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Actor and Director

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Hearing on *The Great American Outdoors Act: Celebrating America's 250th Birthday*

Members of Congress, Chairman Westerman, and members of the Hot Springs community, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Kevin Costner, and I have spent much of my life telling stories about the American landscape, our wildlife, and the people who understood in some mythical way that this would become a mission in their life, a passion worth protecting forever.

My involvement in Conservation has largely come through my work as a filmmaker. My goal has remained the same: to simply help people understand the history, value and importance of preserving our natural landscapes.

My introduction to the environment came early, as a result of my family's economic status. We didn't have a lot... And we didn't have much time. The one-week vacation was it for us. It was something I looked forward to for an entire year. We didn't have the money to fly to Paris or a trip to NY to see the Statue of Liberty, Empire State Building or the Brooklyn Bridge... But we could afford the gas that would get us to the mighty Sequoias... to the high Sierras... to Yosemite. It was better than Paris... at least for a kid with my imagination. We could fish in a lake... sleep in a tent next to a stream. Wake up to the smell of bacon...an open fire... It seemed wild...Never mind that there were other tents and people sharing the same area.... It was always worth the wait... What always struck me but I could never articulate as a child was that it never changed. It

was undisturbed. It was comforting to know it would be the same every time we came back...It was perfect.

But ...why was it so perfect...Nature doesn't need a lot of help...being perfect... but getting to this spot would have been impossible without a road. A marked trail. Even our campsite was the perfect distance from the next campers. ...How did that happen...And then I started to think... It was created by people I would never meet. People I would never be able to thank for taking the time...the effort to make it so perfect for me that I didn't think about it... Something so simple as a road and trail that would lead to a lifetime of memories.

Well now I'm saying...The National Parks... My god. Thank you...

Sometimes we think we know the story... But do we really? ... Do we know the struggle, what it really took.... we think of Teddy Roosevelt and the mythical relationship he had with John Muir, and their connection to Yosemite. ... but do we know the forces that stood in their way...Do we know that these same great men of history, celebrated ...stood on the shoulders of a young boy named Ferdinand Hayden, who had lost his father at the age of 9 in 1838. His mother would abandon him ... He went to work for his uncle... It wasn't easy... and at the ripe age of 16 started teaching school ...Two years later he would walk 300 miles to Oberlin college in Southern Ohio...and without introduction...walked into the president's office and told him that he didn't have any money, but if he allowed him to enroll, he would do something special one day.

In 1871, our country was expanding, still trying to recover from that terrible Civil War. Our economy was in trouble. In response, an expedition was formed, to go into an area that had only been seen by one white man. His description of it however was a rumor at best... so wild, so unbelievable, that no one really took him seriously. But like any good rumor, it would eventually make its way

back to Washington. And out of it, an Expedition was formed...the mission would be two-fold. One would be to look for gold, silver and any other minerals that could benefit the country. The second would be to find a train route that would connect St Louis to San Francisco. It would be led by Ferdinand Hayden, now a man. It would be funded not only by the government, but also the most wealthy and powerful interests of the time, eager to exploit its resources... if they did exist.

But what would happen during the course of that exploration would be so profound, that it would cause a shift in the world. There was little doubt that these resources would be found.

But what Ferdinand would see was not gold or silver ...or even the route to San Francisco... What stood out was the waterfalls, the geyser's blowing hot steam hundreds of feet into the air, pools of colored water. What the 32 members of this expedition were experiencing wasn't just the rantings of a crazy man. What they were all seeing was Yellowstone.

And slowly but surely Ferdinand Hayden began to feel a shift in his life and his mission.... And against all odds...Hayden would report back to a Congress who were violently divided... with little ability to agree on anything...That yes ... there was good news...Yellowstone did in fact hold all the things he was charged to find... but after a deep long breath... He told them the story ... He told them the truth of his findings...He told them without benefit of a single Lobbyist... that this area should be spared... and left untouched, for everyone to see now and forever...The room was stunned... But that bill would magically pass that day in a house that couldn't agree on anything...and Ulysses S. Grant signed it into law. America would have its first National Park. A country divided came together that day...a testament to the boy who said, "he would do something special."

The odds of that happening in the era he lived and the forces he stood against... at a time when America's natural resources were free to be exploited... with no regard for the future was zero. But he did it. He had the vision and the courage to champion preservation over profit and congress had the good sense to pass it.

We have that chance... Nature doesn't ask much from us. But think about what it does for us... Our souls... But nature sits silent. Beautiful, awe inspiring ... A Patient that can't speak for itself. That's who we must be... That's why we are here today... It's our opportunity... We must stand up for it... it's not enough to draw lines on a map and call a place protected. Real stewardship requires investment.

Millions of Americans visit our national parks every year, families travel across the country to experience these landscapes, veterans find peace on its trails, children see wildlife in its natural habitat for the first time. Visitors from around the world come to witness what America has chosen to preserve. Yet while visitations continue to grow, many of our parks continue to struggle with aging roads, deteriorating trails, outdated water systems, historic buildings in need of repair and staffing shortages that make it increasingly difficult to protect these resources and serve the public.

We need the people who care for these places. We need the rangers who educate visitors, protect wildlife, maintain trails, respond to emergencies and preserve the stories these parks tell. If anything, the demands of our parks today demand more support, not less.

As our nation approaches its 250th anniversary, there is no better time to reaffirm our commitment to the places that tell America's story. Conservation should never be a partisan issue. It wasn't that day Ferdinand Hayden stood in front of Congress ... It is an American responsibility... It's our legacy and promise to people and generations we will never meet.

The Great American Outdoors Act represents one of the most important conservation achievements in recent history because it recognizes that protecting our public lands requires more than good intentions. It requires action. The act has helped address decades of deferred maintenance throughout our national park system, but the work is not finished. The needs remain substantial and the responsibility remains ours.

As we think about the future of our national parks and public lands, we should also recognize that conservation and public access are strengthened when the public and private sectors work together. When thoughtfully structured, these partnerships can help deliver world class opportunities and create new experiences that inspire people to return again and again.

Hot Springs National Park sits at the intersection of conservation, recreation, history, and community. It shows how local communities, park leaders, nonprofit organizations, and private partners can work together to enhance public access, while preserving the character and integrity of the resource itself. That is why I am here today... to urge Congress to reauthorize the Great American Outdoors Act. We have to live up to the vision that created them.

As we celebrate 250 years of our nation, let us honor the foresight of those who protected these places before us by ensuring they remain protected for generations yet to come. That responsibility belongs to all of us. We can all become Ferdinand Hayden.

Thank you.