

Statement of Thomas C. Kiernan, President
National Parks Conservation Association
House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies
April 16, 2013

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Moran, and members of the subcommittee, I am Tom Kiernan, President of the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA). I appreciate the opportunity to testify on behalf of our more than 750,000 members and supporters from every state and congressional district to provide our views regarding appropriations for the National Park System for the upcoming fiscal year. Founded in 1919, NPCA is the leading, independent, private voice in support of promoting, protecting and enhancing America's national parks for people from all walks of life to learn from, be inspired by and enjoy – now and on into the future.

We testify during a very challenging time for the National Park Service and the appropriations process, as you know all too well. I want to first acknowledge the very significant challenges you have had to face as you have seen your allocation dwindle and have had to implement the sequester that reduced funding for programs that I know you realize are important and support. We recognize as well the challenge in meeting the substantial needs for fire suppression in the West and hope that you can work with the Senate to reach a final bill this year that can prevent fire needs from eating into other needed investments in the Interior bill.

NPCA is working on several levels to encourage Congress and the administration to come together on a broad solution that addresses the real drivers of the deficit, which certainly are not the discretionary programs in the Interior appropriations bill. We recognize that until and unless such a deal is struck, it will be a continuous struggle to provide national parks with the funding they need, that park visitors and communities deserve, and that the American people support—as we know from polling that we've already shared with you showing broad bipartisan support for national park funding. As we noted last year, we deeply appreciate and congratulate your frankly courageous effort to put everything on the table in an effort to secure a truly meaningful, worthwhile compromise on the deficit. Yet here we are in a situation that we all had hoped would never come to pass, with sequestration in place, and a final FY13 continuing resolution that cut park funding even more than sequester-mandated levels. We are also concerned that the FY14 House budget sharply cuts discretionary spending; if that budget were implemented, it would further challenge this committee's effort to meet the needs of our national parks.

The hard reality for national parks is that they are experiencing deep impacts from the sequester and other continuing reductions, and this year—2013—will be the most challenging in some time for park superintendents. As you know, the final FY13 levels came on top of two prior years of budget cuts for the park service. Since FY10, park operations have declined by an estimated \$300 million—or nearly 13%—in today's dollars. We know that you understand the importance of funding the operations of our national parks, but it is worth taking a moment to summarize the damaging impact these cuts are having in every park across the country.

As you know, the situation at every park is different, and the impacts of the sequester vary park-by-park. In Maine, Acadia is delaying completely opening the park by a full month, with reduced staff and visitor center hours as well. At Blue Ridge Parkway, the most visited unit in the system, more than 400 campsites will be closed, in addition to picnic areas and visitor centers. Denali National Park and Preserve in Alaska will go without—among other positions lost through attrition—six maintenance staff, despite a deferred maintenance backlog there that has grown to nearly \$50 million. And finally, at Mammoth Cave National Park in Kentucky, there will be fifteen fewer staff this year, and fewer rangers will be available in the main campground to assist visitors. There will also be fewer cave tours, such that an estimated 28,000 people will not be able to visit Mammoth Cave as a result.

Overall, there will be nearly 2,000 fewer staff in our national parks this year to protect the amazing resources that have inspired visitors for nearly a hundred years, and to provide a safe and enjoyable experience for the nearly 300 million annual park visitors from across our nation and the world.

I read this week the story of outfitters at Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area, which is among the most visited park service units. Outfitters in gateway communities were expressing concern over the National Park Service's decision to close several access points to the river, a cutback in services that is likely to make a canoe trip downriver lengthy enough to discourage many families from visiting. Canoe livery owners predicted the access closures could decrease business by 25 percent. The superintendent responded by outlining the very real constraints to his budget as a result of the annualized across-the-board cut of five percent to park budgets that has resulted from the sequester. This is just one of many stories, and we worry what will happen to countless local businesses this summer and families looking forward to their park visits—an experience of a lifetime for so many of them—when facilities are closed and rangers are not there to greet people and ensure they have a safe and inspiring visit.

Recently, a number of businesspeople whose livelihood is threatened by reductions in park budgets wrote to the president and congressional leaders outlining their concerns about funding for national parks. I ask that their letter be made a part of the record. It reminds us that in addition to their importance to the American way of life and experience, national parks are economic engines that support a quarter million American jobs and contribute some \$30 billion to the national economy annually.

It appears that national parks have no choice but to weather these cuts this year, but it is clear that many of the ways in which savings are being found are not sustainable. Half of the savings is through attrition; but as many superintendents have acknowledged, operating a park with insufficient staff can be managed in the short term, but the strategy cannot be sustained over the long run. As you begin to deliberate on FY14 funding, we should be clear that if these cuts are sustained for any amount of time, we will begin to see more significant damage to resource protection, as well as visitor services. Without some relief, less costly—but needed—

maintenance will go undone, leading to much more costly repair needs over the long term. You can delay changing the brake pads on your car for a year; however, eventually you will not only have to replace the pads but the rotors as well because they've become damaged for lack of maintenance, costing more in the long run and compromising safety in the meantime.

Of course, there are impacts from cuts to all the accounts, not just park operations. The loss of 70% of the construction budget over the last decade in today's dollars is leading the deferred maintenance backlog to approach \$12 billion, with no relief in sight. Historic grant programs have been substantially reduced over the years, compromising opportunities to protect and interpret our unique and important American story, and undermining opportunities for heritage tourism. The Land and Water Conservation Fund has been suffering setbacks despite its importance as a conservation tool.

Mr. Chairman, we are doing more than complaining about budget reductions. Looking toward the Centennial of the National Park System in 2016, last month we helped convene a symposium hosted by the respected Bipartisan Policy Center to discuss creative ideas for supplemental funding sources for the Park Service. We realize the fiscal climate will continue to be challenging and that no stone should be left unturned in securing the resources the parks need. We will be focusing on implementing a handful of the most promising of these ideas to supplement—but not replace—appropriations. In the meantime, though, the parks are losing ground.

This subcommittee has a long history of engagement with NPS fee revenue, having been active in the formulation of Fee Demo and the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA). Without congressional action, FLREA, along with the NPS's authority to retain fees, will expire next year. It is imperative that fee retention authority not be allowed to expire, and NPCA looks forward to working with the subcommittee and with the authorizing committees to reauthorize and improve this important legislation.

Restructuring national park fees is one of several supplemental funding ideas that we are exploring. With a decline of the park service budget since FY02 of now 22% in today's dollars, parks desperately need fee dollars in addition to every penny this subcommittee is able to provide.

From what I have seen of the president's budget so far, it appears to be an important step in the right direction, yet not enough to meet the needs of park base operations. The budget very importantly would undo the sequester and provide a modest \$57 million above FY12 in overall discretionary funding for the National Park Service. However, the proposal provides for some important priorities reflected by this increase in part through reductions to park base operations, with a total loss of nearly a hundred full time positions in the operations account. When parks already went into the sequester insufficiently staffed, we find this a troublesome continuation of

the decline of park base operations that cannot be sustained without impacts to park resources and visitors.

Our national parks have been called the envy of the world, preserving our uniquely American history in places as diverse as the Everglades and the Statue of Liberty, Independence Hall and Yellowstone. These are extraordinarily special places that provide opportunities for our children and grandchildren to learn about what it means to be an American and to be awed by a glacier or a geyser, or simply to sit with their families and watch deer saunter by. We have a fundamental responsibility to care for them, to hand them down to the next generation in at least as good a shape as we found them on our watch. The continuing decline in national park budgets and other discretionary spending—which is not really providing the long-term budgetary relief the times demand—threatens our ability to carry out this national responsibility.

We hope to work with you to identify ways in which we can be helpful in this climate that we understand is challenging for the committee. We hope that together we can identify a way to prevent our national parks from becoming a casualty of a broken budget process.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify. I'd be happy to answer any questions you or other members of the subcommittee may have.