, that young people across our nation are eager and prepared to respond to a renewed call to service. Applications to SCA are now at all-time highs – more than 40% ahead of this point last year – and many other service organizations are experiencing similar surges. An expanded Public Land Service Corps, along with President Obama's Give Act and the bipartisan Kennedy-Hatch Serve America Act, have the potential to chart a new era in citizen service at a time when our country and our people need it most.

Conservation service sustains resources, enriches lives, strengthens character, and deepens one's commitment to American values. It instills a powerful sense of ownership

that keeps the “public” in public lands. And it is a vital leadership model to the country and the rest of the world as we broadly foster responsible, participatory adulthood.

SCA is conservation service...and at the same time we are service-learning. The word “educate” comes from the Latin word “Educatus”, meaning to draw or lead out. In the dictionary, the first definition of education is “to develop the person’s natural powers through experience and example.” The secondary definition is “to teach.”

SCA believes that young people best “develop their natural powers” *in nature*, through service – by giving back and working toward a goal bigger than self.

Just as important, expanded conservation service stands to provide a new generation with the contemporary green job skills and experiences they need to advance toward an emerging green economy – and to advance America toward energy independence, a cleaner environment, and more responsible consumerism.

In this area, too, SCA has both the ability to help and the perspective to see that conservation service works. By engaging young Americans in the stewardship of public lands, we are building lifelong conservation leaders, voters, and citizens. We accomplish this across all youth constituencies through outdoor service opportunities, career-focused internships, and skill-building conservation jobs.

The sponsors and other supporters of this bill deserve tremendous credit for seeking to strengthen the Public Land Corps and effectively expand it beyond parks to include forests, seashores and other public lands. Federal lands have long been – and will continue to be – among the largest of SCA partners.

However, to ensure nature’s wonders and opportunities are available to all populations, and to bring about a more inclusive conservation community, SCA has for some time focused on engaging underserved, often ethnic, urban populations. In cooperation with city authorities and with the support of corporations and foundations, we introduce African-American, Latino, Asian-American and other young people of color to their hometown parks and encourage them to explore their own unique connections with nature. We furnish them with stipends to make our programs more accessible, with new innovative routes to extend their education, and with tangible job skills that lead to long, promising, productive careers.

Although the city parks of Pittsburgh, Detroit, Oakland, and the dozen other municipalities served by SCA are presently beyond the scope of this legislation, I want you to know that each year SCA draws thousands of diverse participants from these communities, and at every step we are engaging, training, and opening professional doors for them.

I further encourage the committee to join SCA in building bridges between local communities and federal lands. This could be achieved by funding local training programs for city and county parks, with a commitment to paid public lands placement in

continued training or apprenticeships. By initiating engagement with nature at home, the individual flourishes, the community benefits, and the participant is empowered to go further afield into federal public lands management and take their place within an agency workforce that, like many of us, is widely approaching retirement.

SCA is a proven partner of the bureaus within Interior; among other roles, we contributed significantly to the implementation of the National Park Service's existing Public Land Corps Program. We also work closely with Agriculture, Commerce and other federal departments. Amid a burgeoning list of needs across the public landscape, SCA is qualified and ready to help fulfill the objectives of this legislation by engaging more young people in conservation service, reaching out to diverse populations, and providing tens of thousands of emerging citizens with a direct pipeline to green jobs and lifelong stewardship.

In closing, there are several specific aspects of the expanded Public Land Corps Service Act deserving of special attention.

- This bill recognizes that conservation service benefits more than the land. It benefits the communities in which those who serve live, the communities surrounding the park or forest, and most of all the community at large as conservation service fosters an extended practice of selflessness and helping those in need.
- If we are to engage more young people in conservation service, we must redouble our recruitment efforts and redouble them again. SCA applauds the authors of this bill for including additional outreach and we stand ready to assist in this effort in any way we can.
- A lot has changed since passage of the original legislation and this is acknowledged through this bill's inclusion of educational products such as web content and audiovisual programs. Technology can be viewed as the antithesis of nature, but at SCA we know today's generation has grown up with cell phones and laptops and quite naturally Facebooks, YouTubes and Twitters as part of daily life. We must use these modern tools as a bridge to our natural and cultural heritage.
- I believe the consulting intern provision of this bill has as much potential as any other. For some years, SCA's Business Planning Intern program has sent MBA candidates as well as other graduate students to national parks as business consultants. Increasingly, these students postpone the green that Wall Street offers – until recently, anyway – for the green of our national parks, bringing with them enhanced efficiency and productivity.
- The provision referencing residential centers addresses a significant opportunity to furthering conservation service. At Mount Rainier National Park, Delaware Water Gap NRA, and even the historic "Blister Rust Camps" at Yellowstone

National Park, SCA restoration corps have operated out of existing but closed camps. Utilizing these facilities allows park units to mount large-scale service operations with small-scale impacts on the environment, augmenting the effort staged from more traditional tent camps.

- The explicit expansion of “public lands” to include seashores, marine estuaries and like resources, as well the specific inclusion of the Commerce Department and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration are wise and worthy additions. They represent irreplaceable economic, environmental and cultural resources and enabling these places to benefit from the efforts of the Public Lands Service Corps will ensure their health and vitality for many years to come.
- The further expansion to the U.S. Geological Survey and the Natural Resources Conservation Services is similarly important in that it better facilitates the conservation of working lands such as farms and ranches: iconic pieces of the tapestry that is the American landscape.
- Retaining and expanding AmeriCorps education awards is an important factor in allowing middle- and low-income Americans to participate on conservation service. From my vantage point, the value rendered by these young people is many times that of the award’s face value, making this modest investment in America’s future a monumental bargain.
- I am also pleased to see that alumni of the Public Lands Service Corps will be afforded a noncompetitive hiring status for two years following 960 hours of service which is critical to moving PLSC alumni into paid positions. Building on our experience, SCA would welcome the opportunity to provide alumni services such as job and education counseling to alumni of the Public Lands Service Corps.

In conclusion, I am in strong support of the aims of this bill, as I suspect are the more than 50,000 SCA alumni who have benefited in very personal and profound ways from their own conservation service. To achieve the legislation’s objectives, SCA is prepared to grow to the extent that funding will allow. Our recruiting, training, mentoring and career counseling services are both proven and scalable. And SCA’s existing Cooperative Agreements with federal agencies will facilitate a simple, rapid, and effective deployment.

National service is the greatest calling a citizen will ever hear...and conservation service enables one to make both today and tomorrow better for all. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to such a sterling and urgent imperative.