

## Concessioners: A Pillar of Support to National Parks

Companies – large and small – have long been partners in meeting the needs of visitors to America’s national parks. Today, the National Park Service has 600 contracts in place under which appropriate lodging, transportation, food, guide services, retail operations and more are provided to 280 million customers annually. In total, concessioners serve some 50% of all park visitors and the 25,000 employees of the concessioners are a vital source of information and guidance to those visiting park units. The total value of goods and services purchased by visitors now approaches \$900 million annually, and the franchise fees and other payments to special accounts by concessioners generate \$50 million annually in resources available to the agency. In addition, concessioners provide even more than that annually in maintenance to federal structures and facilities, and in voluntary contributions of goods, services and labor. In many parks, concessioners lead major volunteer efforts to maintain trails and remove trash from roadsides, trailheads, shorelines and other areas. And concessioners are increasingly playing a key role in informing visitors about opportunities to contribute to park needs and collecting contributions under guest donations programs.

Concessioners are pleased that satisfaction levels of the public about national parks is high – in part because they know that their efforts are often a critical part of the positive memories generated by park visits.

The role of concessioners in the operation of park units and in serving visitors is clear to local park managers, and concessioners enjoy generally positive relations with the National Park Service at the local level. Understanding of the close working relationships between NPS personnel and concessioners is less apparent to those at the national level, where the business relationships between the agency and concessioners frequently dominate discussions. For this reason, the **Concessioners Centennial Council (CCC)** offers this paper as an insight into outstanding concessioner efforts supporting national park units – by large and small concessioners alike. The examples cited here are simply anecdotes, demonstrations of the diverse and central role concessioners play in park operations and positive visitor experiences. A more comprehensive national report on the overall role of concessioners in assisting the operations of the national parks system is under development, with first-ever estimates of the total positive contributions of concessioners to America’s national parks.

### Volunteer Efforts: *Trash Tracker*

Begun in 1990, the Trash Tracker program is a co-operative effort between ARAMARK and the National Park Service (NPS) to clean up the 1,960 miles of Lake Powell’s shoreline. On each of the 26 trips annually, volunteers spend five days aboard a houseboat donated by ARAMARK. Volunteers must apply, be trained and must be at least 18 years of age and committed to working eight hours a day. And it is hard work: trash found along the shoreline is often filled with sand and can get very heavy. 2006 was a stellar year for the Trash Tracker program, as volunteers collected over 55,000

pounds of trash while also declaring the experience “*one of the most rewarding experiences of my life.*” Since the inception of the program, 800,000 pounds of trash have been removed from the shores of Lake Powell. The costs of the Trash Tracker program to the agency are virtually nothing: ARAMARK supplies a houseboat and work boat with a pilot, fuel, and repair and maintenance of the boats and equipment. The volunteers supply their own food and beverages.

### Investments in Federal Infrastructure

Concessioners are a vital means for funding the buildings and other infrastructure vital to visitor experiences. The National Park Service and other public agencies have long struggled to overcome a basic political reality: maintenance is a low priority in the budget process. By adding a very substantial new stream of revenue and through business models that put corporate resources and revenues from operations to work, concessioners have helped to protect and preserve invaluable public assets, including historic hotel structures and less visible utility operations. Here are some examples of the benefits accruing to the National Park Service – and park visitors.

Delaware North's involvement with national parks began in the early '90s with its bid for the largest single concessions contract – at Yosemite. In addition, it now operates in Yellowstone, Sequoia and Grand Canyon. Delaware North has worked hard to establish agreements for public/private partnerships allowing stewardship to flourish alongside initiatives aimed at making national parks accessible to a national and international visitor base. The company increased government payments dramatically, created a capital improvement fund, provided \$61 million to buy out the previous concessioner's investment in the park and undertook a \$12 million environmental cleanup project, mitigating damage from 31 leaking underground storage tanks. The company invested about \$40 million voluntarily – beyond the capital improvement fund – in major renovations and improvements to the park's facilities. In total, Delaware North has returned \$200 million to park facilities and operations in less than 15 years and demonstrated it is possible to enhance visitor services, protect public lands and provide an attractive rate of return to both government and concessioners. At Sequoia, Delaware North has reinvested an astounding 77% of revenues during the first four years of operation, including \$14 million invested in the design and construction of Wuksachi Lodge.

Glacier National Park concessioner Glacier Park Inc. donated its vintage “red buses” to the National Park Foundation with the stipulation that the National Park Foundation donate those same buses back to Glacier National Park. That donation was valued at \$3,000,000. The concessioner also has established a “Red Bus Endowment Fund” funded jointly with its customers. The fund gives Glacier National Park money to help restore the historic buses when necessary. Among the sources of funding are sales of mugs with the “Red Bus” image and model “Red Buses.”

Xanterra provides visitor services at Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, Death Valley, Bryce, Zion, Crater Lake, Everglades, Rocky Mountain, Petrified Forest National Parks and

Mount Rushmore National Memorial. Its operations in national parks date back a century, operating as the Fred Harvey Company. Its recent investments in federal infrastructure exceed \$44 million and include: renovation of the El Tovar Hotel at Grand Canyon; Annie Creek Restaurant and retail building at Crater Lake, which received the first U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy Environmental Design (LEED) Silver Certification for construction of a federal building in a national park; renovation at the Canyon Western Cabins in Yellowstone; refurbishment of historic touring buses in Yellowstone; construction of the new Old Faithful Snowlodge in Yellowstone; construction of guest accommodations at Zion and Bryce; and renovation of the food service and retail facility at Mount Rushmore.

Smaller concessioners also make big contributions. Faced with an acute need for new signs, Gettysburg National Military Park turned to its concessioner, Gettysburg Tours, Inc. for a contribution and a voluntary repainting of the concessioner's fleet to create awareness of the new signs.

### *Outreach Efforts and Environmental Education*

Forever Resorts, a concessioner with marine operations in several national parks, has partnered with park units in Texas and Nevada to bring hands-on environmental stewardship to school children during educational field trips on the water.

The *Lessons on the Lake Program* in Texas began with a public private partnership between the Lake Amistad National Recreation Area and Forever Resorts. Forever Resorts provided a rental houseboat and skipper, and the National Park Service delivered the curriculum. The program, a 4 hour on-the-water trip geared at 5<sup>th</sup> grade students, is directly tied to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills and the Texas Academic Assessment of Skills requirements.

During the field trip, students learn about local geologic processes, prehistoric people of the Lower Pecos, and adaptations of plants and animals in the Chihuahuan Desert. They also receive instruction in boat and water safety and learn to use binoculars. Begun in 2000, Lessons on the Lake has hosted 120+ trips and some 6,000 children.

Lake Mead National Recreation Area is minutes away from one of the nation's fastest growing metropolitan areas. The growth means that many living in the region have little in the way of tradition regarding use of – or connection to – the NRA's lands and waters and thus limited appreciation for water use and water quality issues, the impact of development on area wildlife and social conflicts arising from human use. Forever Resorts played the central role in designing, building and donating a 70' custom-designed houseboat used as a floating laboratory and educational classroom at Lake Mead called Forever Earth. On board, students from an urban environment spend a day on the lake participating in hands-on science experiments, learning about the ecology of Lake Mead, water conservation and the value of our public lands.

Since the program's 2002 inception, nearly 3,000 students from the 4<sup>th</sup> through 7<sup>th</sup>

grades, teachers, biologists, researchers, agency personnel plus a local variant of the national WOW – Wonderful Outdoor World program have benefited from the Forever Earth Program. In the past eight months, 43 field trips with more than 800 students have occurred. Clark County School District students in grades four through high school participated in hands-on science activities focusing on Lake Mead's fish, including the endangered razorback sucker; the potential effects of invasive zebra mussels; the area's geology; and performing water quality tests and measurements. By understanding the importance of our water resources in the desert, students formulate personal stewardship actions that they share with other students and Southern Nevada residents. In addition, 43 teachers participated in workshops that provided tools for teaching about water, water conservation, and Lake Mead. These workshop participants potentially reach over 2000 students each year with these important concepts.

Forever Earth is also used for conducting research about Lake Mead's natural and cultural research. The National Park Service's Underwater Cultural Resources Team used Forever Earth to document the presence and condition of a B-29 bomber that crashed into the lake in the late 1940s. The team also used the boat to survey artifacts remaining from the construction of Hoover Dam in the early 1930s.

In summer 2006, the National Park Service began using Forever Earth as a mobile visitor center on busy weekends. Interpreters make contacts with recreational boaters and fishermen, stressing water safety and promoting responsible use of public land. Over 1650 contacts were made in just six trips aboard Forever Earth.

ARAMARK Harrison Lodging has acted as a champion for the parks, and especially getting youth outdoors, in many ways. At the 2007 Travel Industry Association of America POW-WOW, drawing leading domestic and international tourism industry leaders, ARAMARK gave out signed copies of Richard Louv's book **Last Child in the Woods** to an audience more accustomed to information about theme parks and spas.

In Everglades National Park, concessioner Shark Valley Tram Tours provides free tram transportation for school groups, and supports the park's Junior Ranger program. The concessioner recently suggested a new essay program that is now part of its concessions contract. Each school class does an essay on their trip. The essays are judged by NPS staff and the winning student receives a savings bond and a free tram ride for their family at Shark Valley.

### *Parks and Health*

The National Park Service has been charged under Executive Order 13266 with a role in helping Americans pursue more active lifestyles and avoid the significant health risks of obesity and inactivity. Concessioners are playing an important role in building awareness about the importance of physical activity among visitors to parks and helping those visitors use their time in the parks to be active. California Guest Services, Inc., concessioner in Lassen Volcanic National Park, for example, plays an active role in promoting healthy lifestyles through parks. It's **FitKid** program rewards children for

exercising, eating healthy foods, and enjoying the outdoors. Stickers, prizes, buttons, etc. will be given as prizes for the healthy choices.

Using placemats and lobby displays, Forever Resorts Team Members invite visitors to its lodges and marinas to walk more. At Signal Mountain Lodge in Grand Teton National Park, the company has developed trail maps offering its customers special reinforcements and rewards ranging from free apples to membership in the Signal Mountain Summit Club for completing a healthy activity. This program is popular with Forever Resorts team members and is included as part of the employee orientation. Guests are encouraged to hike to the summit of Signal Mountain. More than half of Signal Mountain's Team Members and more than 450 guests have enjoyed this activity, not only for the hike, but the bragging rights of acquiring a Summit Club commemorative sticker for their water bottle!

### Support of Local Foundations

A large number of concessioners provide significant, continuing support for local foundation and support groups. In Lassen Volcanic National Park, California Guest Services, Inc., created and continues to sell shirts, hats, and mugs with the local foundation's logo, generating thousands of dollars since the program's inception.

Beginning in the 1990s, concessioners initiated programs in Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks through which visitors staying in the park were encouraged to add a dollar per day to their bills, with the receipts donated to local foundations. These programs led to the National Guest Donations Program, offering concessioners a less burdensome path to implementation of the program. Guest donations programs now operate in at least 14 park units and provide an estimated \$500,000 annually for specified programs, including seasonal interpreters, new interpretive materials and outreach efforts to local communities. Although the national guest donation program generally requires deposit of collected funds with the National Park Foundation, Glacier and other parks now have arranged for transfer of 80% of the collections to a local foundation.

Glacier Park Inc. also hosts an annual fund-raising function called "Spring for Glacier" at Lake McDonald Lodge. The proceeds benefit the four non profit organizations within the park. These non profits support many visitor services' needs within Glacier National Park.

In Gettysburg National Park, concessioner Gettysburg Tours, Inc. has contributed \$ .80 per head for all riders to the Gettysburg Foundation, the nonprofit organization that is building the new visitor center for the NPS. To date that amounts to almost \$600,000. This pledge will continue through 2009. In addition, the concessioner provides free transportation and tours for Foundation programs and meetings.

Over the last four years Xanterra has collected over \$1 million through its guest donation program in support of the National Park Foundation and specific park

foundations. Xanterra has also teamed up with the Peregrine Fund and National Park Service to sell shirts to raise money for condor protection at the Grand Canyon.

### Environmental Management

Concessioners have often led park efforts to protect air and water quality, reduce solid waste and conserve energy.

As a provider of hospitality services in 13 of America's national parks, ARAMARK operates with a deep sense of respect for the planet, and in a manner that protects the nation's natural resources for the enjoyment and education of this and future generations. In order to accomplish this considerable goal, PlanetEVERgreen, the official environmental management program of ARAMARK Parks & Resorts, was developed. PlanetEVERgreen initiatives influence every aspect of ARAMARK operations, including purchasing, waste management and reduction, water and energy conservation, transportation, sustainable building design, employee training, guest communication, sustainable cuisine and cultural and interpretive programming.

Under the larger PlanetEVERgreen program umbrella, the waste management and sustainable building design initiatives at Lake Powell Resorts & Marinas highlight ARAMARK's commitment to implementing programs that set the standard for how a concessionaire can positively impact the environment where it does business. The sustainable building design initiative was developed to utilize the latest energy and water conservation techniques in all new construction. Specific results of PlanetEVERgreen include:

- Installation of Green Suites bulk amenity dispensers in almost 2,000 guest rooms, eliminating the disposal of over 1,000,000 individually packaged amenities each year.
- Over 676,000 tons of trash collected via award winning Trash Tracker guest participation program.
- Recycling of over 1,500,000 pounds of recyclables annually.
- Replacement of over 50 gasoline powered vehicles with alternative fuel vehicles/carts over the last three years.
- Installation of a 250 Kw, 384 panel photovoltaic system that eliminates over 550 tons of air pollutants annually. This project also received the Department of Interior Conservation Service Award, the highest level award available from the DOI.
- Implementation of a towel and linen reuse program in over 5,000 guest rooms that saves an estimated 21 million gallons of water annually.
- Certification of over 1,800 guest rooms under the Green Seal GS-33 Lodging standard.
- In 2004, ARAMARK expanded its purchasing program for employees that allows them to purchase environmentally preferable items for their own use at home through ARAMARK at company cost with no added mark-up. Response to the program has been very positive, especially in the purchase of Energy Star rated appliances and electronics.

ARAMARK helps park visitors understand the company's commitment to environmental stewardship through fact sheets, signage and various collateral materials, seeking to provide information useful in visitors' daily lives. The company also provides guests an even deeper, more connected experience: interpretive tours highlighting the historical and environmental significance of the parks and the cultures of previous dwellers.

Xanterra operates concessions in Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, Death Valley, Bryce, Zion, Crater Lake, Everglades, Rocky Mountain, Petrified Forest National Parks and Mount Rushmore National Memorial as well as at state parks in Ohio and New York. The company has become recognized as a leader in environmental commitment to the parks not only by protecting park resources, but also by protecting and improving visitor facilities, educating guests, and giving back to the parks through volunteer efforts.

Xanterra uses renewable wind power and on-site large-scale renewable solar photovoltaic systems to reduce in-park air emissions and greenhouse gas emissions. Each year, Xanterra recycles, composts, and diverts from the local park landfill more than five million pounds of solid waste. The company serves Marine Stewardship Council-certified fish and other sustainable and organic cuisine to guests. Xanterra also recycles grease on-site into biodiesel for use in fleet vehicles and boilers, and uses hybrid vehicles, countless electric vehicles, and numerous alternative fuel vehicles throughout all of its operations.

Guest Services, Inc. (GSI) has had a long history of providing food and beverage, lodging, and recreational services to the residents and visitors in the Nation's Capital and other unique locations around the country. The company was nominated by the National Park Service National Capital Region for the "Cooperative Conservation Award" for its newly-constructed food and retail kiosks at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC. Located immediately adjacent to the Memorial, the 4600 sq. ft. kiosks possess a climate control operating system that maintains the natural beauty of the park with no unsightly outdoor condensing units or vapor plums from the furnace, while providing greatly increased energy efficiency. The system uses 17 Geo-thermal wells, 300 feet deep and is computer software controlled. In addition to energy conservation, the system will save 2.1 million gallons of water each year by cooling the water used by its water-cooled ice machines.

Additionally, GSI is investing in eco-friendly trash compactors called "Big Belly" - a cordless, solar-powered compaction system. In addition to energy savings, "Big Belly" reduces waste volume by 4 times. These systems are located at Thompson Boat Center (Georgetown) and Columbia Island Marina (near the Pentagon).

### Meeting Park Needs

Concessioners act to fill gaps in National Park Service capabilities. At Lassen Volcanic National Park, due to the lack of a visitor center, the concessioner gives out brochures and maps, hiking suggestions, driving directions and other visitor information during the shoulder seasons when NPS staff is limited. The same concessioner also provides

horses for park rescues free of charge and underwrites many nightly campfire programs that tell the history of the park when NPS staff are not available. When Everglades was hit by a succession of hurricanes in 2004, Shark Valley Tram Tours employees were the first ones on site to begin cleanup! Despite no income from visitor services for weeks after Wilma, the company kept employees on the payroll doing park clean-up work.

In the Nation's Capital, GSI is a major sponsor of events in the parks. At Pershing Park on Pennsylvania Avenue just one block from the White House, GSI helps host a monthly *Arts at Pershing Park* program, highlighting local artists and providing them with the opportunity to showcase and market their skills. Children and adults can take part in instructive lessons on various art projects and participate in creative, interactive learning workshops. GSI also is a sponsor of the Annual National Cherry Blossom Festival.

Concessioners also act as liaison with gateway communities, working to disseminate park visitor information outside the park, and with state tourism agencies. In fact, concessioners and gateway communities are working with the National Park Service Tourism Office to significantly increase the percentage of state tourism marketing expenditures – a total of nearly \$250 million annually – earmarked to highlight lesser-known park units and off-peak periods for park visits.

*For Additional Information*

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