



NATIONAL PARK HOSPITALITY ASSOCIATION

HEART - Honoring the Efforts of America's Returning Troops

The National Park Hospitality Association -- the park concessioners -- proposes a partnership based effort to unite all Americans in support of our parks and public lands and in recognizing the contributions who are serving in harm's way to protect our nation. The program would link hundreds of thousands of visitors to our public lands with tens of thousands of servicemen and servicewomen, symbolized in an "honor coin" that would be earned through volunteerism and then awarded to military men and women.

The new program will launch in 2009. Servicemen and servicewomen returning from war zones would be key beneficiaries -- but our parks and public lands would also be direct beneficiaries. Across the nation, concessioners in national parks and other "friends" will encourage park visitors, concessioner employees and residents of gateway communities to volunteer and "donate" their volunteer hours in parks to a new "volunteer bank." For every 100 hours, an "honor coin" would be "minted" and presented to a returning soldier, entitling them to enter any national park or nationally-managed recreation site for a year, fee-free: not a gift from government -- a gift from appreciative fellow citizens. Concessioners will lead the way by identifying a 2009 New Years resolution to generate and manage one million hours over the year.

The idea originated when a young Air Force sergeant returning from Afghanistan with 24 young men and women to his California base gave a **Campaign Enduring Freedom VII** honor coin to a recreation community leader during a flight in appreciation for an act of friendship and respect. During the discussion with the recreation community leader, the young servicemen told how the returning group had talked for two months about priorities for the first weeks home. Beyond reunions with families and friend, he said, the group had made visits to several California national parks and ski areas on national forests top priorities.

Through HEART, we hope to have park superintendents and forest supervisors, perhaps accompanied by Members of Congress and others, greet returning units and pass out the honor coins and let these great Americans know that we hope they will visit the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, and Gettysburg -- and national forests -- and see what it is that America stands for. Honor coins are especially treasured by military personnel and will be a lasting memento -- even after use for fee-free entry expires. The 1.75" coins would have the Take Pride in America logo on one side and the year. On the reverse would be the emblems of the federal agencies which manage our parks and public lands -- one third of the total surface of the nation -- and a website with information about the program and its benefits. We invite other organizations interested in parks and people to be "launch partners" on this project.

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