

*Statement of David MacDonald – President, Friends of Acadia  
Before the United States Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources  
Concerning “Funding the National Park System for the Next Century”  
July 25, 2013*

Chairman Wyden, Ranking Member Murkowski, and other honorable members of this committee, thank you for the opportunity to join you here this morning to discuss a topic that is critically important to me and many other residents in the state of Maine: the future of our National Parks.

My name is David MacDonald and I have lived most of my life on Mount Desert Island, Maine, home to Acadia National Park. I currently serve as President and CEO of Friends of Acadia, a private, not-for-profit organization with 3,600 members that has worked in close partnership with the National Park Service since our founding in 1986. Our members love Acadia and are proud to give back to the park through our organization with philanthropic donations, thousands of hours of volunteer work on the trails, and as advocates for Acadia.

Friends of Acadia is one of nearly 200 philanthropies helping the National Park system and we are also an active member in a coalition of similar national park friends groups from around the nation, known as the Friends Alliance. We benefit greatly from the exchange of information and experience with dozens of other friends groups, and as a member of the Friends Alliance steering committee, I hope that my remarks will also reflect the perspective and wisdom of other peers working in partnership with parks around the U.S.

My respectful message to your committee here today – coming from the front lines of the first national park established east of the Mississippi that operates at peak capacity on a beautiful July day like today on the Maine coast – is that Acadia is a conservation gem and economic powerhouse that we must work together to conserve. We must find the appropriate balance between public and private funding so that this park and others around our nation provide inspiration to all Americans in the years and generations to come.

I also want to convey that I certainly do recognize the very challenging decisions that you must make in this Congress and the next, and I appreciate the conflicting pressures on legislation and appropriation that come before you every day. Senator Susan Collins and Senator Angus King are terrific champions of Acadia and our national parks, but also have made all of us at Friends of Acadia aware of the context within which the deliberations and decisions are made in Washington.

You hear thousands of worthy petitions every month. You must decide much – but can satisfy few. With respect, I am here to petition with pride and confidence, because I have a mighty ally: the American people.

Across every geographic, demographic, and political cross-section, Americans want Congress to strongly support our national parks. In a robust, bipartisan survey done last year, 92% of all respondents opposed any reduction in support for our national parks, and 45% called for increased funding. Some 88% of Republican voters supported level or increased funding for national parks. Americans want their national park heritage conserved for their children and grandchildren. On their behalf, we petition Congress to make no more cuts to federal funding for our parks and that you develop a longer-term plan to restore full federal funding for our parks.

As we petition, we also step forward as partners prepared to help achieve what the American people desire. As we approach the centennial of the National Park Service, you and your colleagues in the House should be able to depend on park friends groups and the broader American conservation community as a resourceful, creative and cooperative force.

I am honored to serve a glorious American treasure – Acadia National Park – that provides benefit and enjoyment to millions of residents and visitors each year. Relatively small in size, at only 35,000 acres, Acadia is within a day's drive of major cities of the northeast and therefore is one of the most heavily used parks in the nation, with more than 2.3 million visitors each year. Acadia was also the first national park created entirely through private donations of land from neighboring landowners, when visionaries such as George B. Dorr and John D. Rockefeller Jr. and dozens of others assembled strategic tracts of land with bold Atlantic coastline, mountain-tops, remote ponds, and pristine woodlands and granted them to the federal government nearly 100 years ago. These founders, other public-spirited volunteers, skilled local workers, and 3,000 poor boys from Maine in the Civilian Conservation Corps all worked tirelessly over the years to create a magnificent network of hiking trails, carriage roads, and motor roads that enrich the park as an historic and cultural treasure. I share this brief Acadia history so you know that there is a very long history of private initiative, philanthropy, community pride and investment, and volunteerism in our park – as these very principles will be essential to our ability to prepare the park for its second century.

They are also the principles upon which Friends of Acadia has based our first twenty five years of partnership with the federal government. In the early 1990's we undertook a public-private partnership to restore Acadia's 45-mile network of gravel carriage roads following decades of government neglect. We worked with Congress to commit \$6 million of federal appropriations while agreeing to raise \$4 million in private contributions that would serve as a permanent endowment held at Friends of Acadia to ensure continued maintenance of the roads over the long-term. Friends of Acadia annually grants funds to Acadia under the terms of a memorandum of understanding regarding the endowment, which has helped spin off a total of nearly \$5 million since its establishment. Since their renovation, Acadia's carriage roads have

served as the heart of the park's recreational infrastructure; use by an ever-growing population of walkers, bikers, equestrians, and cross-country skiers has taken off.

More recently, the same public-private partnership has been brought to bear on efforts to address vehicular congestion, air quality, and visitor experience by launching a low-emissions, fare free bus service linking Acadia to the surrounding communities. Friends of Acadia provided the original seed money to pilot the project, and later secured a significant sponsorship agreement with L.L.Bean that has brought more than \$3 million to the operations of the successful bus service that has now carried more than 4 million passengers and removed millions of cars from our area roads.

We have applied the same successful mix of federal and private funds to our work with neighboring landowners and our partners at Maine Coast Heritage Trust in helping Acadia secure key tracts of land to complete its acquisition boundary. Acadia's irregular boundary weaves in and out of nearly a dozen surrounding villages and hundreds of abutting owners. We are often called upon to use FOA funds to pre-acquire properties when Congress and the Park Service are not able to move quickly enough to meet a seller's time-frame. Completing Acadia's boundary has been the top priority of current Superintendent Sheridan Steele, and Friends of Acadia has been willing to assume some risk in these transactions, but as with infrastructure and operations, our donors believe that the federal government has a critical role to play in funding these acquisitions, particularly given the dedicated revenue source in place through the Land and Water Conservation Fund. We urge Congress to support full and reliable funding for the LWCF as a fiscally-sound strategy for conserving national parks like Acadia.

All of us at Friends of Acadia are proud of our long history and strong partnership with the Park Service, however we are also firm in our conviction that we, the people of the United States, through our federal government, have a perpetual responsibility to assure the conservation of Acadia unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations. Private philanthropy has a critical role to play in the future of our parks, but there are limits to that role. Friends of Acadia works hard to add value to our national parks rather than fund core operations, which are ultimately the responsibility of Congress.

In recent months, the federally mandated 5% cut to Acadia's operating budget meant that park motor roads opened a month later than usual, visitor center hours have been shortened, and free ranger led interpretive programs for families have been cut in half this summer. Acadia now has 23 out of 110 permanent staff positions left unfilled, and the park has nearly \$1.4 million less to operate in FY 13 than it did in FY 10. The reality that park operating funds are decreasing now under the sequester creates a disincentive for private donors to contribute to park projects. These cuts do serious damage to the fundamental assets and heritage that our national parks represent. The cuts in federal funds also create a negative ripple effect in the economy of our surrounding communities. The park is estimated to generate \$186 million in economic activity in our region, supporting approximately 2,970 jobs.

Friends of Acadia is already working with partners at the local, state and federal level to explore options for sustainable, supplementary funding for America's national parks. In March, I participated in a leadership conference convened by the National Parks Conservation Association and the National Park Hospitality Association that put forward sixteen specific proposals for such efforts.

Confident that my colleagues from those leadership associations will give you a full account, I will speak briefly to two key proposals which my team at Friends of Acadia believe hold great promise, and which require Congressional action to advance further.

1. The first proposal is to enhance the park visitor experience through improvements enabled through a stronger fee system. The Federal Lands Recreation Act (FLREA) must be reauthorized, preserving parks' ability to retain a high majority of the fees they collect. People feel a sense of investment when they pay for an experience, and park entrance fees have been a very important source of funds for Acadia to maintain buildings, roads, trails, and more. The *Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act* (FLREA – Title VIII of P.L. 108-447) enables national parks to retain up to 80% of the fees collected and use them for maintenance, interpretation, law enforcement, and to cover the costs of fee collection. At \$20 for seven days or \$40 for a year, the entrance fee at Acadia is a better bargain than taking one's family to the movies. Visitors pay the fees willingly and are pleased to hear that 80% of them are retained at Acadia. It is critical that FLREA be renewed by 2014 with the authorization for the National Park Service to experiment with the fee structure to maximize revenues based on locally-appropriate solutions. Continuation of fee collection is also very important for the future of Acadia's award-winning Island Explorer bus system. Acadia National Park adds a transit fee, seamless to the visitor, during the bus system's operation. This fee generates more than half of the funding needed for bus system operations, so if Acadia's authority to charge an entrance fee were to disappear, the Island Explorer would shrink significantly. At Acadia, nearly 21% of the park's annual budget comes from fee revenue.
2. The second proposal is for a Park Legacy Partnership enabled by public-private cooperation. Versions of this noble concept have been discussed since at least 2007. Now is the time to build upon lessons learned from the past efforts and to create an opportunity for Congress and private partners to design a fund that will inspire private donors to look toward the 2016 Park Service Centennial. In particular, we encourage a program that would be inclusive of a wide array of possible ways to give, and not require that private gifts be made to the Federal Treasury in order to qualify for the federal match. In my conservation career, I have been privileged to receive the wise counsel of some of America's great philanthropic families with a deep commitment to

our natural heritage. Under their guidance as volunteer board members or donors, Friends of Acadia has demonstrated that private, non-profit partners should not replace the role of the federal government, but we can provide critical flexibility, innovation, cost effectiveness, and a trusted broker for donors wanting to add to our national parks legacy.

I will close with a final specific example from Acadia that illustrates the power and potential of both the fee collection and the proposed Park Legacy Partnership. In the year 2000, Friends of Acadia successfully completed the Acadia Trails Forever Campaign. Our organization raised \$9 million in private funding to restore and permanently endow the maintenance of Acadia's historic trail system. This was matched by \$4 million in public funds – primarily from revenue collected at Acadia through visitor entrance fees. This campaign went on to be a model for other parks and friends groups around the country. Yet I don't believe that it would have been possible if we had not been able to tell our private donors that the federal government was coming to the table with a significant investment in the project; nor would it have worked if we had told our private donors that their contributions would need to be made directly to the U.S. Treasury. Instead, Friends of Acadia holds the endowment and makes yearly grants to the park for intended uses on the trails under the terms of a memorandum of agreement signed by both parties.

As we approach 2016, it is important to note that Acadia National Park shares that same centennial date with the broader National Park Service. We are certainly prepared and motivated to bring our best thinking and resources to bear to ensure that Acadia's second century is launched with the same level of inspiration and leadership exhibited by the park's founders one hundred years ago.

I greatly appreciate the opportunity to share testimony with your committee today, and hope that you will not hesitate to let me know if I can assist with follow up questions or suggestions. And in conclusion, I invite each of you to pay us a visit at Acadia along the Maine coast this summer or in the future – my words here today pale in comparison with a first-hand visit, and it would be our pleasure to help you or your staff come on up and enjoy the Acadian experience with us. Thank you.

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