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*Statement of David MacDonald – President, Friends of Acadia and
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*Before the National Parks Subcommittee of the
United States Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Concerning “the State of the National Park System” May 26, 2021*

Chairman King, Ranking Member Daines, and other honorable members of this subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to join you here this morning and to add the perspective of the park partner community to your discussion regarding the state of our National Parks, and in particular the challenges and opportunities arising from the past fifteen months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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 4,500 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.

I also have the honor of serving as the current president of the National Park Friends Alliance Steering Committee, a coalition of more than 250 organizations from around the country that share best practices, new approaches, and coordinate on key issues affecting national parks. While each of these organizations is different and our members reflect the amazing diversity among the varied park units themselves, 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 both a specific park like Acadia and from a national view of park partners – is that these special places are more important and more popular than ever following the pandemic year, and we must avail ourselves of every existing tool and also expand the toolkit with new partners and approaches to ensure that parks are adequately funded, staffed and made available to the American people for safe and rewarding experiences.

While I hope to share specific and tangible examples in the next few minutes and the questions and answers to follow, please let me emphasize three primary themes of my testimony at the outset:

- 1) The pandemic put tremendous stress on park partner organizations, with dramatic reductions in revenue, staffing and operations; however, our community has been resilient, resourceful and innovative and remains committed to our mission of supporting parks and serving the expanding constituency that sought refuge in parks during the past year;
- 2) National parks have unfortunately been under-resourced for decades. Park partners have been looked to as an option to help plug this gap either through private philanthropy or retail operations. While we once liked to describe our contributions as adding a “margin of excellence” in parks, over time, partner contributions have increasingly provided a “margin of survival” for some parks. The pandemic revealed the risks of this shift and underscored the absolute importance of Congress maintaining and increasing the funding appropriated for the base operating budget of the National Park Service.
- 3) While funding is important, to unlock the full potential of public-private partnerships with organizations like ours, we must also be willing to create a framework of policies, practices, and authorities that encourage the innovation, flexibility and entrepreneurship that partners can often bring to the table and that is needed in order to meet the complex challenges before us.

Our ability to make parks resilient to climate change; or to make parks accessible and relevant to new or underserved audiences; or to bring new technology to bear to alleviate overcrowding at iconic sites or enhance a 21st century visitor experience; or to solve the acute shortage of seasonal housing in many gateway communities that limits parks’ ability to hire the staff needed to operate – each of these will require a joint effort by parks, partners and surrounding communities.

Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on park partner community: Park partner organizations vary greatly in terms of their revenue models, programmatic offerings, and roles they play in their respective parks. Some organizations, like Friends of Acadia, rely exclusively on philanthropy; others, particularly cooperating associations, play a primary role in raising funds for parks through retail operations, such as bookstores, tour operations or other earned-income activities. Still other organizations are “hybrids,” generating funds through a combination of fundraising and park-related sales. All types of partner organizations were impacted by the pandemic and the deep shock-waves it had on the economy. While philanthropy bounced back in the second half of 2020, and many of us saw donors actually increase their giving in a time of need, those organizations relying on retail sales experienced devastating budgetary impacts, while visitor centers and stores remained closed and guided activities were eliminated or dramatically pared back. The federal Payroll Protection Program provided a lifeline to many of these organizations, but very few were immune from temporary or permanent layoffs and the need to reduce or suspend entirely their financial support to parks.

A few silver linings emerged from the darkness of the past year, however. Partner organizations replaced traditional in-person events or programming with digital versions that reached new and

more diverse audiences. Last year's phenomenon of more people seeking time outdoors and in parks and nature in the face of the pandemic combined with the ability for parks and partners to be more inclusive and reach new constituents by expanding virtual offerings creates a tremendous opportunity for us to build upon in the weeks and months to come. Now that visitor centers and stores are starting to re-open, cooperating associations are starting to see strong sales that are out-pacing pre-pandemic revenues. Finally, the tremendous bipartisan support and successful passage of the Great American Outdoor Act provides historic levels of funding to address long-standing deferred maintenance and land acquisition needs of parks and other conserved areas.

Challenges and Opportunities Ahead: As with so many aspects of our lives and society, the pandemic has forced parks and partners to rethink how we do our work and how to deepen our impact and further our respective missions. The past fifteen months saw millions of people relying on parks as places of refuge, solace, health, healing, and inspiration; parks emerged as something constant and reliable in people's lives when so many other touchstones were upended. In order to "meet this moment," the National Park Service and its partners must recognize our increased interdependence on each other and tap into our respective strengths to address the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. These include:

- Bringing new tools and resources to bear to address issues such as hiring, contracting, project management, and shortage of housing that are vital to our ability to tap into the full potential of the Great American Outdoor Act and other funding opportunities;
- Ensuring that parks are places where diversity, equity and inclusion thrive in order to make the resources and benefits they offer available and welcoming to all; and to ensure that parks in turn benefit from the breadth of perspectives inherent in a wider audience.
- Tapping into rapidly-advancing innovations to help offer new solutions to growing challenges of over-crowding at the most heavily-visited parks.
- Making parks as resilient and healthy as possible in the face of our changing climate and models of sustainability that inspire visitors to do their part in helping address this global challenge.

Each of these will benefit from a partnership approach that leverages private philanthropy and nimbleness, while also underscoring the importance of the fundamental federal budgetary support. 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. Please know that the park partner community is ready and willing to be a resource for you in this important work.

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