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**FOR**

**THE WESTERN STATES TOURISM POLICY COUNCIL**

**TO**

**THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS**

**ON**

***VISITATION TRENDS IN THE NATIONAL PARKS***

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## Introduction

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee. I am Michael Cerletti and I am Cabinet Secretary of Tourism for the State of New Mexico. It is a pleasure for me to appear before you today on behalf of the Western States Tourism Policy Council. The WSTPC is a consortium of thirteen western state tourism offices, including the States of Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming. The WSTPC mission is to support public policies that enhance the capacity of tourism and recreation to have a positive impact on the economy and the environment of States and communities in the West.

The WSTPC was formed a decade ago principally because of the common interest of western states in the Federal public lands. Since then, the WSTPC has signed two memoranda of understanding with the Federal land agencies pledging mutual cooperation and consultation on issues and projects of shared interest. The WSTPC and the Federal land agencies meet twice a year to discuss such issues and projects and have cosponsored four significant and successful conferences dealing with Federal land issues.

We commend you, Mr. Chairman, as well as Representative Christensen and the other members of the Subcommittee, for holding this important and timely hearing. The National Parks are truly our National Treasures, preserving unique natural wonders and providing inspiring scenic vistas and cultural and historic riches. They are, unquestionably, the people's parks, owned by every American and made available to the world to experience and enjoy.

Nowhere are the National Parks a more prominent or a more vital part of community life and of State and local economies than in the American West. The thirteen WSTPC states are the proud locations of many national parks, including such global icons as Yellowstone, Yosemite, Denali, the Grand Canyon and Carlsbad Caverns. The number also includes lesser-known but still magnificent parks, such as the Great Basin and Wrangell St. Elias.

## Visitation Trends

Yet there are troubling signs that the number of visitors has been flat or even declining in both the short and long terms. For example, following are National Park Service Data for recreation visits in the WSTPC states for the last three years. These data include visits to the National Parks, National Monuments, National Recreation Areas and National Historic Sites managed by the agency:

2003	92,508,204
2004	91,516,183
2005	92,337,040

National visitation figures for the National Park System for these three years show a comparable trend:

2003	266.1 million
2004	276.9 million
2005	273.5 million

In our state of New Mexico, Mr. Chairman, the visitor figures for Carlsbad Caverns dramatically illustrate this negative trend. Following are the Carlsbad visitation totals for the past three years:

2003	457,631
2004	419,599
2005	413,786

There is strong reason to believe that declining visitation is more than a short-term trend. Official visitation data for the National Park Service's Intermountain Region, including nine western states (six WSTPC states plus South Dakota, Texas and Oklahoma), shows a longer term slide. Of the 130 national park units in that region, 38 units, or 29 percent, had their peak visitation year **before 1990**. Only 18 units, or 14 percent, have had their peak visitation year since 2000. As an example, Carlsbad Caverns National Park had its peak visitation year in 1976 with 876,520 visitors, a total that has fallen a stunning 52.8 percent compared with 2005 figures.

#### Consequences of Visitation Trends

There may be some who see these visitation trends as a positive development because smaller numbers of visitors mean there will be less deterioration of park roads, trails, and other infrastructure and less pressure on natural resources. Fears of "overcrowded" parks and strains on park staff and budgets are certainly alleviated when there are fewer visitors.

We believe, however, that a stronger case can be made that these visitation trends are disturbing for at least three major reasons:

First, they mean that many Americans (there does not appear to be as sharp a decline in international visitors) are not receiving the personal benefits and rewards provided by the National Parks, including:

Greater appreciation of the wondrous beauties of nature and the outdoors life;

Greater understanding of the history and culture of our country;

Greater health benefits of outdoor recreation, especially when there is so much public concern over a rising tide of obesity.

Second, visitation trends mean that many businesses in gateway communities and beyond those communities, such as motorcoach tour companies, outfitters and guides, RV parks

and campgrounds, hotels, restaurants, purveyors of outdoor equipment and supplies and other retail stores are missing potential customers and losing revenue, depressing economic growth, costing jobs and losing State and local tax revenue.

Third, visitation trends will reduce future popular support for the National Parks. In our democratic society, with many claimants for limited public resources, this long-term impact could be the most costly outcome.

### Causes of Visitation Trends

These visitation trends are the result of a number of different developments. Without attempting to rank them by importance and acknowledging that there are undoubtedly additional reasons, following are some suggested causal factors that have affected recent visitation trends:

*Public Misunderstandings About Overcrowded Parks and Environmental Damage.* As alluded to earlier, concern has been expressed for some time about overcrowded parks and environmental damage to parks caused by excessive use. Overcrowding, however, typically occurs for the most part in only a few of the best known iconic parks and then usually only during certain periods such as long holiday weekends.

*Social Trends.* The demands of work and organized activities have made extended vacations the exception in modern society. With husband and wife both likely to have full time jobs and organized sports and other activities involving both children and parents, short three or four day vacations have become more the rule. Families spending a week or more hiking and camping or taking a driving tour of multiple National Parks have been in decline. The popularity of electronic entertainment, especially computer games and internet offerings, increasingly seem to hold children and even a few adults captive before their computer monitors. Richard Louv in his perceptive 2005 book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, further observes: “Our society is teaching young people to avoid direct experience in nature. That lesson is delivered in schools, families, even organizations devoted to the outdoors, and codified into the legal and regulatory structures of many of our communities.”

*Fee Increases.* Some observers believe that recent increases in recreation and user fees by the National Park Service have been disincentives for visitors to the National Parks, although even at higher levels, Federal recreation fees for use of the public lands appear to remain competitive with private sector attractions.

*Deficient Infrastructure.* While the National Park Service has made great strides in improving Park Roads and reducing its maintenance backlog in recent years but much remains to be done.

*Lack of Marketing and Public Relations.* The National Parks Service does little marketing and public relations with the intent of increasing visitation and use of the Parks. While the private sector and State and local tourism marketing organizations do

attempt to increase park visitation and use, their efforts are often not as effective as they could be because of a lack of coordination and cooperation from the Parks themselves.

*Meaningful Park Experiences.* Interpretive and education programs in the National Parks are too often little changed from what they have been for decades. A Park Ranger who is passionate and knowledgeable about her subject can still educate and even inspire visitors. But increasingly, visitors want more of a “hands on” experience and have little patience with “talking heads.” It must also be recognized that potential visitors to the Parks, like the overall American population, are increasingly diverse and have different expectations for their Park experiences. Satisfying a public with different age levels, from teenagers to retirees, and many different ethnic backgrounds is a challenge that the National Park Service recognizes but with which it is struggling in order to make the National Parks relevant for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### A Strategy Going Forward

State Tourism Offices work very hard to increase the number of visitors to their States and thereby to increase business for their tourism and recreation industries. Tourism and recreation are economic mainstays of State and local communities in the West. In all but one WSTPC State, tourism and recreation are either the first or second greatest source of jobs. In major urban centers and in scores of rural communities that serve as gateways for millions of visitors to our National Parks and other public lands, tourism and recreation are vital economic forces. In every WSTPC State, one or more National Parks are major attractions and recreation venues. When visitation to our National Parks slumps, western economies suffer. As a result, WSTPC members all feature National Parks prominently in their marketing strategies.

At the same time State Tourism Offices in the West understand the absolutely critical importance of preserving our natural environment. We understand that it is the grandeur of our snow-capped mountains; the beauty of our lakes, rivers and ocean; the limitless horizon of our plains and deserts and the rich diversity of our wildlife that make the West unique and have attracted explorers and visitors for centuries. We understand, therefore, that the National Parks must be protected and preserved in order to sustain tourism and recreation for future generations. Fortunately, this is an eminently achievable goal. Tourism, recreation and the environment are not mutually exclusive. With smart, creative marketing and strategic cooperation and coordination between the National Park Service, State and local tourism organizations and the public and private sectors, we can increase public use and enjoyment of the National Parks while preserving and even enhancing the resource.

Before presenting several policy recommendations, let us emphasize that we recognize and appreciate the leadership of National Parks Service Director Fran Mainella, who has demonstrated her commitment to initiatives supporting and enhancing visitation in the Parks. Her leadership has produced such positive developments as the Draft 2006 National Park Service Management Policy, which recognizes more fully the Parks’ purpose of supporting public access and enjoyment; her Legacy Initiative, which calls for

a seamless network of Parks through the common link of outdoor recreation and its highlighting the health and fitness benefits of Parks and outdoor recreation; and her restoration of the agency's Office of Tourism.

Drawing on the experience and expertise of State Tourism Offices, following are our recommendations for a strategy for the future to reverse the declining trend in National Parks visitation:

- (1) The National Park Service must continue to strive for a better balance between its dual mission of preserving the resource providing for the enjoyment of the public. In this regard, the WSTPC supports the Draft 2006 National Park Service Management Policy, which moves towards restoring that balance. Unfortunately, the commitment of Director Mainella and the national leadership of the Park Service to the importance of access and public use and enjoyment at times does not seem to be shared at the local park level. We urge the agency to approve and implement the Draft Management Policy so that specific Park decisions and programs consistently and evenly consider both sides of its historic dual mission.
- (2) The National Parks should cooperate more fully with State Tourism Offices and with local and regional tourism and visitor organizations, as well as with private sector tourism and recreation businesses. Although there is usually a healthy, respectful relationship between these entities, it is not often a vigorous relationship. We realize that the Parks do not have substantial experience and expertise in marketing and public relations and that budget pressures make it difficult to commit agency resources to such efforts. This results in situations such as we know occurred in at least at one Park where very useful and attractive NPS brochures were only made available to visitors already at the Park and could not be used in marketing efforts outside the Park to attract more visitors. At other Parks in the West, we know of cases where Park Superintendents have simply been unwilling to cooperate with State Tourism Office in designing and implementing marketing and public relations campaigns, perhaps because such cooperation would absorb scarce staff time and energy needed elsewhere.

State Tourism Offices and their tourism and recreation allies have substantial capabilities in exactly those marketing and public relations functions where the Parks are weak. With vigorous cooperation from the Parks, robust public-private campaigns will be able to help turn around declining visitation trends. Integrated intergovernmental and public-private initiatives will be critical in turning around visitation trends.

It is particularly important for the Parks to focus on the dynamics of gateway communities. We have seen, in many cases, a refreshing change of perspective on the part of progressive Park managers. We commend this willingness to engage in partnerships with local tourism communities, which is also emphasized in the Draft Management Policy, and we encourage the agency to give even greater priority to this form of civic engagement in all Park units.

We must emphasize that we are encouraged by several recent promising regional and local National Park Service initiatives that we hope are emulated throughout the system. One is the development by the Intermountain Region of a Regional Tourism Plan that is comprehensive, sophisticated and balanced and lays out a realistic and meaningful strategy for the park units in that region to work with State Tourism Offices, gateway communities and the private sector. This could be a model plan for other regions. Certainly, the State Tourism Offices in the intermountain states look forward to working with the National Parks in that region to implement this promising plan.

The second initiative is in Alaska, where the National Parks there, the Alaska State Tourism Office and the private sector Alaska Travel Industry Association launched in 2005 a two year joint marketing campaign to promote visitation in the National Parks there, especially focusing on the underutilized Parks.

Another initiative is from my own state of New Mexico where Carlsbad Caverns National Park Superintendent John Benjamin recognizes the challenge of declining visitation and has developed a promising strategy to reverse those visitation trends. His plan includes supporting new events and exhibits to attract more visitors, working with the local chamber of commerce to promote visitation, increasing volunteers to help develop and preserve natural resources, cooperating with our State Tourism Office and conducting visitor surveys to identify their interests and measure their satisfaction with their visits. Superintendent Benjamin understands the importance of making the Park experience memorable for all visitors.

Allow me to emphasize here that good marketing and public relations will not just drive more visitors to the Parks. They should be considered part of a smart, comprehensive and integrated strategy that will also advance the goal of resource preservation. As in Alaska, marketing and public relations can be used to target underutilized Parks and relieve some of the burden on Parks that are more heavily utilized. A smart strategy can also promote a better distribution of visitors into slower, "off season" periods. In addition, a smart marketing and public relations strategy can help educate the public about the value of the Parks and the importance of preservation and conservation. Finally, a smart strategy will understand its market and attempt to identify and serve the complex and diverse needs of that market, instead of assuming that prior products and programs will suffice for the future.

- (3) The National Park Service should view its recreation fee program as much more than simply a source of needed revenue. It should also be regarded as part of a marketing strategy, just as any successful private sector business understands that its pricing strategy is an integral part of its marketing strategy. Differential fee levels, for example, can also encourage greater use of underutilized parks and can be adjusted to respond to seasonal variations in demand. Congressional

authorization and direction may be necessary to achieve more innovative implementation of the fee program along these lines. In addition, we urge greater use of interagency and intergovernmental Federal public land fees to make them simpler and easier for the public to purchase one pass that will be valid for multiple States and agencies. And of course, fees must not be set so high that they become disincentives to visitors.

- (4) Greater support is needed for the Office of Tourism for the National Park Service. After the position of Director of Tourism had been vacant for three years, the agency late last year, following an extensive national search, named an experienced, well-qualified tourism professional to that post. That office should be invaluable as a source of expert tourism advice and consultation for agency staff and as a liaison between the agency and the tourism and recreation industries. Unfortunately, while the Director's position sat vacant for an extended period, it lost its budget and is now functioning with a budget that consists only of the Director's salary. There is no support staff. We urge Congress to appropriate sufficient funds to allow the Tourism Office to make a significant contribution to the visitation problems under discussion here.

#### Summary and Conclusions

Visitation to many, if not most, National Parks has been flat or declining. Many Americans are losing the personal benefits of Park visits, including greater appreciation of nature and the outdoors, historical and cultural awareness and better health; communities are losing economic benefits; and the Parks are losing public support.

Causes for these declining trends include public misunderstanding of overcrowded parks, social trends, increased fees, deficient Parks infrastructure, lack of marketing and public relations and Park experiences that lack meaning and relevance to many in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Although the current NPS national leadership recognizes this problem and encouraging initiatives are underway to reverse these visitation trends, the WSTPC recommends the following further strategic steps:

- (1) The NPS must continue to strive for greater balance in implementing its dual mission by emphasizing the importance of providing access that allows public use and enjoyment of the Parks.
- (2) The NPS must cooperate more fully with State Tourism Offices, local and regional visitor organizations, gateway communities and the private sector to develop and implement comprehensive, integrated marketing and public relations programs.
- (3) The NPS should regard its recreation fee program innovatively as a crucial part of its marketing strategy.

- (4) The NPS Office of Tourism should have a budget sufficient for it to carry out its vital functions effectively.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit these comments. The WSTPC will be happy to answer any questions or provide additional information.