

STATEMENT OF JASON MORRIS, EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, NATUREBRIDGE, BEFORE THE SENATE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES,  
CONCERNING THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE "A CALL TO ACTION: PREPARING FOR A SECOND CENTURY  
OF STEWARDSHIP AND ENGAGEMENT" REPORT

SEPTEMBER 21, 2011

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to appear before the subcommittee to provide our perspective on the National Park Service's recently released report "A Call to Action: Preparing for a Second Century of Stewardship and Engagement."

NatureBridge commends Director Jarvis and the National Park Service for developing an action-oriented report that brings together the best thinking from a decade of reports and Commissions. The report does not start over but instead focuses on moving forward through concrete actions. I recognize that many of these actions are appropriately focused on preparing the agency for a second century. As the opening section of the report explains, there are broader benefits that will come from undertaking these actions - benefits to schools, communities, and society at large. I will focus on that greater good with reflections on three questions:

- 1. how to provide meaningful national park experiences for 25% of America's K-12 schoolchildren**
- 2. how to create the next generation of stewards and career professionals**
- 3. how to overcome the current barriers to partnerships**

About Us: Founded in 1971 in Yosemite National Park, NatureBridge has been working in partnership with the National Park Service for 40 years. Ours is a history of mutually beneficial collaboration. Indeed, we are excited about the impact we have on the lives of youth through our partnership with the National Park Service.

NatureBridge employs 180 people in three states; primarily field educators who deliver what we have dubbed the "Wow! moments" for the students and teachers who participate in our programs. Our mission is to inspire personal connections to the natural world and responsible actions to sustain it. We currently operate residential campuses in Yosemite National Park; Golden Gate National Recreation Area; Olympic National Park; and Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area. In 2012 we will be conducting a demonstration program at Prince William Forest Park in Virginia and we are excited to be working with the National Park Service on this new venture. And, since 2009, NatureBridge in conjunction with the National Military Family Association has hosted military families participating in the Operation Purple Healing Adventures program, giving veterans and their families a chance to reconnect.

We serve more than 40,000 participants annually through field science, youth leadership and teacher training programs. We are a fee-based program and we fundraise to provide scholarships to 35% of our participants. In looking at the past three years alone, NatureBridge has served schools from 19 states

including 49 of the 53 California congressional districts, all 9 of the Washington congressional districts, and all 5 of the Oregon congressional districts. As we prepare to celebrate our 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we are approaching one million students served through our programs.

While we are proud of one million, there are 52 million school-aged children in this country who would benefit from programs like ours. We are one of about a dozen residential environmental education programs operating in national parks and our combined best efforts are just scratching the surface.

**So, how do we scale to provide meaningful national park experiences for 25% of America's school children as called for in the report?**

We recognize that there are several strategies contemplated in this action item but there are some efforts that will benefit all proven program providers. Whether you are talking about field-science programs like ours or history and civics in our national parks, NatureBridge supports making systemic changes that will connect our schools to our national parks, our "nation's best classrooms." We have three suggestions on this front.

1. Continue working across the Administration. With the first-ever Associate Director for Interpretation & Education, the National Park Service is able to engage counterparts at the Department of Education. We commend this outreach and ask that partners be engaged where they can deliver, extend, or implement programs that are well-aligned with cross-departmental goals.
2. Work across Congressional committees. As we work to reauthorize our federal education laws, specifically the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, we should provide clarity so that organizations like ours are recognized as "eligible partners" under the law. This will ensure that schools can use funding that they receive for national park-based student programs and teacher training. Other legislative efforts include Senator Reed's "No Child Left Inside" legislation. We would like to thank members of the Committee who have co-sponsored that legislation.
3. Ensure that existing resources are preserved. There is modest funding, \$10 million per year, for environmental education programs in the EPA budget. We must ensure that this funding is not cut as contemplated in the House Interior Appropriations bill. We applaud the collaboration with the National Park Foundation and other partners to provide transportation support for 100,000 students each year. This is desperately needed as transportation costs are a significant barrier for many schools. We also support the \$1 billion endowment campaign and feel certain that educational opportunities will compel philanthropic support. However, the private sector cannot do its part only to see the modest amount of federal funding for environmental education cut from the budget.

All of these suggestions are focused on introducing more students to national parks but **how do we extend the experiences to create the next generation of stewards and career professionals?**

The report talks about creating deep connections between a younger generation and parks through a series of diverse park experiences offered in collaboration with education partners and youth organizations. The described outcome is to create a pathway to employment with the NPS, with a focus on diversifying the workforce. Our programs provide these deep connections every day and we know that we are achieving the intended outcome. A few years ago, we gave a presentation at a National Park Service forum and after the presentation four Superintendents in the room stood up and said that they had been through our programs and that it impacted their career choices.

A student from our Yosemite Summer Research Institute writes, “It was this program that showed me my love for science. I hiked over 50 miles total with 40 pound pack; everyday was incredibly challenging, but I’ve never felt more accomplished. I didn’t realize how tedious science really is, and this showed me not only what it is really like, but that I can do it and because of this trip I’ve decided that a career in science is what I want to pursue.”

Another student, Virginia Delgado, made her first connections to the natural world at our Golden Gate campus in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. She came with her biology club and in her own words, “got hooked.” She is now pursuing a career in environmental policy and urban planning and is committed to seeing that more students in low-income areas, like the one she grew up in, have the same opportunity.

So, how do we all join Virginia’s cause? One program provider will never excel in providing all of the experiences from first exposure to education to stewardship to career. We offer two thoughts:

1. Connect the experiences. The report contains separate actions that talk about first experiences, deep connections, diverse experiences, new audiences, and new locations. The action focused on adopting a class of 2016 graduates at all national parks has the potential to connect these experiences. Proven partners should be included in developing and delivering the “fun, educational, and engaging activities culminating in the NPS Centennial in 2016” but we should not stop in 2016. The next five years should be just the beginning of a program for the second century that can have profound impacts on young people from all parts of the country and all demographics.
2. Cross promote. As a community of partners that provide experiences along this continuum, we must cross promote. NatureBridge will do our part to bring the community together through our privately-funded field building initiative.

Everything in my remarks thus far, and indeed the Call to Action itself is based on recognition that the National Park Service cannot accomplish all of these actions alone and that there is a shared vision between the Service and its partners. While we are certain that we have the shared vision, we are also certain that the barriers to effective and sustainable partnerships have not evaporated with the release of this report. I would like to turn my attention to the question of:

**How to overcome the current barriers to partnerships?**

NatureBridge is looking to strengthen an already rewarding partnership with the NPS. We seek to advance our common mission and develop a closer working relationship. Our testimony is offered in the spirit of wanting to move forward with these actions and a need to leverage increasingly scarce resources.

We fully support the National Park Service goals in the Enhancing the Professional and Organizational Excellence section of the report to:

- develop and recruit NPS leaders at all levels with the skills to work with partners
- build a more flexible and adaptive organization that encourages innovation, collaboration, and entrepreneurship
- modernize and streamline NPS business systems

Unfortunately, those goals are not evident in the proposed actions. We would like to highlight two actions where the full range of partners and their perspectives will need to be considered, and possibly directly engaged, to ensure success:

1. The NPS Career Academy. We recommend that Partnerships be one of the 12 career fields in the NPS Career Academy. The cultural differences between government and nonprofits are often a barrier to effective partnerships. Understanding this is a key for both the NPS and their nonprofit partners. Partners should be directly engaged in trainings that focus on how nonprofits and government agencies operate, and how to bridge the gap. NatureBridge would gladly participate in this type of training.
2. Cooperative agreements. Cooperative agreements impact more than the buying power of national parks. From our perspective they impact mission delivery. We are not vendors and would not want considerations around streamlining cooperative agreements for program providers to be lumped with those of buying offices as implied by the report.

The following are additional recommendations on partnerships that speak to modernizing and streamlining NPS business systems.

1. Difficulty of Completing Legal Agreements. The increasing complexity of public/private partnerships has resulted in Agreements (Cooperative, Fundraising, etc.) that are overreaching and unworkable. The staff time and financial resources spent on reviewing and redoing agreements is frustrating and wasteful, can take several years to complete and in the end fosters a climate of legal adversaries rather than partners.

The process of reviewing agreements is highly centralized; drafts acceptable to the Park or the Region may be extensively questioned by the Washington Support Office (WASO), which can at times seem disconnected from the field. “No risk” partnerships do not exist and should not be the legal bar that is set.

For example, our Yosemite Institute has operated under a series of agreements with the NPS since 1971, but in 2010 questions from WASO about the NPS's legal authority to allow us to enter into agreements has caused extensive delays. Our most recent experience with the Fundraising Agreement for our proposed new Environmental Education Center in Yosemite National Park is a perfect example of what is not working. We first received a 20 page draft modeled from former partner agreements that has now mushroomed into over 40 pages after review by NPS solicitors.

Meanwhile, at Golden Gate National Recreation Area, NatureBridge's Headlands Institute campus is operating under its fourth successive one-year extension of its general agreement. After operating and providing programs for over 30 years in the Park, the partnership feels more like a landlord/tenant arrangement as we are now being asked to pay approximately \$140,000 annually in "service district charges" to continue our programs in the Park.

NatureBridge recognizes and values the uniqueness of each park but is frustrated by our inability either to use agreements signed in one park as a template for a similar agreement in another park, or to negotiate a master agreement that would cover NatureBridge operations in multiple parks.

Suggestion: NatureBridge supports streamlined and standardized partnership agreements. For example, the National Park Service should consider "proven partner status" for longtime partners that have a strong mission alignment and have met their program and financial obligations for a number of years. This would involve setting up a vetting system for new partners and enabling them to use streamlined processes once certain conditions are met and a proven track record is established.

2. Cost of construction in National Parks. Last year the National Park Service signed a Record of Decision approving construction of a new environmental education center in Yosemite National Park. The Center will be owned by Yosemite National Park and operated jointly by NatureBridge and Yosemite National Park. NatureBridge will raise more than \$45 million from private donors to pay for the center. It doesn't need to cost this much.

We have worked closely with the Park Service for 5 years finalizing the EIS, the design and the construction drawings. The process involves thousands of design decisions made by the National Park Service that affect cost while as a partner we are focused on ensuring that scarce resources have maximum impact.

Suggestion: A greater focus on value per dollar spent will increase the power of public-private partnerships and allow partners to apply increasingly scarce resources to program delivery.

3. Decision Making. Decisions must be made more quickly. This mainly has to do with the layering of agreements and multiple written approvals that are time-consuming, cumbersome and difficult to manage and enforce. Often it seems the delays come from divisions within a particular park's management. These kinds of delays are costly, frustrating and can inhibit timely

implementation and execution of partnership agreements as well as program and fundraising activities.

Suggestion: Approval processes should be streamlined to fit the pace of business in the 21st century. This will improve mission-related results for both partners and will save both donor and taxpayer money.

We look forward to working with the National Park Service and other non-profit partners to overcome these barriers to partnership and we feel confident that we can move forward together.

The NatureBridge staff is inspired to do more every day by the beaming faces of the students we serve and by the teachers who organize bake sales so that their students can experience our programs. We know that our model and our talented educators are only part of the equation – the other part is the power of place embodied in our national parks. We hear the call to action every day and we are ready to answer it.

Thank you for focusing on the future of our National Parks and what it means for our communities and our children, and for including NatureBridge in this hearing. I would be glad to answer any questions.