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GARY A. KIEDAISCH: CONGRESS, BUSINESSES CAN HELP NATIONAL PARKS

BY GARY A. KIEDAISCH

I'm a fortunate American, because my passion for the outdoors coincides with my life's work. But times have changed for many Americans. The shift from rural to urban, from mechanical to technological, and the many other changes in our society bring us to a cultural juncture where we need to decide wisely about the future of outdoor America. Will our national parks be places to visit and experience firsthand, or merely clicks of a computer mouse, experienced in high-resolution photos and video clips?

For many of the younger generation, the outdoor encounter must be made more relevant to their modern lives. For others, particularly minorities, the portal to the outdoors needs to be opened for the very first time and then nurtured.

Nine years from now, the National Park Service will celebrate its 100th birthday. This occasion is an opportunity to equip one of America's greatest inventions to serve the environment and Americans long into the future.

Congress is already well on its way to dramatically boosting the operating budget of our parks and is considering another important leadership recommendation of President Bush and Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne: creation of a National Park Centennial Challenge Fund to encourage corporations, foundations and individuals to support exemplary new park projects and programs.

Today, kids average 6 ½ hours a day tied to television and computer screens. Visits to parks and many other outdoor places are down. Increasing obesity, diabetes and other health-related disorders are the result. We know that regular doses of healthy, active fun in the outdoors are a remedy to these challenges that now jeopardize the quality of life for millions of Americans.

The National Park Service needs our help in protecting our parks and using these places to provide mental, physical and spiritual benefits to all of us. It is time to recruit the business community as a partner to help make it happen, and to use its marketing and customer relations acumen to make the parks more relevant to young and old. The splendor comes naturally; we need to roll up our sleeves to do the rest.

Imagine recruiting business executives and others, and charging them with revitalizing our national treasures and creating transformational experiences that will endure for decades ahead.

The National Park Centennial Challenge Fund would provide \$1 billion in new federal funding over 10 years to match nonfederal support, yielding at least \$2 billion to dramatically improve national parks and park visitor experiences.

Rep. Todd Tiahrt, R-Goddard, testified recently in support of the program and helped boost operational funding in his role as ranking member of the House Interior Appropriations subcommittee. I encourage the entire Kansas congressional delegation to join in supporting this very worthy effort.

Our national parks are treasures to be enjoyed and enhanced for our children and generations to come. Together, we will make the National Park Service Centennial Celebration into a lifestyle-

changing effort -- and win back our kids from "Grand Theft Auto" and other electronic bait that sidetracks them from the best opportunities our country has to offer.

Gary A. Kiedaisch until last month was president and CEO of Wichita-based Coleman Co. and is contributing leadership to the National Park Centennial Initiative.

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