

NATIONAL PARKS CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

Protecting Parks for Future Generations

**Laura Whitehouse
Central Valley Program Manager
National Parks Conservation Association**

**Testimony Before the
National Parks Subcommittee, Committee on Resources
U.S. House of Representatives**

**National Park Service's Efforts to Combat the Growth of Illegal
Drug Farms in National Parks
November 17, 2005**

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, it is with great honor and pleasure that I testify before you today about the future of our national parks. I want to thank you for the opportunity to participate in this important hearing about dangerous illegal cultivation of marijuana and drug trafficking in our national parks.

I am Laura Whitehouse, Central Valley Program Manager in the Pacific Region of the National Parks Conservation Association. I live in Fresno, California, which is shouldered by two of the grandest national parks in the system – Yosemite National Park and Sequoia and Kings Canyon national parks. It is a privilege to be here today as the subcommittee delves into one of the significant challenges to the ability of the Park Service to protect the America's park system and serve and inspire park visitors.

Since, 1919, the nonpartisan National Parks Conservation Association had been the leading voice of the American people in protecting and enhancing our National Park System. NPCA, our 300,000 members, and our many partners work together to protect the park system and preserve our nation's natural, historical, and cultural heritage for generations to come.

National Parks Mission

The national parks preserve superlative examples of America's natural, cultural, and historic resources. Each site within the National Park System is designated for the common benefit of all the people of the United States—those of us here today and those who come after us. This gives the National Park Service not only a stake, but also an affirmative obligation to protect the national parks in carrying out the mission entrusted to it by the American people.

The National Park Service Organic Act, which established the National Park Service nearly 100 years ago, declares the fundamental purpose of the national parks to be *to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such a manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations*. The 1978 Redwoods Act built on the Organic Act by requiring that *the authorization of activities shall be construed and the protection, management, and administration of these areas shall be conducted in light of the high public value and integrity of the National Park System and shall not be exercised in derogation of the values and purposes for which these various areas have been established, except as may have been or shall be directly and specifically provided by Congress*.

The Park Service has an obligation to protect park resources from whatever threats arise to them. It cannot ignore its primary mission to preserve the parks unimpaired for generations. This means that the agency cannot merely combat illegal drug trafficking like other agencies, but must take an extra step to restore the parklands affected by such damaging activities.

The increasing danger to rangers and visitors, financial costs, and environmental damage caused by illegal drug cultivation and trafficking in the parks are real and significant problems that need our attention. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for shining a light on this important issue.

Drug Trafficking in the Parks

According to NPCA's 2005 report, *Faded Glory: Top 10 Reasons to Reinvest in America's National Park Heritage*, the Park Service confronts increasing problems with illegal drug cultivation and/or trafficking at Sequoia National Park and Whiskeytown National Recreation Area in California; Organ Pipe Cactus and Coronado national monuments in Arizona; and Amistad National Recreation Area and Padre Island National Seashore in Texas, among other park sites nationwide.

Illegal marijuana cultivation within Sequoia National Park, for instance, has increased drastically since September 11 when Mexican drug cartels relocated operations onto public lands because of tightened security along U.S. borders. This has serious consequences on the safety of park staff and visitors, the experiences of visitors, and the park's already-tight budget.

Unsafe Parklands

The drug cartels hire armed guards to protect their illegal marijuana gardens in Sequoia National Park. The men, dressed in camouflage, are armed with AK-47s with military-style, double-stacked ammo clips, and guard the perimeter and any trails leading to the gardens. Park Service rangers have heard of hikers and fishermen being chased at gunpoint after inadvertently stumbling onto a marijuana garden or meeting one of these guards on a trail.

The cartels also use booby traps to secure the marijuana gardens—shotguns with trip lines carefully hidden and positioned to shoot an unknowing victim in the face. Families that may have once worried about stumbling across a bear while hiking through Sequoia are now threatened by the hidden dangers of armed guards and booby traps.

Rangers and law enforcement officers who seek to combat this illegal activity are also at risk. In prior years, guards used to flee from Park Service law enforcement, but now stand their ground with leveled guns, using intimidation tactics. This past June, a California State Fish and Game officer was wounded in a bust of an illegal marijuana garden—the fourth incident in two years.

In addition to safety concerns, visitors are also affected by what they do not see: park rangers who have been detailed elsewhere to respond to the drug problem; outdated or nonexistent interpretive materials because resources have been diverted to eradication efforts; structures that continue to crumble or must be closed because the parks have had to spend scarce funds on security or other needs; and a lack of ranger-led educational programs.

Sequoia National Park spent \$50,000 in fiscal year 2005 to clear out garbage, miles of irrigation hose, and other debris left behind when the marijuana gardens were abandoned or eradicated. This expense has an adverse impact on the park's already insufficient budget.

In 2002, the Park Service was forced to refuse about half of the school groups requesting ranger-led education programs because it had to devote significant resources instead to combating the park's marijuana problem.

Seventy-two percent of people who visit national parks say it is very important to them to have park rangers available to answer their questions, and lead walks and talks and campfire programs. When rangers are diverted to duties associated with combating illegal marijuana trafficking, this eliminates any opportunity for them to interact with and inspire park visitors.

Resource Protection

Illegal marijuana gardens in the parks have caused significant damage to the natural environment. Nowhere is this more evident than in the 850,000 acres of Sequoia and Kings Canyon national parks, some of the wildest country in the Sierra Nevada range. Growers clear the under story from parkland to cultivate marijuana plants and terrace the land, stirring up soil and attracting non-native, invasive plants that wouldn't otherwise take hold in the mountainous region, setting off a disturbing domino effect across the parks' delicate ecosystems.

This cultivation method also involves trampling delicate soils, redirecting sources of water to the gardens, and disrupting natural drainage. Pollution from fertilizer and pesticide runoff kills native fish and enters the watershed and water supply of nearby communities like Three Rivers. Growers also poach wildlife. Trash left behind is a fire hazard.

The Park Service has found that by completely removing the drug infrastructure such as camps, fertilizers, and pesticides; restoring the natural landscape; and posting bilingual warning signs about the area being under surveillance, the cartels do not return.

But this hard work and extensive effort is expensive.

Increasing Challenges

In 2004, more than 44,000 plants were eradicated within the Sequoia National Park. But in 2005, only 1,351 plants were removed. This sharp reduction is likely due to the drug cartels changing tactics. Instead of growing a large number of plants in a few areas, they are now growing a fewer number of plants in a variety of areas. And instead of growing crops in square or rectangle gardens, the cartels are now growing marijuana along the contour of the terrain, making the gardens more difficult to locate and remove.

Similar to national parks across the county, Sequoia and Kings Canyon are greatly understaffed and under-funded. While rangers are doing their best to protect the parks by coordinating multi-agency raids and alerting the parks' 1.5 million annual visitors to the dangers that might exist just off the trail, more funding is desperately needed to enable the rangers to do their job to protect park resources and provide a safe and enjoyable experience for park visitors.

Sequoia and Kings Canyon national parks have insufficient rangers to patrol the remote areas where these activities take place. In addition to needing more personnel, the parks are in desperate need of increased backcountry patrols and helicopter time to patrol and surveillance hours to help locate these hard to find growing areas. Without further investigation of marijuana activities within the parks, park resources—as well as visitors and park rangers—are in danger.

We appreciate congressional efforts, and the Director's efforts, to provide a fiscal year 2006 \$438,000 budget allocation to combat the illegal marijuana cultivation problem in Sequoia. However, that funding may be reduced as a result of potential across-the-board cut to the Park Service's operating budget.

Significantly more resources are needed to combat this dangerous problem and conduct critical restoration efforts in Sequoia and other affected parks.

Congressional Action

Mr. Chairman, we greatly appreciate your efforts and that of your colleagues on this committee, in drawing attention to this important issue. We note the letter that Representative Radanovich, Senator Feinstein, Chairman Lewis, and Representative Bono sent to Director Mainella in July about this serious threat to our national parks. As stated in that letter: "It is clear that illegal marijuana cultivation on public lands has become a serious problem in California... the National Park Service has not dedicated sufficient resources to tackling these growing problems..." NPCA supports the request in this letter to the Park Service for a report outlining a multi-year plan to resolve this serious problem, including an estimate of the extent of criminal activity in the parks; what additional law enforcement personnel are needed to combat this activity; and how the Park Service plans to rehabilitate park resources damaged by the marijuana plantations. We urge the committee to support, and follow up, on this request.

Mr. Chairman, the national parks are at the core of our national identity, and they are one of America's unique gifts to the world. But until Congress and the administration address the parks' critical funding needs, the safety of rangers and visitors, and the preservation of our heritage, will remain at risk. Parks will continue to be forced to cannibalize their scarce resources to confront issues such as illegal marijuana cultivation.

NPCA looks forward to working with you and other members of the subcommittee on the many issues that confront our national parks, including illegal cultivation of marijuana. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions.