

**COMMENTS OF BOB WARREN**

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**FOR  
THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE OF GATEWAY COMMUNITIES**

**TO**

**THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS**

**ON**

**VISITATION TRENDS IN THE NATIONAL PARKS**

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## **Introduction**

Good Morning. It is a genuine pleasure for me to be part of this important hearing today on national park visitation. I am Bob Warren, Chairman of the National Alliance of Gateway Communities(NAGC). NAGC is the national organization that represents the interests of hundreds of communities that serve as “gateways” for millions of visitors to the treasures of our national parks and other federal public lands. I am also General Manager of the Shasta Cascade Wonderland Association, a multi-jurisdictional tourism marketing organization in Northern California.

Our organization lauds you, Mr. Chairman, as well as Representative Christensen and the other members of the Subcommittee, for holding a hearing on the issue of visitation to our national parks. Our national parks, once a unique experiment for preserving the natural wonders on our landscape, is now a model for countries around the world for preserving special places. Our national parks represent a tradition which America is built on, of preserving the wildness and spectacular natural and important historical places for all Americans.

Visiting a national park is as important to the social fabric of America as baseball and apple pie. The United States is unique in the world in having set aside hundreds of park units, covering millions of acres of public land for the use of all. Our country offers the most extensive "menu" of recreational opportunities at national parks, of any nation in the world. A number of communities in the west have either been developed because of national park units, or have transitioned into being tourism service centers for those visitors to our best special places. There are numerous examples of communities that were founded because of resource extraction and that have now become healthy and viable visitor oriented destinations for our national parks.

As California and the United States become more populated, park lands set aside for tourism and recreation uses, have become increasingly more important. The density of many big cities is in the hundreds of people per acre, and along with stressful jobs, individuals need a way to "get-away from it all". Our parks offer an opportunity for families to reconnect, for individuals to "recharge their batteries", and a way for all to enjoy a wide variety of recreational experiences that are both healthy for the body and the soul.

## **A Changing Society**

The shared concern this Subcommittee and many gateway communities have about “flat” or declining visitation to our national parks is worthy of a national commitment to this issue. It’s hard to imagine places like Yellowstone, Yosemite or the Grand Canyon going wanting for visitors, but with changing societal trends escalating into the future, that possibility may be a reality. There are now words in our vocabulary that just a decade ago did not exist, but now are the names of major corporations and our most popular consumer products. Who can even remember how Google, Playstation, or Xbox “snuck up” on our society.

The “Y”, “Z”, and to some extent the “X” generations do not have the same connection to nature as previous generations. Gone are the days of packing the stationwagon for a two week camping trip to a national park. Currently, Americans are working longer and harder

than the last several generations, and the concept of taking two or even one week at a time is as antiquated as the black and white television. Teenagers now demand to be connected 24/7 and the thought of being in the "wilderness" without email, cell phone coverage, pagers, cable TV or Playstations is not only unattractive, but to some even terrifying. Hiking, cookouts, sleeping in tents and watching deer is just not stimulating enough for those who have grown up with constant and instant multimedia stimulation.

A growing number of those looking to the outdoors for recreation seem to want to bring all their entertainment with them. Their definition of an outdoor experience includes jet skis, ATV's, motorcycles, and jet boats - all part of activities that are largely prohibited in national parks. Therefore, a rapidly expanding portion of the outdoor recreation user group has migrated to areas where they can engage in these high impact activities.

Another segment of the outdoor recreation market the Park Service has been slow to react to the changing trends, is the RV marketplace. Gone are tear drop trailers, replaced with half a million dollar luxury cruisers, driven by a more demanding baby boomer. These "boomers" want larger pull-thru sites, wireless internet, recreation centers, and full hook-ups, as offered by many private sector campgrounds. Most of the campgrounds in the NPS system are still set up for the 1960's type user base of the single family with a tent and a canoe, driving a station wagon. The current potential national park user has changed, while the Park Service has not.

The change in the potential park user is further complicated by the increased competition for the ever shrinking vacation. Today every major city has amusement parks, festivals, sport stadiums, word class resorts and the money to market.

### **Developing the Next Generation of Park Users**

It seems an effort is going to be necessary to continue to attract the next generations to national parks. A number of park units around the country understand the importance of working with local groups to develop viable education programs that cause increased visitation. One of the best programs I found in my research for this testimony, is not too far from Washington in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania.

The Pocono Environmental Education Center (PEEC) enhances environmental awareness, knowledge and appreciation through a hands-on experience in a natural outdoor classroom. PEEC is located in northeastern Pennsylvania, within the boundaries of the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area. PEEC has been an independent residential environmental education center since 1972, serving a national and international community of students, teachers, adult learners and professionals. Over twenty-five thousand (25,000) people of all ages stay and study at PEEC annually. PEEC is a center for study of nature and natural systems, the natural environment and the human environment. PEEC's campus includes unique hemlock gorges, the scenic Delaware River, diverse lowland and upland forests explored by Gifford Pinchot (the father of modern forestry). It is one of the more respected residential centers for environmental

education in the United States. It is an easy day's drive for 28 million people, making PEEC one of the more accessible Environmental Education Centers in America.

PEEC is located on 38 acres of land within the seventy thousand-acre Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area. PEEC has forty-seven guest cabins that can sleep from two to fourteen people. For over thirty years, the Pocono Environmental Education Center (PEEC) and the National Park Service have partnered to provide visitors to the National Park a variety of educational experiences to help increase their knowledge and enhance their understanding of the natural world. Unfortunately programs such as this are not part of what should be a national mandate.

### **Gateway Communities Need our Parks and Public Lands**

Gateway communities in America, by their very nature, are close to national parks or other public lands. This symbiotic relationship creates an arrangement where the park users need the community for services, while the gateway communities need the parks as an attraction. As more and more rural communities are transitioning into more diverse economies that are less based on resource extraction, visitors to national parks can play an increasingly important role in local economies. In rural California, every \$63,000 dollars spent by visitors, creates one new job. Many of those visiting our national parks are international visitors who often make their visit to America, a visit to one or more of our magnificent national parks, and while here, other parts of rural America. Germans alone account for hundreds of thousands of visits to national parks annually. Redwoods National Park in Northern California surveyed visitors during a specific month several years ago, and 11% of the visitors were German. That was more visitors from Germany than from any state in the United States excluding California. That was even more German visitors than visitors from Oregon, less than 50 miles to the north of the Park. Obviously, the money spent by these international visitors is important to both the local economies and to our national balance of trade. In light of the impact on tourism from the challenges brought on by the war on terror, we know luring back many of these visitors to America will be difficult. Those of us in the West know that public lands will continue to be the "magnets" that draw internationals back to America and our rural communities.

### **The Park Service, State Tourism Offices, and our Gateway Communities**

The White House Conference on Travel and Tourism which was held in October, 1995, helped bring federal land management agencies and the destination marketing organization's together, each beginning to understanding the need to work cooperatively towards a common goal of responsibly promoting the use of our national parks. Out of that gathering came the creation of the Western States Tourism Policy Council and the National Alliance of Gateway Communities, one organization representing the western states tourism offices, and the other representing gateway communities. Also out of this landmark conference came the commitment to follow through on one of the National Tourism Strategy objectives developed at the White House conference, by holding the first Western Summit on Tourism and Public Lands in Lake Tahoe the following year. One of the key recommendations of the Western Summit was that communications and cooperation be improved between federal agencies charged with managing public lands

and state tourism offices. The following year, the Western States Tourism Policy Council and all federal agencies that are involved in public lands tourism management signed a memorandum of understanding. The MOU encourages improved cooperation between the two parties for the purpose of sustaining the economic and social benefits of tourism and encouraging responsible actions on public lands.

The White House Conference, the Summit and the MOU have served to uncover concerns and provide a mechanism for improved relations and problem solving as regards management of federal lands and tourism.

The National Alliance of Gateway Communities, and the Western States Tourism Policy Council are, encouraged and pleased with changes in the way the National Parks are being managed today. We appreciate the increased efforts of the NPS in seeking our opinions and support. We recognize the very difficult position that the NPS is in as regards balancing its dual mandate of preservation and use while responding to the many different types of users that are interested in the parks, and we congratulate the Service for its actions recently to reach out and increase involvement in solving the serious problems that face the parks. As regards to National Parks, I wish to emphasize that the NPS should continue and expand its outreach to the communities and states, and through this cooperation, the common goal of continuing to develop a user base into the future has a greater possibility for success .

Many of the supervisors, superintendents, and managers of Park Service units are keenly aware of the importance of working with their gateway communities. I know in my area, many of them make daily efforts to interact with community leaders. As an example, the park superintendent at Whiskeytown National Recreation Area, personally has taken on the marketing challenges of promoting a newly discovered attraction, Shasta Falls. He has led dozens of guided tours to both local citizens and important media contacts. This personal effort has caused a significant amount of press coverage, including an article in an upcoming issue of western lifestyle magazine, *Sunset*. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. There are too many examples where relationships are inconsistent and unreliable and are often too dependent on the personalities involved. Because of the physical remoteness of many national parks, it has been common among National Park superintendents and their staffs to operate independently from gateway communities, county governments and state governments. Today, however, the solutions needed by National Parks are often dependent upon the approval and involvement of these entities. Today, National Parks cannot operate as islands, regional solutions are needed for both management and marketing.

### **Financial Matters**

Current, there are no cooperative marketing opportunities available in the Pacific Southwest Region of the National Park Service to develop marketing programs with individual or a collection of park units. My organization saw the need to develop a "critical mass" model for marketing park units in Northern California and Southern Oregon to the German market. After working with several German tour operators, it was determined that to successfully sell an itinerary focused on visiting a national park, probably more than one

park would need to be included to develop the critical mass necessary to attract a visitor from Europe. Just as Americans are not likely to go to Europe to visit one attraction, Europeans see travel the same way. There is a definite relationship between the amount of time needed to get to the intended destination, and the amount of time it takes to see what the visitor came to see. Our Marketing cooperative of the Humboldt County Visitors Bureau, the Redding Convention & Visitors Bureau, and the Shasta Cascade Wonderland Association; packaged six national park units into one loop itinerary in Northern California, and arranged for its promotion in Germany through one of the largest tour operators, DerTour. This itinerary is in the current DerTour catalog which is distributed to one million German households, and 10,500 German travel agencies. (See attached PDF files of the actual catalog page and catalog cover.) This program was developed with no support from the Park Service.

The Recreation Enhancement Act should have provided the opportunity to implement an important common business practice seldom overlooked in the private sector – marketing. Just as virtually no private sector business plan would ever make it out of the draft stage without the inclusion of a marketing plan, the Park Service should require each individual unit work cooperatively with its potential marketing partners at both the local and regional levels to develop individual marketing plans. This plan should include setting aside funds for local and regional marketing along with a small percentage going back to Washington to fund the national program through the Park Service, Office of Tourism.

### **Improved Training and Management**

I recommend that any NPS employee seeking advancement to park superintendent or regional manager positions be required to learn about good practices in community relations, public policy and tourism management. The U.S. military requires its senior officers to train in world affairs and national defense strategy. A similar broad understanding of public policy, tourism management, and finance should be expected of senior park service employees.

I very strongly recommend that the NPS Tourism Director be provided the with the resources to work cooperatively with the travel trade (tour operators, receptive operators, bus companies, state tourism offices) and that this individual be allocated funds (along with similar representatives from the USDA Forest Service and BLM) to attend major national and world travel and tourism trade shows in order to meet with the travel trade and develop cooperative marketing programs.

Further, we recommend that all highly visited National Parks assign specific personnel to work with the travel, tourism and film industries.

### **Park Service Employees**

While training is helpful in improving the quality of the workforce, we recommend that a study be conducted that establishes what training is occurring today and how much it costs the NPS, before new training programs are established. Park records on employee training, man-hours of training per park, subjects trained, cost of instruction, cost of travel and other factors should be evaluated. It may be revealing that a substantial amount of

training occurs today, but that training is not always directly relevant to improvement of performance, visitation, or productivity.

Proper attitudes supported by adequate training along with dialog and partnering with “stakeholders” should be top priority for the National Park Service. Gateway community citizens can lend expertise in attracting and retaining visitors, as well developing business and commerce models to support increasing visitation.

### **Recommendations for Improving Visitation to National Parks**

Changing visitation trends basically becomes two distinct challenges, one for the domestic market, and one for international visitors. Although both can be affected by an increased effort at marketing, the domestic market needs help that will deliver a more basic and longer lasting solution concerning actual demand for a national park experience. Wide ranging demographic changes in America require some commitment to seeking solutions through education.

- 1.) Education programs** Developing educational programs that continue to create new park users is only a partial solution to declining visitation. One of the best programs in the country is the Pocono Environmental Education Center (P.E.E.C.) in northeastern Pennsylvania, within the boundaries of the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area. This program sees only 25,000 visitors annually, a small percentage of the tens of millions of Americans who live within a few hundred miles of their park unit. More broad based programs need to be developed “outside the park”, to affect the perception of parks in our cities. An example of this sort of program might be California’s Children Outdoor Bill of Rights. This program will be implemented statewide, to help convince parents of the importance of outdoor experiences for their children. (See the complete set of “California Children’s Bill of Rights” in the attached PDF)
- 2.) Developing and Funding Cooperative Marketing Opportunities** The Recreation Enhancement Act provides the Park Service with the opportunity to provide individual park units with the resources to cooperatively work with its potential marketing partners at both the local and regional levels to develop individual marketing programs. This plan should include setting aside funds for local and regional marketing along with a small percentage going back to Washington to fund the national program through the Park Service, Office of Tourism. Also, international marketing to those countries we know love our parks accomplishes two important goals. One, International visitors have a very positive affect on our nation’s balance of trade, and bring valuable dollars to rural communities. Two, the opinion of those international visitors about America and Americans is markedly different after a visit to our country. They see Americans in a positive way and more than just a compilation of our nation’s “Foreign Policy”.
- 3.) Commitment to Training Park Service Employees** All NPS employee seeking advancement to park superintendent or regional manager positions should be required to learn about good practices in community relations, public policy, and tourism marketing and management. A broad understanding of these disciplines could be developed in senior park service employees, by

implementing training development tracks into their already existing training programs.

- 4.) **Support is needed the Office of Tourism for the National Park Service** We commend NPS Director Fran Mainella for reinvigorating the agency's Office of Tourism. A well-respected industry professional was named Director of Tourism in September of 2005. He is in a position to provide tourism expertise that should help stem the declining visitation numbers that have prompted this hearing today. Yet, for the full potential of the Office of Tourism to be realized, it must have a reasonable budget. Presently, its budget is taken up entirely by the salary of the Director of Tourism. We urge this Subcommittee to take the lead in urging the Appropriations Committee to provide sufficient funds to allow the Tourism Office to perform its needed functions.

### **Conclusion**

The recommendations I have provided may not be the only possibilities for improving park visitation. They represent the minimum level of changes our communities around parks see as part of developing better relations with the gateways. Visitation trends to our national parks should continue to be carefully monitored, as it serves as an indicator of public interest in preserving our special places. But, without changing the current management model of only "preserve and protect", little is likely to change in the current set of visitation trends. Virtually every successful business model includes marketing as a core component. Visitation at individual park units also serves as an indicator of the performance of park managers in the area of education, resource protection, and providing a quality visitor experience. Failure to analyze these indicators will surely end up in minimizing the importance of our national wonders, rather than the preservation of our national parks for future generations.

Leaders in gateway communities are faced with the daily tension of attempting to balance commerce and conservation, of preserving enduring wildness while enhancing economic well-being. Our gateway communities will prosper only if we are constantly ensuring that the needs of nature are met, while people are allowed to make a living. This tension is of course by choice, as those of us who live in rural locations most often would choose to be nowhere else. I am confident that by investing in the relationship between gateway communities and our national parks, we will continue to ensure that our nation's special places will stay relevant to the majority of Americans, while we strive to preserve all that is natural, as well as maintaining the character of our gateway communities.