

Statement of Derrick A. Crandall, Counselor, National Park Hospitality Association
Submitted to the Subcommittee on National Parks, Committee on Energy and Natural
Resources, United States Senate, September 21, 2011: **Hearing to consider a
recently released report by the National Park Service: *A Call to Action: Preparing
for a Second Century of Stewardship and Engagement***

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, my name is Derrick Crandall and I am delighted to submit the following statement as a representative of the National Park Hospitality Association (NPHA). NPHA is honored to contribute to the discussion of the future of the National Park System and, in particular, to provide the Subcommittee with our comments on the recently released report entitled ***A Call to Action: Preparing for a Second Century of Stewardship and Engagement***.

Concessioners are proud of the important role they play in helping people enjoy parks. Visitors come to the national parks to be inspired by the beauty of the parks while relaxing, recreating, learning, and having a good time with family and friends. What we do as concessioners has a great deal to do with the overall experience when they visit the park. We are an integral part of the national park experience and an important element in helping the NPS meet its mission. We are working hard at demonstrating best practices in environmental management, and are ISO-certified in many parks. We are active in offering healthy, sustainable foods to park visitors. We are true partners with the National Park Service.

Concessioners have served park visitors since the 1870's and today serve some 100 million park visitors annually in approximately 160 park units, providing food and lodging, transportation and retail services, outfitter and guide services and more. NPHA members have a combined workforce of nearly 25,000 persons – mostly front-line, visitor-contact jobs – and provide in excess of \$1 billion in goods and services to visitors annually. Franchise fee payments to NPS generated from the approximately 600 concessions contracts are now approaching \$100 million annually, or about the combined sum raised annually by the National Park Foundation and members of the Friends Alliance.

And concessioners do far more than generate franchise fees. Our Guest Donation programs operate in partnership with local friends organizations and the National Park Foundation (NPF). NPF-associated programs alone, in 13 parks, have generated almost \$2 million for deserving park projects since 2006, including more than \$500,000 in the year ending June 30, 2011. Concessioner marketing and park promotion efforts exceed \$10 million annually, and are coordinated with the marketing and promotion efforts of states and gateway communities that equal that amount. In addition, concessioners have made significant financial investment in the visitor infrastructure of many park units.

Concessioners are now actively involved in efforts to promote the National Park System and to reach those Americans unaware of the great benefits available through time in

our parks rather than focusing our efforts on specific parks and services and traditional park visitors. Most importantly, concessioners are committed to meeting America's needs – needs for healthier lifestyles, for better and lifelong educational opportunities, for strong local and regional economies that can sustain and protect our parks, and for connecting all Americans to our parks across differences in regions, ages, income and ethnicity.

Comments on ***A Call to Action***

NPHA commends the efforts of the National Park Service in producing ***A Call to Action: Preparing for a Second Century of Stewardship and Engagement***. We applaud the report's overriding philosophical goals: creativity, flexibility and partnerships. We believe the National Park Service's commitment to these goals will support excellence in visitor experience long into the future. The report is timely and deals with important issues facing national parks today. ***A Call to Action*** focuses on encouraging people to explore our parks and also recognizes an increased role for parks in helping people to lead healthy and happy lives.

Concessioners have expressed – and acted on – their commitment to support parks in many ways. NPHA believes that the key to a healthier America lies in encouraging people to have fun in the great outdoors – and that increased physical activity, leading to better overall health, will be a natural result of such encouragement. This value is exemplified in Action Step #6 of ***A Call to Action: Take a Hike, Call Me in the Morning***. We have worked with the Institute at the Golden Gate on several break-through meetings and the report ***Park Prescriptions: Profiles and Resources for Good Health from the Great Outdoors***, which is attached. We played a central role in bringing the health agenda to the America's Great Outdoors (AGO) initiative, including uniting dozens of recreation and health organizations for the special AGO listening session on Health and the Great Outdoors in August 2010.

We also applaud Action Step #8, ***Eat Well and Prosper***, which highlights the role of national park concessioners in offering park visitors healthy food choices. Our members already offer healthy food to most park visitors, as well as information on continued healthy eating at home. And we plan on increasing these efforts. But it takes partnership and cooperation. Not all parks have easy access to locally grown foods for the full period of operation, and National Park Service approval of menus and pricing can be a barrier to these goals. Concessioners seek to not only offer healthy, reasonably priced and sustainably produced foods, but also to make our food operations reflect environmental best practices. Our members have achieved remarkable reductions in waste generation and energy and water use, and have even worked with local food suppliers to “return-ship” compostable wastes to be used in producing more food. Some of these efforts are showcased in another Institute at the Golden Gate report, ***Food for the Parks: Case Studies of Sustainable Food in America's Most Treasured Places***, which is also attached.

A Call to Action shows a very strong commitment to reaching America's youth, helping our next generation abandon its increasingly sedentary lifestyle and enjoy and sustain our nation's parks – a sentiment NPHA supports completely. We are proud that concessioners have long supported – and support today – outreach programs like NatureBridge and school trips to parks. These actions and more will become part of the broader effort to prepare the National Park Service for another 100 years of serving and aiding the American public.

Supporting and Building on ***A Call to Action***

The National Park Service can serve the nation well over the next 100 years, especially through actions and programs in partnership with other government agencies, businesses serving visitors in and near park units, national and local friends organizations, conservation organizations and others. To unite and empower these park partners, the National Parks Conservation Association, National Park Foundation and NPHA will organize a first-ever America's Summit on National Parks in January 2012. The Summit will draw leaders from across the nation to Washington to meet with Members of Congress and National Park Service officials, with medical and education community leaders and more. The Summit will acknowledge the energies invested over several decades in crafting visions for America's national parks and the National Park Service, review ***A Call to Action*** and then unite park partners around supplemental actions designed to make national parks relevant and valued to all Americans.

As longtime partners of the agency in protecting park resources and serving visitors, NPHA believes there are additional courses of action required to fully prepare the National Park Service to welcome a new century. We are delighted to pledge support to NPS efforts on the 36 identified action steps as well as outline important additional actions that will build upon ***A Call to Action***. In this light we offer the committee several ideas and suggestions.

First, national parks have long been a major focus for family activity. Yet the word "family" does not appear in ***A Call to Action*** at any point in the report. We plan to continue to focus on helping American families plan and enjoy multi-generational park experiences for the next 100 years.

Second, we plan to continue another long tradition of involvement in helping Americans – and international visitors – reach national parks. Many of the early concessions operations in parks involved partnerships with railroads. We continue to work with transportation companies and public transportation agencies in the 21st century to help visitors access our parks, and believe that there are exciting opportunities ahead.

And third, we strongly encourage actions to reach active younger American servicemen and servicewomen, their families and recently discharged military members. Their service can and should be rewarded with special invitations to enjoy America's national parks. Moreover, the age and diversity of America's military community make them especially important to efforts to share the benefits of parks with all Americans.

NPHA Offered Suggestions to NPS Plan Development

NPHA offered the National Park Service several specific suggestions for inclusion in the **A Call to Action** plan. Our suggestions were not included, but we believe these ideas deserve attention as you consider actions regarding national parks and other National Park Service activities. These steps would increase visitor satisfaction, better connect guests to parks and increase and streamline fee collection efforts – actions that we estimate would achieve a sustainable annual gain of at least \$110 million in revenue and savings. The key steps include:

Campground Improvements: The National Park Service needs to take action to reverse the decline in use of its campgrounds while also reducing operation and management costs. The National Park Service should take advantage of its partners in the private sector by calling upon concessioners to develop and implement new operational strategies. By modernizing, better marketing and better maintaining campground operations, the National Park Service can increase visitor satisfaction and campsite occupancy, save millions in operating costs and redeploy staff to still provide the interpretive and other services so valued by park campers.

Incentivize Concessioners: Concessioners are proud of their efforts to meet visitor needs and protect park resources. Many exceed performance required under concessions contracts. Yet current evaluations do not provide for any rating above “satisfactory.” We propose that concessioner evaluation include an opportunity to earn “outstanding” and/or “superior” ratings and become eligible for contract extensions. Extending contract period for valuable partners will also substantially reduce NPS costs for prospectus development and offer evaluation.

Increase Franchise Fees: NPS now collects nearly \$100 million annually in franchise fee payments by concessioners. This income stream – used for vital maintenance and other priority purposes – can grow substantially if concessioner services are expanded appropriately. A national strategic business plan could define added services and help concessioner revenues increase by as much as 50% within four years.

Cooperative Research: NPS and concessioners each fund research on visitor experiences and on attracting non-traditional visitors to parks. These efforts should be unified, with the results guiding cooperative actions.

Promotion of Non-Peak Periods: Cooperative efforts should be launched to expand non-peak visitation. Part of the promotion can involve activities showcasing American Indian artists and other educational/cultural events. Increases in total park visitation of five million will result in entrance fee and franchise fee increases with little additional operational costs.

Expanding Annual Pass Sales: Sales of the America the Beautiful Pass could be increased from the current level of 260,000 passes annually to at least 500,000 annually

if sales were promoted by concessioners at the time lodging and other reservations are taken. Holders of annual passes are more likely to plan visits to other park units – including lesser visited sites. Purchased passes could either be mailed to visitors or held for pick up – much like will-call tickets are at theaters.

Expand the Guest Donation Program: The current Guest Donation Program generates more than \$500,000 annually for park programs and projects in about a dozen units, mostly under agreements done in cooperation with the National Park Foundation. The program is burdened by red tape and poor communication to guests and concessioners about the uses of contributed funds. The program can be re-energized and expanded greatly to all park lodging operations, to non-lodging services and to gateway communities. In addition, guests making a donation during their visit to a park could be invited to learn how they could make more significant contributions to either a specific park unit or the entire system. Participating concessioners would then arrange contact between interested guests and either the National Park Foundation or a local friends group.

Needed: A Better Visitor Services Initiative

Above and beyond **A Call to Action**, there is a critical need to respond to changing needs and expectations by park visitors. We are concerned that park visitation has declined by some 5% since the late 1980's – despite an increase in the U.S. population of nearly 30%. The decline in hours spent in parks since the 1980's is even more dramatic – meaning visitors are spending, on average, fewer hours during each experience. Overnight stays in NPS campgrounds are also down – some 17% -- when overall U.S. campground use is up, and when ownership of RVs has reached a new high of one in every 12 U.S. households.

To address these concerns, NPHA members have developed a plan to improve park visitor experience. Our plan is called the Better Visitor Services Initiative and is attached. It has five elements:

- **Improve Visitor Infrastructure to Attract More Visitors.** Park visitor infrastructure must support relevant experiences for 21st century Americans, and must support an increase of visitation parallel to the overall growth of the U.S. population.
- **Revitalize NPS Campgrounds.** As mentioned earlier, NPS campgrounds are significantly underutilized, and use has declined markedly. Campgrounds need modernization and new options, including simple shelters like cabins, tents and tepees/chickees available for rent.
- **Encourage Concessioner Investment in the Parks.** Nearly all concessions contracts under the 1998 National Park Service Concessions Management Improvement Act have been for 10 years, despite authority for longer contracts. NPS should reduce the deferred maintenance backlog and reduce the need for taxpayer-funded capital investments by encouraging concessioner investments through longer contract terms.

- **Rethink Park Fees.** Entrance and other fees by the NPS should be studied carefully to develop a fee program that yields revenues to aid park operations and better supports overall the park mission.
- **Initiate Outreach Efforts to Boost Visitation.** Park experiences deliver great benefits – including better mental and physical health, education about our nation’s history and the environment, regional economic benefits and more. Yet a large portion of the public is unaware of national parks – especially young people and the urban, economically disadvantaged, and minority components of our population.

Summary

Mr. Chairman and Members, we commend the National Park Service on a job well done in its plan entitled ***A Call to Action: Preparing for a Second Century of Stewardship and Engagement***. The plan recognizes the need for parks to encourage Americans to get back in touch with nature, engage in physical activity and outdoor recreation, and connect to the magnificent culture, heritage and landscapes that are showcased in our National Park System. It recognizes the need to reach out to youth to encourage them to share in the wonder and enjoyment of our national parks and discourage the increasingly sedentary lifestyles that are contributing to our healthcare crisis. It also recognizes the need to expand park visitation to encourage minorities, disadvantaged communities, new Americans and urban residents to see their national parks for themselves and to build a broader constituency for America’s great outdoors.

The National Park Hospitality Association and the national park concessioners want to help continue the contributions of the National Park Service to our national well-being. The upcoming 100th anniversary of the agency’s creation offers a wonderful opportunity to find new and innovative ways to improve the parks and create a new generation of Americans who share in the wonder of this amazing legacy. We thank you for considering our thoughts and recommendations. We would be delighted to provide additional information and respond to any questions you might have.

Derrick A. Crandall, Counselor
National Park Hospitality Association
1225 New York Avenue, NW, Suite 450
Washington, DC 20005
202-682-9530, dcrandall@funoutdoors.com

Attachments:

- [Park Prescriptions: Profiles and Resources for Good Health from the Great Outdoors](#)
- [Food for the Parks: Case Studies of Sustainable Food in America’s Most Treasured Places](#)
- [Better Visitor Services Initiative](#)