

## 2009 NPHA Park Partners Forum



*Park Partners Forum participants enjoy the vista of Tunnel View in Yosemite National Park*

The National Park Hospitality Association's 2009 Park Partners Forum brought together concessioners, National Park Service (NPS) employees, Interior Department officials, allies and friends groups to discuss the future of recreation, travel and tourism trends affecting the concessions industry in 2010 and beyond. The productive gathering, which convened October 18-20, 2009, at the Tenaya Lodge – a Delaware North Companies property – adjacent to Yosemite National Park, also included a session in the park and a dinner at the historic Ahwahnee Hotel – and delightful weather.

### **Sunday, October 18, 2009**

The meeting opened with an invocation by Rev. Spencer Lundgaard, Executive Director of A Christian Ministry in the National Parks – an honorary member of NPHA. He encouraged concessioners to reach out to their visitors, who are “so connected and yet so tuned out,” and reminded them of the great impact their businesses have on their visitors' lives. NPHA Chairman Joe Fassler reported on association activities since the Annual Meeting held in March 2009 in Washington, D.C. He applauded the proactive focus of the organization, noting that the respect between concessioners and NPS was at the highest level he had ever seen. He mentioned the great progress made by NPHA's several committees on activities like rate approval, marketing, CONPAC, and more, and he gave a brief preview of the positive reports to come from the committees later in the meeting. Mr. Fassler announced that NPHA would organize meetings with at least five of the seven NPS regional directors across the country over the next few months in preparation for the annual meeting in March. He also announced the creation of a new membership committee to be headed by Kevin Kelly of Delaware North Companies.



*NPHA Chairman Joe Fassler reports on association activities*

NPHA Counselor Derrick Crandall reported on the many exciting developments concerning concessioners in Washington, D.C. in the general session ***Recreation, Travel and Tourism Trends Affecting the Concessions Industry in 2010 and Beyond – Washington Report***. To start, he noted that, rather than support the previous administration's Centennial Initiative to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of NPS, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar will instead focus on the America's Treasured Landscapes Initiative, which will recognize all Interior lands. Mr. Crandall told the group to expect something similar to the Great Outdoors Colorado model, which uses lottery proceeds to invest in state parks and outdoor buffer zones around Colorado cities. Mr. Crandall presented two recent high-profile reports on the future of outdoor recreation and the national parks: the Outdoor Resources Review Group's "Great Outdoors America" and the Second Century Commission's "Advancing the National Park Idea." The ORRG report determined that current structures and funding are not sufficient to support the country's growing population

and clearly states that there is an important part to be played by the private sector in conservation efforts. Mr. Crandall noted that concessioners can also play a crucial role in keeping outdoor recreation on the national agenda. He pointed out that the Second Century Commission's report is more limited and only relates to the national parks, but also made the observation that there is no mention of concessioners or concessions operations anywhere in the report. This is an important challenge to overcome, Mr. Crandall asserted, because concessioners need to be seen as critical partners in the future of national parks. He urged all concessioners to read the report and be prepared to offer ideas to expand on it. A strategy session on the report hosted by the University of Tennessee will be held November 3-5 in Knoxville, and Mr. Crandall encouraged participation by the concessions industry.

In addition to the release of these reports, Mr. Crandall noted several other critical developments regarding public lands. The Department of the Interior's budget for FY 2010 will soon be approved, and a \$32-33 billion increase over 2009 is expected. NPS will receive an increase of \$100-150 million over its 2009 budget, representing huge opportunities for expansion of conservation efforts. He reported that NPS is acting fast to fill holes in top leadership ranks. With the regional directors group expected to strengthen over the new few months, Mr. Crandall reaffirmed the need to meet with them soon. He also reported that the Travel Promotion Act is nearing passage after four years on the Congressional docket. While the legislation pertains only to international travel, this segment is very important to U.S. tourism. Despite strong global growth in long-haul international travel between 2000 and 2008, the U.S. welcomed 633,000 fewer overseas visitors in 2008 than it did in 2000, not including arrivals from Mexico and Canada. According to the U.S. Travel Association, the lag in the growth of overseas visits can be attributed to a difficult visa process, a lack of national promotion and a negative perception of how people are treated upon arrival. Final action – the Senate has already approved the bill by a vote of 79-19 – is expected shortly, and the measure has White House support. Mr. Crandall explained that the new law would use matching federal and tourism industry funds to generate up to \$200 million annually. And new legislation to fund domestic tourism is being readied by U.S. Representative Sam Farr (D-CA), who has pledged to include a provision for national parks promotion.

### **Monday, October 19, 2009**

The NPHA Board of Directors held its meeting early Monday morning and took a number of actions, including allocating funds for start-up of a new National Parks Promotion Council, approving the association's budget for 2010, supporting creation of a Brian O'Neill Award to honor outstanding national park superintendents, and more.

The general session ***Recreation, Travel and Tourism Trends Affecting the Concessions Industry in 2010 and Beyond*** featured Dr. Emilyn Sheffield, a professor at California State University at Chico. Dr. Sheffield's presentation, "Linking Our Legacy of Parks to 21<sup>st</sup> Century Youth," discussed dramatic demographic and cultural changes underway in our nation and the implications for parks and public lands. Her message was hopeful – even after acknowledging that parks are less visited by Americans today. "We simply don't have to lose this next generation!," she exclaimed. Dr. Sheffield noted that concessioners can play an important role in binding people to special outdoor places by using products and ideas to make visitors want to be a part of something bigger than



*Jim Lyons and Dr. Emilyn Sheffield discuss recreation, travel and tourism trends*

themselves. She encouraged concessioners to use their marketing capabilities and help take the message of the outdoors into the communities where the people already are. Jim Lyons, a lecturer and research scholar at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies and former Under Secretary of Agriculture for Natural Resources and Environment, expanded on Dr. Sheffield's comments, saying that concessioners need to get ahead of the curve on outreach to growing minority populations. He emphasized the importance

of understanding this new market in order to shape our businesses to fit the cultural needs of a changing population. Concessioners must consider factors such as income and education levels of visitors in their efforts to make them feel at home in the outdoors. Outreach to youth is also critical to our future, he remarked, and outdoor participation by this group in the future will be determined by how we treat them in the outdoors today. Most importantly, he said, we must understand our market before we develop a marketing strategy. Mr. Lyons also reminded concessioners to look beyond our borders to the global economy, noting that – as he had heard again from a guide in the hotel lobby that morning – European tourists love American national parks! Mr. Lyons also encouraged concessioners to capitalize on the growing trend of volunteerism on public lands among both retirees and young Americans.

In the following general session on the **NPHA Marketing Committee**, Terry MacRae, Chairman of NPHA's Marketing Committee, outlined a plan for the creation of the National Parks Promotion Council (NPPC), a broad stakeholders group tasked with increasing awareness of and interest in national parks. Mr. MacRae reminded the group that the word "promote" is a key element of the National Park Service's mission statement, and that it is especially appropriate to market the parks in a time when visitation to these special places continues to fall, even while the American population is growing. He explained that, currently, there is no organization that works to promote all of the national parks, and the fact that NPS does not have the flexibility to market that concessioners and others do is further reason for the creation of a separate group. The NPPC could leverage cooperative strategies of interested parties to create a unified website, audience-targeting plans, joint promotions, welcome centers, coordinated media outreach, and more. Many successful models for the plan already exist, such as Go RVing and the California Travel & Tourism Commission. Mr. MacRae reported that the NPHA board had approved start-up funding for NPPC, although investments will be sought from a wide range of partners and securing sustainable funding for the effort will be a core goal for the new organization.

Several key topics were covered during the **Lunches with Learning** session. Jonathan Simon of Van Ness Feldman – a NPHA Associate Member – led the session **Climate Change is a Hot Topic!** This group discussed recent developments concerning concessioners and climate change, including the recent report from the Rocky Mountain Climate Organization and Natural Resources Defense Council, "The National Parks in Peril: The Threats of Climate Disruption." NPHA Communications Director Mindy Meade led a session on the **NPHA Newsletter, Website and Communications Efforts**. She

announced that the NPHA website [www.parkpartners.org](http://www.parkpartners.org) would soon have a section filled with valuable resource materials for concessioners, including the latest information on NPS regulations, personnel and more. The CONPAC Advisory Board also met during the lunches with learning sessions.

In the first afternoon session, Mike Tollefson, President of the Yosemite Fund and retired Superintendent of Yosemite National Park, touted the importance of visitor services to the national park experience. “Half Dome won’t ever change,” he said, “but visitor services do and they play a central role in creating the remembered experience.” He reminded the group that differences in staffing alone meant that park visitors are more likely to have contact with concessioners than with the National Park Service staff. He also noted that more than half of today’s visitors to Yosemite are repeaters, returning because they had a great time there before. This point is crucial, he said, because “the visitor experience is what protects the resource.” Mr. Tollefson reported that when he first came to Yosemite, all the “buzz” surrounding the park was negative – and often false. It took a coordinated effort to put out positive news releases, debunk myths and negative rumors, and turn the debate about Yosemite into one based on facts. In Yosemite today, “primary partners” get together at least quarterly to discuss park issues. While discussions at these sessions used to be based on in-park issues and activities, he said, today they are mostly about activities in gateway communities. Mr. Tollefson noted that the keys to a successful partnership in the parks are talking and listening early and often, and working to break down barriers and create positive relationships before divisive issues arise. He encouraged concessioners to work with NPS staff to get out their messages when possible, because news from NPS carries a certain cachet with it that outside companies don’t have. Mr. Tollefson addressed some of the challenging management issues surrounding a place like Yosemite and offered interesting observations about park visitors and their activities. He stressed the need to have appropriate visitor services such as Spanish-speaking interpreters. And we have to meet the people where they are, he told the group. If the Latino community is more comfortable gathering in park stores, let’s meet them there, he said. He commented on the wonderful outreach efforts to youth in the park and remarked that many young people involved in those efforts go on to become employees in the park. Mr. Tollefson applauded Delaware North Companies for its extraordinary support, including providing buses every Saturday to allow UC Merced students to reach the park. The more engaged partners there are in the park, he said, the better it is for everyone. Mr. Tollefson then showed a Yosemite Fund ad featuring Yosemite Ranger Shelton Johnson, who was featured in the Ken Burns national park documentary telling the story of the park’s Buffalo Soldiers. He highlighted the good work of Yosemite Fund in paying for Mr. Johnson’s travel expenses to share his story in conjunction with the rollout of the film over the past year.

The next session – ***NPHA Rates and Standards Task Force: Today’s Opportunities and Using SERA to Continue Progress*** – included a report on the activities of NPHA’s Task Force on Rate Approval and Standards, including concessioner interaction with the SERA process within NPS to revamp NPS Guideline 48. The task force met with NPS officials in Denver in April to discuss ways to mitigate the unnecessary burdens placed on concessions by an inefficient rate approval process. Topics included increased use of core menus, appropriate response times to rate requests, anticipated and expected rates, comparability, and methods for reviews and appeals. It was reported that, because of limited space for concessioners at NPS training sessions for superintendents and concessions specialists, NPS taped its 2009 training session and will make it available to

concessioners online. Jo Pendry, Chief of NPS Commercial Services, pledged continued meetings between concessioners and NPS commercial services staff and further pledged assistance in developing a unique concessioner “mark” that would aid visitors in identifying authorized concessioners.

Monday’s sessions were followed by a reception hosted by Delaware North Companies and a dinner recognizing contributors to CONPAC, the concessioners’ political action committee.

### **Tuesday, October 20, 2009**

Tuesday began with an exciting general session titled ***New Technology Opportunities in Parks Marketing***. Dennis Biela of LightSpeed Media encouraged concessioners to think of smartphones as their 24/7 sales tools. Apple recently reported two billion iPhone/iPod Touch applications (“apps”) have been downloaded via iTunes, and the number is expected to reach three billion by Christmas. Currently, he explained, there are approximately 2,000 apps related to travel and tourism, generating 20 million downloads per month. This group of apps is second in popularity only to games. Mr. Biela urged concessioners to think outside the box about how to use key elements of the iPhone, such as the “sniffer” that tells the user where it is located and where the nearest services are, and includes the ability to immediately download travel guides about its current location. The partnership between Lake Mead and the Southern Nevada Agency Partnership (SNAP) is the first prototype of this kind of use. While Mr. Biela wasn’t at liberty to share demographic trends about iPhone users, he assured concessioners that iPhone users are the “missing-visitor” demographic groups that national parks wish to attract. Alan O’Neill of the Outside Las Vegas Foundation told the group about **ePark Guide**, an online site with park information that is downloadable to smartphone devices for a small fee. The guide is based on various points of interest within a park and uses GPS technology to direct visitors between points and trigger displays. Aside from convenience, he noted that it is far easier to keep information accurate on electronic guides than it is to change books. He predicted that the technologies to improve visitor experiences will have to come from the private sector, not the government. Mark Finley of Finley-Holiday Film Corporation – a NPHA Associate Member – shared information on promotional video clips his company has been preparing for NPHA members and demonstrated easy ways to incorporate streaming video into websites via YouTube. Although his company remains committed to producing DVDs for sale in the parks, Mr. Finley showed his passion for helping concessioners tell their stories through video. He also shared some of the advantages of the advances in high-definition filming and showed some of NPHA members’ promotional videos. Mark Saferstein of the American Park Network/OhRanger.com – another NPHA Associate Member – discussed new developments on his company’s website, recently recognized in *USA Today*. While the American Park Network is well-known for publishing guidebooks to parks and public lands, that is an expensive business model, he said. It is much cheaper and more efficient to be online with your information. Mr. Saferstein demonstrated new features of **OhRanger.com**, which allows potential park visitors to search parks and other public lands by activity, state, region. In the future the site will also feature a Q&A section that will compile the expertise of park experts into a searchable database. Mr. Saferstein encouraged concessioners to share their park offerings with him for incorporation into the site.



*Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Interior Bob Stanton addresses the Park Partners Forum*

Robert Stanton, Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Policy and Program Management and former Director of the National Park Service (1997-2001), joined the group for the session ***A Discussion of Interior's Youth and National Service Initiatives – And Opportunities for***

***Concessioners***. Mr. Stanton brought greetings from Interior Secretary Ken Salazar and expressed his delight at being in the company of people with an unwavering commitment to visitor services. He affirmed that the Interior Department is determined both to be the best steward of the public lands it can be and to make those same lands widely available to the American people. He outlined the Secretary's five main goals for the Department, one of which is youth-focused. He noted that Interior has a long history of reaching out to young people. In 1933, the Civilian Conservation Corps put 2.5 million young men to work on public lands across the nation. Building on that tradition, he explained, Secretary Salazar wants to capture the spirit of the CCC to increase the

connectivity between young people and their lands. The efforts of the CCC have been replicated several times, including the Public Lands Corps and the Youth Conservation Corps. Youth who become engaged with the public lands through programs like these often stay involved with them throughout their lives, he said, noting that the new Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Sam Hamilton, is a YCC graduate. Mr. Stanton mentioned how Richard Louv's book *Last Child in the Woods* drew much-needed attention to serious issues regarding our young people and the outdoors, including decreased time spent outdoors and increased time spend in front of screens, reduction of recess at school, and problems associated with increasing childhood obesity. On June 6, the Secretary created a youth office to carry out Department-wide activities to engage youth on public lands through employment, services and recreation programs. Mr. Stanton described the office as practical and self-serving for the Interior Department as well. The current workforce is aging and the demographics of the nation are changing, he noted, and Interior needs to attract a diverse workforce that represents the face of America. "There is no more compelling obligation than the one we have to our youth," Mr. Stanton said. He recalled the World Congress on Parks in 2003, where Nelson Mandela told the group that the future is in the hands of our youth, and if we don't engage them in conservation, we will not save the lands or humanity. Mr. Stanton also thanked the concessioners for their active involvement in programs such as Take Pride in America and First Bloom, which enrich the whole nation.

Jo Pendry, Chief of the NPS Commercial Services Program, led an ***Exchange with NPS Commercial Services*** on the upcoming Concessions Management Advisory Board Meeting and more. She informed the group about a new set of quarters coming out featuring America's public lands that will replace the former state quarters program. Five coins will be released each year over the next 10 years. Ms. Pendry was pleased to report that NPS is making progress on revamping its website and is utilizing new social media through channels like Facebook to reach out to new audiences. Concessioners also shared information with the commercial services staff on their sales trends for summer 2009, reporting that while visitation may be slightly up, visitors are having shorter stays

(often not sleeping in the parks) and spending far less on things like souvenirs. Ms. Pendry also repeated her statement of support for the concessioners' idea of an official "concessioner mark" to be used to designate official NPS concessioners.

The concessioners then traveled into Yosemite National Park, where they enjoyed outstanding interpretive services and learned about the history of concessions operations in Yosemite. After a stop at Tunnel View to take in the scenery and a historic tour of the Ahwahnee Hotel, the group met with Leigh Westerlund of the Yosemite Institute (a NatureBridge campus), whose goal is to inspire youth to make a personal connection to the natural world. The Institute takes out an average of 350 students per week, mostly from the California public school system, for the purpose of giving these kids, who may not otherwise be able to visit the park, a sense of place, interconnection, stewardship, personal growth, group development, educational impact and responsible environmental behavior. Over 15,000 youth visited the park last year through the program. Dave Uberuaga, Acting Superintendent of Yosemite National Park, welcomed the group to the park and commended the concessioners for being "key partners to all parks in what you do." He remarked how proud Yosemite was of employee Shelton Johnson for sharing one of Yosemite's greatest stories with America and how the park showed episodes of the Ken Burns series at three sites within the park during its premiere. He shared stories from Secretary Salazar's visit to the park the previous week. He reported that visitation to Yosemite is up 8% for the year, with visits in September up 13%. He remarked on the need to continually reach out to new audiences for the parks and added, "You need everyone to have a conversion when they visit [these special outdoor places]". Mr. Uberuaga commended Yosemite Institute as a powerful example of outreach and urged the group to challenge the attitudes of kids who arrive at parks and can't bear to be away from digital contact.



*Park Partners Forum participants are treated to a historic tour of the Ahwahnee Hotel*



*L to R: John Schoppmann, Rex Maughan, Bill Butts and Tim Colvin of Forever Resorts are shown with the Coleman Award*

The evening concluded with the presentation of the 21<sup>st</sup> Annual Sheldon Coleman Great Outdoors Award to Rex Maughan of Forever Resorts. To read the story of the award presentation, [click here](#).

### **Wednesday, October 21, 2009**

Many concessioners attended the NPS Concessions Management Advisory Board (CMAB) meeting at the Ahwahnee Hotel on Wednesday, hearing from the NPS commercial services staff on subjects ranging from its training efforts for the 300 people involved in concessions management to projections of future concessioner contract prospectuses and awards. During the lunch break, concessioners, NPS staff and board members traveled to the Yosemite Lodge by hybrid shuttle for a “sustainable lunch,” focused on locally sourced food and minimal waste. Dan Jensen of Delaware North explained its Greenpath program and the challenges of working with lodging and restaurant rating programs that fail to give consideration to environmental initiatives. He also discussed the added costs of environmental leadership and limits to public acceptance. Prior to the conclusion of the meeting of the newly-reconstituted board – which presently has just four of its seven authorized members – a panel of concessioners reported to the board on current business conditions, discussed concerns about the delay in resolving Leasehold Surrender Interest guidelines, and sought CMAB support for more uniformity and less burden in NPS concessions management practices.

### **IMPORTANT DATES**

#### **2010 NPHA Annual Meeting**

**March 7 - 9, 2010**

**Washington, D.C.**

#### **NPS Concessions Management Advisory Board Meeting (tentative)**

**March 9, 2010**

**Washington, D.C.**

Please mark your calendars and plan to attend!