

Douglas P. Wheeler
Chairman
National Park System Advisory Board

Statement
Before the Subcommittee on National Parks
House Committee on Resources

Oversight Hearing on the Reauthorization of the
National Park System Advisory Board
June 22, 2006

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee:

I am Doug Wheeler, a member for five years and current Chairman of the National Park System Advisory Board. Although I am currently an attorney in private practice, I have known, worked with, and admired the National Park Service for 37 years, beginning with service as Assistant Legislative Counsel of the Department of the Interior in 1969. When the current Secretary, Dirk Kempthorne, was appointed by President Bush this Spring, I wrote a letter on behalf of the Advisory Board, advising of our function as citizen advisors to the Secretary and Director of the Park Service, and offering to assist in his stewardship of the Nation's magnificent National Parks. A copy of that letter to Secretary Kempthorne, which summarizes the broad range of our activities, is attached for ready reference.

In her testimony today, Director Mainella has detailed several of the Board's recent accomplishments. We are grateful for her kind words, and appreciative of the fact that the Director has joined us for all but one of our quarterly meetings in the last five years. At those meetings- whether in Washington or at one of the Parks—the Director and her colleagues are afforded an opportunity to interact with twelve independent citizens, who were selected and appointed to four-year terms by the Secretary pursuant to eligibility criteria contained in the Historic Sites, Buildings and Antiquities Act of 1935. Your witness excluded, the Board is comprised of extraordinarily well-qualified men and women whose specific expertise and experience are readily available to the Director and the Secretary as they tackle some of the Parks' most challenging contemporary issues. Among the current members are a Pulitzer Prize winning historian; the President of the Nation's most popular public television station; the Chairman of the Board of a major university and the President of another; the President of an Alaska Native corporation; a research scientist and executive of the National Geographic Society; and a cabinet-level official in state government. Despite their diverse qualifications, these individuals share a profound respect for the people and places of the National Park Service, and give freely of their talents and energy in the service of the National Park idea.

In fact, the Advisory Board has only two statutory responsibilities, and even they are but advisory to the Director and the Secretary: recommendations for designation of National Historic Landmarks and, more recently, National Natural Landmarks. But, as the Director notes in her testimony, we are responsive to her requests for assistance across a broad range of "other duties as assigned". At the moment, these include the work of standing committees which are devoted to philanthropy as a source of supplemental support for the Parks; pilot programs for fitness in the Parks, consistent with the President's HealthyUS initiative; a television series to encourage civic engagement through use of Parks' educational resources; standards for the establishment and administration of National Heritage Areas, recently enacted as S. 243; and an examination of standards for tax credits under the Federal Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credit Program. In addition, Mr. Chairman, a special committee of the Board responded to the Director's request for assistance in reviewing the draft of 2006 Management Policies, released with your support at an event on Monday. Another special committee, organized at the request of the Director, is comprised of former Directors who meet

periodically under Board auspices to advise on matters of particular interest to senior Park officials.

At the conclusion of the Board's 139th consecutive meeting, earlier this month at Zion National Park in Utah, the Board agreed to consider as a Committee of the Whole a suite of interlocking issues which concern the role of Parks in a changing society. As you observed on Monday, Mr. Chairman, the Parks must remain relevant to the interests, needs and aspirations of diverse constituencies, even as we protect the irreplaceable natural and cultural resources which comprise the National Park system: we intend to begin this examination of Parks in their second century at a joint meeting with the National Park Foundation this Fall.

I appreciate, Mr. Chairman, that this is an oversight hearing, with no particular focus on pending legislation. I trust that I've adequately explained the qualifications of the Board, and its unique role as a citizens' advisory committee, including its many recent accomplishments on behalf of the Nation's National Parks. In return for a relatively modest investment of public funds, about \$150,000 annually, over the years this Board has paid substantial dividends in terms of its volunteer service, providing countless hours of expert advice. The charter of the current Board and the terms of several members are due to expire on January 1, 2007. The Administration has proposed that the charter of the Advisory Board be extended for an additional ten years, and the Senate has held hearings at which Deputy Director Martin testified in favor of S. 2627. No bill has yet been introduced in the House, Mr. Chairman, but we recommend that this Committee give favorable consideration to re-authorization of the Advisory Board for an additional ten years..

Although S. 2627 contains proposed amendments to our charter, including re-configuration of its membership, the Advisory Committee recommends that no change be made in current composition of the Board. As I've already indicated, the Board now consists of individuals whose qualifications and terms are established by the Congress. The Board is functioning well, and by statute consists of individuals whose special qualifications are relevant to Park needs. We are aware of no issue or interest which lies beyond the current competency of the Board. All meetings are open to the public, and every meeting includes a session at which public comment is invited. At no time during my five-year tenure as Chairman has the Board been challenged for failing to take into account diverse points of view, or for having lacked the expertise to discharge its responsibilities. Of course, it might be argued that not every Park constituency is represented by a member of the Board. But it would be impossible to structure a Board on which every one of the Parks' many and diverse constituencies is represented. Moreover, we read the Charter to require that members possess resource- or management-specific expertise, and not that we function as a sounding board for multiple Park constituencies. In this connection, it should be noted that the Chair, including this one, is authorized to appoint to Board committees non-Board representatives of particular interests, when broader participation might be useful. For this reason, I am pleased that Derrick Crandall, of the American Recreation Coalition, today serves as a valued member of our Health and Fitness Committee.

I thank you, Mr. Chairman, for this opportunity to describe the work of the National Park System Advisory Board. We are honored to serve as members of the Board, and grateful for this opportunity to assist in the management of America's great National Park system. On behalf of the Board, I'd be pleased to answer your questions.