

STATEMENT OF BRIAN CARLSTROM, SUPERINTENDENT, BISCAYNE NATIONAL PARK, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE A JOINT OVERSIGHT HEARING OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEES ON NATURAL RESOURCES AND SMALL BUSINESS ON “RESTRICTED ACCESS AT BISCAYNE NATIONAL PARK AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FISHERMEN, SMALL BUSINESS, THE LOCAL ECONOMY AND ENVIRONMENT”

August 3, 2015

Mr. Chairmen and members of the Committees, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the issue of access to Biscayne National Park, particularly with regard to the impact of management plans on visitor access and local economies.

Providing for visitor enjoyment of our national parks is required by the National Park Service Organic Act, along with the mandate to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects of our parks unimpaired for future generations. These are areas where, in carrying out the Organic Act and other laws, we are responsible for protecting wildlife, ecosystems, water quality, and natural quiet; preserving our nation’s culture and history; educating visitors; and leaving a legacy of our nation’s natural and cultural heritage. For that reason, the management plans for our parks that the National Park Service develops need to carefully weigh competing requirements, needs, and desires, particularly in terms of visitor use.

The focus of this hearing is discussion of two major, separate planning efforts at Biscayne National Park – the park’s General Management Plan (GMP) and the recently completed Fishery Management Plan (FMP) – which are seen by some as curtailing access to this popular and highly valued Atlantic Coast park. The FMP included a set of recommendations, including park-specific recreational and commercial fishing regulations. The GMP has been of interest among opponents and proponents because of the plan’s proposed marine reserve zone. In both cases, the National Park Service is following through on our mission to preserve and protect natural resources and to provide enhanced visitor experiences that are fundamental to the reason this area is included in the National Park System. These management plans are instruments that will help us invest in the future viability of the wildlife and the ecosystems of the park. Restricting a relatively modest amount of use of this park now will help ensure that the public continues to have access to these natural resources over the long run.

The National Park Service is keenly aware of how important parks are to gateway communities, and how changes in rules for recreational and commercial activities can affect the businesses in those communities. Our process for developing management plans includes taking into consideration the views of all affected parties. This public process helps us refine plans in ways that will minimize the disruption to traditional uses and businesses built around those uses, while we act to comply with laws and regulations and balance competing interests.

Biscayne National Park, located south of Miami, encompasses an area of 173,000 acres, of which 95% (approximately 164,000 acres) are marine and estuarine waters. The park was established “to

preserve and protect for the education, inspiration, recreation, and enjoyment of present and future generations a rare combination of terrestrial, marine, and amphibious life in a tropical setting of great natural beauty.” Biscayne National Park is home to a large segment of the Florida reef tract (the only living coral reef tract in the continental United States), which includes the majority of Biscayne Bay. The park supports an incredible array of wildlife, including more than 600 species of fishes, many of which are commercially and recreationally utilized, over 200 species of birds, and 21 federally threatened or endangered species, including seven species of hard coral found in the Florida Keys. The park’s coral reef is its signature feature, and, its main attraction is the opportunity for water recreation – swimming, snorkelling, diving, boating, and fishing. In 2014, visitors spent an estimated \$32.4 million in local gateway communities while visiting the park. These expenditures supported a total of 459 jobs, \$17.9 million in labor income, and \$44.8 million in economic output in local gateway economies, much of it related to the economies of fishing and ecotourism.

Data collected by the park and other sources demonstrate an overall decline in fisheries resources in the park compared to historical levels. Recognizing the need to preserve the park’s fisheries resources, the development of a Fishery Management Plan (FMP) was initiated in 2001. Because the park’s enabling legislation requires the coordination of fishery management with the State of Florida, the FMP was developed through a partnership and memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) and the park. FWC acknowledged that resources within the park should be managed more conservatively than surrounding non-park waters, and endorsed both agencies working collaboratively to develop the FMP. A MOU was signed between the two agencies in 2002, and renewed in 2007 and 2012 as the FMP was being developed.

Biscayne National Park and the FWC held joint public meetings to solicit input on the development of the FMP. The public identified overfishing, commercial and recreational fishing levels, habitat protection and enforcement of regulations as major focal points for the FMP. In addition, the recommendations of a working group consisting of recreational and commercial fisherman, divers, scientists, and members of the conservation community were considered in the development of the plan. The final FMP was reviewed and approved by FWC and released by the National Park Service in May 2014. The goal of the FMP is to increase the abundances and average sizes of targeted fishes and invertebrates by 20% over current levels through a range of management strategies. Some of the actions used to achieve this goal could include: changes in bag and/or size limits for some species, gear restrictions on spearfishing, and implementing a gradual phasing out of commercial fishing within the park. Many of these park-specific management actions would be implemented in conjunction with the FWC through their rule-making process.

Specific to commercial fishing, the phase out would be accomplished via the issuance of non-transferable, use-or-lose commercial permits that require annual renewal, thus protecting any individual’s business for his or her lifetime, while eventually reducing the harmful impacts from trawling, traps, and other commercial practices on the park’s marine resources. The final FMP incorporated nearly all the recommendations of the working group, including this phasing out of commercial fishing.

The other long-term planning effort for Biscayne National Park has been the development, which began in 2000, of a new General Management Plan (GMP) to update the park's 1983 plan. The process has included extensive resource evaluations, as well as agency collaboration and public engagement with boater/angler groups, commercial fishermen, environmental groups, local elected officials, university partners, and congressional staff. Since the inception of this planning effort, the park has held more than 30 public meetings, received more than 43,000 pieces of correspondence, and reviewed and considered over 107, 000 comments.

The aspect of the GMP process that has generated significant interest is the proposed establishment of the Marine Reserve Zone (MRZ), which would be a no-take area, where fishing of any kind would be prohibited. Of the park's approximately 164,000 acres of marine waters, the MRZ will set aside 10,512 acres (or approximately 6%) of the park's waters. This also represents approximately 28% of the park's coral reef habitat. While commercial and recreational fishing will not be allowed inside the zone, public use of nearly 90% of the park will remain the same as it is today and 72% of the park's reefs will remain open to fishing. The majority of public comments on the GMP supported alternatives that included an MRZ.

The proposal for an MRZ is intended to allow a portion of the coral reef to recover its health and to offer visitors the opportunity to see an intact and unfished coral reef system. Coral reefs contain some of the most diverse ecosystems in the world, forming important habitat for thousands of corals, algae, fish, and other marine organisms. They also serve as natural areas for recreation, boost the marine tourism economy, support recreational and commercial fisheries, protect coastlines from storm damage, and function as rich warehouses for genetic and species diversity.

Coral reefs are in decline worldwide and Biscayne's reef is part of that trend. Peer-reviewed studies have consistently detailed the loss of biological integrity of the park's coral reef. The studies show that the reef's coral and fish resources are greatly diminished from previous years. They also document a clear relationship between healthy fish populations and healthy reef ecosystems.

Biscayne's reef shows dramatic losses of living coral, from approximately 28 percent coverage three decades ago to only five to eight percent today. Fish populations in the park have been declining for years, with 64 percent of species observed less frequently in 2006-2007 than in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The highly prized species that fishers target are very rare in the reef environment, and when seen, their average sizes are smaller than the legal minimum size for harvest. Observations of large individuals are very rare. Some species have disappeared from the park completely. These declines in fish population, fish species diversity, and live coral cover also adversely affect the experience of visitors who snorkel, dive, or ride a glass-bottom boat.

Marine scientists the world over agree that the most effective tool for marine ecosystem repair is an MRZ. Other tools can be effective for maintaining sustainable fish populations, but the National Park Service mission is different than merely achieving sustainable fisheries. Natural coral reef ecosystems contain the full size and age spectrum of all the species found in them. Fishing size limits, slot limits, and bag limits cannot achieve the goal of ecosystem repair.

Temporary closures produce short-term growth but not long-term population enhancement. Catch and release is an effective tool for shallow water species but has proven to be far less successful with reef species. Similar marine reserves globally and locally at Dry Tortugas National Park and Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary have yielded positive results.

Areas where fish are not harvested also provide important recreational opportunities. Snorkeling and diving in a healthy and vibrant coral reef, full of large fish and brilliant corals, are activities that many people find enjoyable and educational. MRZs are also good investments in tourism: areas that consistently contain large numbers of big fish, such as grouper and snapper, attract greater numbers of scuba divers, snorkelers, and others interested in seeing beautiful fish in their natural habitat. In MRZs, large fish often swim right up to snorkelers and divers, providing an experience unmatched in other places. By allowing Biscayne's reef ecosystem to recover, the proposed MRZ could make the park one of South Florida's premier tourist destinations for divers, snorkelers, and marine enthusiasts.

While the purpose of the MRZ is for resource restoration and enhanced visitor experiences, not fishery management, numerous studies show that MRZs are also good investments in fisheries. Research has shown that within a few years of establishing a zone, "spillover" from fish swimming out of the zone will benefit fishing in surrounding waters. As fish in a zone become larger and more prolific, many will eventually swim out, leading to greater catches in areas adjacent to the zone. Most large "trophy" fish caught in Florida are taken adjacent to closed no-take areas. The MRZ also contains five of the park's six Maritime Heritage Trail sites, underwater archeological sites of historic shipwrecks. These sites and others in the park are strewn with derelict traps and fishing line, causing damage to the archeological sites and serving as an eyesore for snorkelers and divers. A marine reserve would lessen these impacts.

It is for all of these reasons that the NPS concluded that a no-take marine reserve would successfully achieve the zone's objective of having visitors experience a healthy, natural reef, with larger and more numerous tropical reef fish and an ecologically intact reef system.

As to potential economic impacts of both these planning efforts, a recently completed economic study concluded that because current fishers would be eligible to receive permits initially, the impacts related to the non-transferable permit system would not occur until eligible fishers retire or cease fishing and new entrants are unable to fish within the park, which would likely be years in the future. The same economic study also examined the effects of the proposed MRZ. Since the zone will only affect a small portion of the overall fishing opportunities within the park, any adverse impacts to recreational or commercial fishing are anticipated to be negligible. Indeed, the potential for "spillover" from larger fish leaving the zone may ultimately have a positive impact on recreational and commercial fishing in the area.

Since its beginning, the park has, and will always, provide opportunities to enjoy fishing. The MRZ will continue to be monitored for coral cover, fish, marine debris, and the condition of submerged archeological resources. After five years and again in ten years, these monitoring results will be compared to baseline results in a report made available to the public. The park will provide technical assistance, in coordination with the Small Business Administration, to

identify additional work opportunities in order to assist commercial operations that may be impacted by the MRZ. Over time the coral reefs within the MRZ could become a world class tourist destination, with reef access just outside Miami's front door. The enhanced reef conditions could provide additional business opportunities through commercial environmental tourism. Locals and visitors alike know that Biscayne National Park's outstanding paddling, fishing, and diving opportunities make this a great place to live, vacation, and recreate.

Mr. Chairmen, that concludes my testimony. I would be pleased to answer any questions you or other members of the subcommittee may have.