



NPCA position on the EXPLORE Act

November 29, 2023

Dear Representative,

Since 1919, National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) has been the leading voice of the American people in protecting and enhancing our National Park System. On behalf of our 1.6 million members and supporters nationwide, I want to share our remaining concerns and areas of support for the proposed EXPLORE Act.

NPCA appreciates the intent of the EXPLORE Act as national parks reach the height of their popularity with over 300 million visits. NPCA hopes the Committee will work with us to make changes to improve the bill for park staff and visitors.

The last few years have shown just how important getting into the outdoors is to the American public and the Explore Act contains numerous provisions that forward this priority. NPCA supports efforts to make our national parks and other public lands accessible to those with disabilities, including for our military and veterans. **Title II** – Access America directs the federal land management agencies, including the National Park Service, to develop adaptive trails and adaptive recreation opportunities for those with physical disabilities. We support these efforts to catalog and create adaptive trails and recreation opportunities and ensure those opportunities are promoted for people to enjoy. We strongly encourage Congress to provide increased funding through annual appropriations to ensure the agencies succeed in these efforts.

In addition to the Title II, there are specific sections that NPCA is pleased to see included in the EXPLORE Act. **Sec. 113** increases coordination across multiple Federal agencies as our public lands experience record breaking visitation. **Sec. 156** supports the Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership, a national grant program that develops recreational infrastructure in communities that have been traditionally under-resourced. **Sections 231 and 232** increase access to outdoor experiences by supporting Every Kid Outdoors Act and encouraging strategic efforts to increase youth visitation on public lands. **Sections 321 and 322** would make entrance, recreation, and America the Beautiful passes available for purchase online.

However, there are also sections of this wide-reaching legislation that require further clarification and modification to ensure the best possible outcome for America's public lands and national parks. NPCA is opposed to **Sec. 126**, which would fundamentally alter wildlife management in the National Park System. Decisions on culling on National Park Service (NPS) lands should be rooted in science and utilized as a crucial wildlife management tool to ensure biodiversity in a park is maintained. Culling efforts within the legislated boundary of a national park is led by the government, or its

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authorized agent, to meet clear conservation goals. This effort is contrary to the NPS mission and standards for culling by essentially creating incentives for trophy hunting in parks where hunting is prohibited. This text would not add value to the science-driven, professional approach the National Park Service utilizes in wildlife management.

Visitation within certain iconic units of the National Park System continues to be at, or near, record highs. This sustained increase in visitors presents opportunities for new visitors to enjoy and learn from America's natural and cultural treasures. However, overcrowding also presents new challenges for land managers as they work to guarantee a positive visitor experience that protects these special places. **Sections 131 and 132** attempt to resolve some of these issues through the collection and dissemination of visitation data. Unfortunately, these sections present an unfunded mandate to land management agencies, who will be unable to successfully implement this strategy without significant federal funding. As **Sec. 141** of this legislation illustrates, further infrastructure investments would be needed on our public lands to guarantee the necessary internet access required for real-time data collection. NPCA is not convinced that federal land management agencies have the corresponding staff who can analyze and ensure integrity of the collected data. Since the data is intended for public use, Congress should ensure its accuracy and efficacy, even if that data is collected by a private sector partner. Some of these strategies have already been undertaken by private companies, and Congress should ensure that the intent of this text isn't unintentionally duplicating private sector efforts. Finally, these sections lack a definition of "suitable" locations for developing, expanding, or enhancing recreation use. We need to ensure these sites are sufficient to support estimated visitor increases without degrading visitor experiences or damaging natural and cultural resources such as riparian areas, sensitive species, wildlife habitat and migration areas, and Indigenous sites and sacred cultural areas.

While NPCA supports efforts to address the employee housing shortages in and near the national parks, we are concerned about language in **Sec. 151** that allows the general public to be housed on national park land beyond those that work closely with the park such as concessioners, cooperating association employees and other partners. The NPS provides housing to employees when conditions of employment warrant it or due to a lack of availability elsewhere. The lack of affordable housing across the country is becoming a crisis for national park staff. National park managers throughout the country are struggling to provide adequate and affordable housing for their employees.

NPCA supports creative ideas to address these housing needs for national parks employees and partners. The EXPLORE Act expands the Secretary of the Interior's authority to enter into partnerships with other federal agencies, states, local governments, tribal governments, housing entities, and other public and private organizations to develop, construct, rehabilitate or manage housing affordable housing for federal employees, their families and the public. This expanded authority allows the housing to be located both on and off public lands and NPCA supports the extension of the current authority to allow for these partnerships. We do not believe the general



public should live in national park housing—Congress must ensure park employees can perform their duties by maintaining a supply of housing for them.

A 21st century Park Service requires not only bold thinking, but investments in the staff and technology that are the foundational tools necessary to uphold the NPS mandate as outlined in the Organic Act. NPCA looks forward to working with Congress and this Committee as this legislation moves forward.

If you have any questions or need additional information, please contact NPCA's Visitor Experience Program Manager Tucker Johnson (tjohnson@npca.org).

Thank you for considering our views.

Sincerely,

Christina Hazard
Legislative Director, Government Affairs
National Parks Conservation Association