



September 2012 Newsletter

National Park Hospitality Association

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Grand Thoughts Getting Grander

The Director of the National Park Service, Jon Jarvis, confirmed that he will lead a group of top agency officials participating in the October 16-22 Grand Thoughts at the Grand Canyon program, a week-long exchange of ideas designed to help America's parks flourish in the 21st Century. National Park Foundation President Neil Mulholland also announced plans to participate in the program. Grand Thoughts is being coordinated by the National Park Hospitality Association in cooperation with Grand Canyon National Park and will meet at the Grand Canyon Lodge, located on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon.

Grand Thoughts is a continuation of "big picture" thinking about America's national parks and the American park idea which commenced in January 2012 at the first America's Summit on National Parks. Both efforts focus on 2016 – the 100th anniversary of the creation of the National Park Service. The October 16-22 meeting is expected to draw more than 200 park community leaders to the Grand Canyon Lodge on the North Rim. The operator of the Lodge will earmark 30% of all accommodations receipts for a new NPS Centennial Account to be held by the National Park Foundation and used for anniversary-related programs and projects.

Grand Thoughts will feature TED-like lectures and break-out sessions focused on inspiring and honing big ideas to keep parks relevant in 21st Century America. Among the topics to be covered are: the NPS's A Call to Action Strategy; National Park Guest Donation Programs; Healthy Parks Healthy People; Dark Skies; a newly announced multi-year NPS Centennial Communications Campaign; Strategies for Expanding and

Sustaining Funding for National Parks and National Park Programs; and Harnessing Technology to Improve Park Visits.

Participants in Grand Thoughts will include a broad representation of the businesses serving park visitors with lodging, food, transportation and retail needs. Concessioners in U.S. national parks operate under contracts with the National Park Service and employ an estimated 25,000 workers in parks, mostly in direct visitor-contact positions. The National Park Service receives in excess of \$100 million annually in franchise fees from concessioners, who also play a major role in maintenance and operations of historic structures in national parks. In addition, concessioners assist parks by adopting healthy foods, green operations and other best practices.

For more information on and registration forms for Grand Thoughts at the Grand Canyon, please click [here](#).

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NPS and NPF Hire Firm to Develop and Lead 2016 Campaign

NPHA has repeatedly told the National Park Service that a decline in visitation and overnight stays has important and long-term consequences, like endangering the nearly \$3 billion the agency receives in general appropriations annually. NPHA has introduced agency leadership to Go RVing, Take Me Fishing and Discover Boating to demonstrate how other leisure community organizations have taken action to increase and diversify awareness and participation. NPHA has also worked cooperatively with other parks community organizations to outline goals and strategies for a national park focused campaign for more than a year.

Our efforts helped persuade NPS Director Jon Jarvis that a campaign was needed for the National Park Service and he has chosen to anchor the campaign to the upcoming centennial of the agency in 2016. The initiative has gone from talk to action, as NPS sought from and received a National Park Foundation (NPF) commitment to fund at least the initial phases of the campaign.

Kevin Kelly, Delaware North Companies, and Bob Shaw, Hornblower, recently joined Derrick Crandall for a briefing on the centennial communications campaign. NPS representatives at the session included Director Jarvis and Deputy Director Peggy O'Dell. NPF President Neil Mulholland and Vice President of Communications David French also participated, along with senior National Parks Conservation Association staff, including President Tom Kiernan.

The Director explained that NPS and NPF had produced a Request for Proposals in late June which was delivered to about a dozen agencies. Eight responded with offers. In August a group of NPF and NPS leaders met with the eight agencies in Washington and selected two as finalists. Based on this progress, NPF committed to providing up to \$1 million of financial support for Phase One of the program. A smaller group

traveled to New York in late August for a second series of interviews and a firm has been selected and will be announced shortly. He noted that the firms had all emphasized a multi-channel strategy that did more than produce attractive ads, and he noted that all of the leading agencies had focused on the role of parks as deliverers of stories.

Director Jarvis emphasized that the campaign would be designed in an inclusive way, but NPS and NPF will ultimately make campaign decisions. NPHA was asked to suggest key measurable outcomes. The Director explained that the campaign was seen as a broad effort capable of uniting park interests, including concessioners, and outlined several initial goals: (1) invigorating the current base of park visitors/supporters, (2) reaching out to a more racially diverse group of Americans and (3) finding ways to be relevant to America's Millennials. He expressed concern about simply measuring visitation, although he acknowledged the importance actual visits had in nurturing the deeper bond between the American public and national parks.

Kevin Kelly and Bob Shaw actively participated and urged inclusion of visitation, intention to return and intention to recommend park visits as top KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) for the campaign.

The Director noted that the campaign was envisioned as having the same agency through 2016, but that the campaign was envisioned as continuing even subsequent to the centennial. He told us that the agencies had predicted budgets of \$6 to \$12 million for the campaign through 2016 – not including media buys. Not all of this money is likely to come from NPF. Additional support might come from partners including NPHA members as well as from corporations already associated with the selected agency.

Neil Mulholland amplified the Director's interest in making the campaign inclusive and noted that the campaign would likely depend highly on local activation – with the active involvement of concessioners and others linked to specific parks and regions. NPS and NPF called upon NPHA, recreation companies and state tourism agencies to share research which could help guide the campaign.

NPHA representatives expressed concern that an effort led exclusively by NPS and NPF might be ill-equipped to transition future changes in departmental and White House leadership. NPCA expressed strong feelings that the campaign should have a clear means for involving parks community leaders. Director Jarvis agreed to take the NPCA and NPHA concerns into consideration.

Further details on the campaign will be available at Grand Thoughts at the Grand Canyon.

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NPHA Urges NPS to Adopt Clear National Strategy on Cell and Internet Connectivity in Parks

NPHA has called upon the Director of the National Park Service to issue a Director's Order defining a clear national strategy on cell and internet connectivity in parks. The policy has been sent to the Director and was also presented to the NPS Concessions Management Advisory Board during its September 18 meeting in Shenandoah National Park. NPHA also released the results of its survey of cell and internet service at key parks, demonstrating widespread poor service in parks.

NPHA noted that we live in a world where connectivity via smartphones is highly valued. Economists have projected that the sale of millions of new iPhone 5's over the next 90 days will boost the US GDP $\frac{1}{2}$ of 1% for the entire year. Smartphones go everywhere with Americans – and with people around the globe, including those who visit our nation. But in many of America's national parks, these prized smartphones are little more than cameras because cell and data service, even at visitor centers and lodges and other developed sites, is poor – or worse.

Poor connectivity is especially relevant as the National Park Service and its partners, including concessioners, seek to invite all Americans and more international visitors to visit and experience the natural, historic and cultural treasures managed by the National Park Service. Many of these nontraditional visitors will not find poor cell and data service understandable or attractive – and in fact it may be an irritant that adversely shapes memories of a park visit. Poor service will also handicap NPS and partner efforts to harness smartphones as a means to deliver interpretation and other important information to park visitors.

NPHA has noted issues to consider, including mitigation of the visual impacts of added service and whether Wilderness and some other areas should be "off-limits" to this kind of connectivity, although even there, SOS-level communication might save lives and reduce the challenges of search and rescue operations. NPHA noted that the amount of data downloaded and uploaded can be controlled – noting that it is not NPHA's desire to encourage park visitors to watch movies in their lodge rooms and tents.

Yet technology is available to deliver acceptable cell service and internet access in defined portions of America's distant parks – along key roads and where visitor services are now found. With some education of visitors, this limited access can permit the downloading of valuable information – trail maps and more – that can be used in portions of the park without service, since GPS does not require cell or data connection.

The current response by national parks is inconsistent and the debate about access and connectivity is going on across the nation with incomplete information. Inaction could mean that valuable opportunities to shape access to phone and internet will be lost permanently – for example, concessioner-provided access could allow free access for basic levels of use and fees for higher usage and could welcome those signing in with quick links to NPS, friends alliance and concessioner websites with visitor

information.

The NPS Concessions Management Advisory Board gave its full support to NPHA's proposal. The next step will include gathering technology experts, park interpretive interests and other key parts of the parks community to explore the issue and available alternatives. An important first step will take place at Grand Thoughts at the Grand Canyon, where senior representatives of Verizon Wireless and ViaSat will join NPHA and NPS for conversations.

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Concessions Management Advisory Board Meets

The National Park Service Concessions Management Advisory Board (CMAB) met in Shenandoah National Park on September 18. NPS Associate Director Lena McDowall led the NPS delegation, comprised of national and regional concessions office staff and representatives of nearby park units. A substantial group of NPHA members actively participated in the meeting.

The CMAB was created by the 1998 concessions reform legislation and is comprised of appointees of the Department of the Interior. There is currently one vacancy on the seven-member board, a post reserved for a representative of state park agencies. Ruth Coleman resigned from the board after leaving her post at California State Parks.

The meeting began with the introduction of Associate Director McDowall. She reported on key agency efforts relevant to concessioner/agency activities and praised concessioner efforts on the Made in America issue, on the hantavirus issue in Yosemite and on preparations for the NPS centennial. She noted that NPS was actively looking at incentives to promote concessioner excellence and studying ways to expand concessioner-provided visitor services. She noted the interest in takeover of campground operations by concessioners and reported that the issue is being discussed, but relies largely on individual park preferences. She also noted that the Chief of Commercial Services job would be re-posted shortly.

NPHA has suggested a number of issues which it would like to see the CMAB address, and has expressed concern that past efforts of the board seemed unconnected to agency priorities. The September meeting was notably different in its agenda and style, with a much more interactive format and an agenda that included a number of topics suggested by NPHA. Among the key issues discussed were incentives to encourage and reward concessioner excellence and ways by which concessioners and the agency could expand appropriate connectivity for park visitors.

NPHA Vice Chair Bruce Fears explained the NPHA initiative on cell and internet access. The CMAB agreed unanimously to support the NPHA request to the Director that a new Director's Order be developed regarding in-park connectivity. CMAB agreed strongly with NPHA's message to the Director that outreach to younger and

international visitors would be aided by use of technology available through smartphones.

A significant portion of the CMAB meeting was devoted to an open discussion among CMAB members, NPS staff and concessioners. NPHA board members John Schoppmann, John Rutter, Kevin Kelly and others shared ideas and offered insight into incentives common in the hospitality industry. Among the key points made by NPHA members:

1) there are both financial and non-financial incentives which could be used by NPS. Among the non-financial options are the ability to use an “outstanding” rating in marketing and reduced reporting burdens.

2) among the financial incentives discussed are (a) an ability to earn a contract extension, (b) an ability to have a portion of the franchise fee earmarked for uses proposed by the concessioner, (c) an ability to earn points in the next contract cycle.

NPHA members also discussed the importance of fair evaluation, and offered to submit ideas, including the option to add third-party evaluation.

NPHA raised a variety of other topics during the meeting, including a possible role by the CMAB in a comprehensive review of new, sustainable strategies for increasing the financial resources available for park program operations and investment in needed visitor service infrastructure. NPHA shared information on a new project involving NPCA, NPF and NPHA to examine such sources as historic tax credits, revenue bonds, revised fees and more. NPHA noted that increased use of LSI, and longer concessions contracts, were also important tools.

NPHA board member Brad Hill outlined efforts of the NPHA Retail Operations Task Force on the Made in America issue, on sale of American Indian art and on green operations. He and other NPHA participants also described the role of concessioners in the Healthy Parks Healthy People efforts, including a seminar co-hosted by Sysco in Denver on September 19.

The consensus of NPHA members at the conclusion of the meeting was that this CMAB session was unusually fruitful – perhaps the best of more than a decade of meetings. The NPHA executive committee will discuss adoption of a position on the purpose and utility of the CMAB in October.

Copies of the CMAB agenda, the NPHA cell and internet proposal and other materials are available [here](#).

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NPHA/Sysco Host Healthy Food in Parks Seminar and Show

Several dozen concessioners, food industry executives from a variety of fields, and national and local NPS staffers participated in an educational session focusing on

meeting Action Item #8 in the National Park Service's A Call to Action: "Eat well and prosper."

Frank Dean, General Superintendent of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area and executive lead for implementation of Action Item #8, helped lead off the session. He emphasized that meeting the goal depended on agency/concessioner partnerships and thanked concessioners for the support they have provided to the development of a NPS food standard which would be reflected in future contracts. He noted that the policy would include flexibility, acknowledge pricing issues, and would not address sustainability, since opportunities on local sourcing and sustainability varied greatly by park. He also noted that NPS leadership understood NPHA's clear message that simply offering healthy foods would be a hollow victory – changing visitor buying patterns voluntarily was the goal.

Presentations were made by Sysco on assistance in identifying, preparing and providing information about healthy foods and food items which meet local and sustainable practices criteria. Food industry executives discussed trends in American out-of-home food choices and the complexities of meeting the expectations of international visitors. Issues such as labeling, tracking and portion sizes were discussed.

The seminar was planned to coincide with a major food show hosted by Sysco. Some 350 booths in the show highlighted food availability through Sysco's delivery network, and Sysco offered recommendations for visits to about 40 of the booths as especially attuned to the healthy food/sustainability goals of NPHA members. Participants spent two hours touring the show as part of the seminar.

NPHA added a special section to the seminar addressing Best Practices in Rodent- and Pest-Borne Illness Management. Presentations were delivered by Ecolab Senior Scientist Dr. John Barcay and NPS's Dr. Kevin Castle, DVM with the NPS Wildlife Health Branch.

The participants offered strong support for the seminar and urged NPHA to continue to hold programs of this type, bringing together concessioner staff, NPS staff in the concessions arena, and food industry leaders. Participants also urged use of a similar model. The Seminar brochure, including agenda, and key presentations are available for downloading [here](#).

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FLASH:

NPS has released final draft Healthy and Sustainable Food Choice Standards and Guidelines for Front Country Operations and final draft NPS Healthy and Sustainable Food Choice Guidelines for Back-country Operations. A Healthy and Sustainable Food Choices Glossary has also been released. Copies are available [here](#).

The standards and guidelines continue to apply to new contracts – not applying to existing contracts – focus on providing visitors with choices, and incorporate recognition that sustainability options should be determined on a local basis and that back-country opportunities are also location and activity dependent.

Comments will be considered if submitted by October 26 to [Kurt Rausch@nps.gov](mailto:Kurt.Rausch@nps.gov).

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