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National Parks Testimony (state of the parks/COVID pandemic)
Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources' Subcommittee on National Parks

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It's an honor to be invited to testify before your committee. I should say at the outset that I am not an expert on the current state of the National Park System or the impacts of COVID 19. My life's work has been in the history of this nation, but I am a firm believer that our shared and complicated past has things to say––and lessons––for the present.

Our national parks are a treasure house of superlatives––more than 80 million acres of the most stunning landscapes anyone has ever seen––from the continent's highest mountain in Alaska to groves of the world's tallest, biggest and oldest trees in California; from a sacred volcano in Hawaii that continuously gives birth to new land in the Pacific to a promontory in Maine that catches the nation's first rays of sun over the Atlantic; from the earth's grandest canyon in Arizona to the world's greatest collection of geysers in a geological wonderland in Wyoming. And I should add, Senator Manchin, this treasure house most recently includes the spectacular New River Gorge.

They are geographies of memory and hope, where countless American families have formed an intimate connection to their land––and then passed it along to their children.

But they also embody something less tangible yet equally enduring––an <u>idea</u>, born in the United States nearly a century after its founding, as uniquely American as the Declaration of Independence and just as radical.

For the first time in human history, we decided that a nation's most magnificent places should be set aside and preserved, not for royalty or the rich or well-connected, but for <u>everyone</u> and for all time.

My colleague Dayton Duncan and I––both proud to have been named Honorary Park Rangers––like to say that national parks are the Declaration of Independence applied to the land. The writer and historian Wallace Stegner called national parks "the best idea we ever had."

Theodore Roosevelt, the nation's greatest conservation president, considered the national park idea "noteworthy in its essential democracy, one of the best bits of

national achievement which our people have to their credit. And our people should see to it that they are preserved for their children and their children's children forever, with their majestic beauty all unmarred."

Like the idea of America itself––full of competing demands and impulses, lofty ideals and imperfect struggles to live up to them––the national park idea has been constantly debated, constantly tested, and constantly evolving, ultimately embracing historical places that also preserve our nation's first principles, its highest aspirations, its greatest sacrifices––even reminders of its most shameful mistakes.

Too often, I think, Americans tend to take all this for granted. Saving such places seems, to borrow a word from the Declaration, so "self-evident," we mistakenly assume that doing so was easy, almost automatic.

History tells us otherwise.

The history of every national park is usually the story of individual Americans who fell in love with that place so completely that they decided it should be preserved so that all Americans, in generations they would never know, could have the same chance to see it with the same fresh eyes.

It was always a struggle. It was never easy. But the victories made us a better nation. As we made our documentary on the history of the national parks, Dayton and I played a thought experiment with each other. Imagine the United States without the national parks. Yosemite Valley could just as easily have become a gated community with a private golf course in its center. The rim of the Grand Canyon could be lined with trophy homes, each one with a KEEP OUT sign preventing you from gazing down into that awesome chasm and feeling connected to eons of time. The Everglades, with its abundantly diverse wildlife, could have been drained and made into shopping centers. Yellowstone could have become an amusement park called "Geyser World."

Fortunately, beginning in 1872 with the establishment of Yellowstone as the world's first national park, your predecessors in previous Congresses pointed the arc of history in a different direction.

Even then, the struggles continued. Congress, history tells us, often found it easier to create national parks than to provide them with the resources––that is, funding––they need to operate well.

The progress has come, as it always does, in fits and starts. There have been many periods of Congressional neglect. At one point, the Army had to be deployed to protect Yellowstone and Yosemite, because federal money to administer them wasn't

forthcoming. In 1916, when the volcanoes in Hawaii and at Lassen Peak in California became national parks, Congress declined to appropriate any significant money for their development and protection, on the belief, one senator explained, that "it should not cost anything to run a volcano."

But there have also been moments when Congress has acted decisively. In the midst of the Great Depression, thousands of destitute young men found employment in the Civilian Conservation Corps to help them and their families survive by working to improve the national parks.

Following World War Two, when millions of reunited families loaded up in their station wagons and set out to enjoy the parks––and overwhelmed the facilities––Congress and the Park Service embarked on Mission 66 to build better roads and visitor centers to accommodate the crowds.

And I want to congratulate––and thank––many of you who last year passed landmark legislation––and funding––to address the infrastructure and maintenance backlog in the parks that had been growing for decades.

There's still more work to be done.

At the heart of the national park idea is the notion that every American–whether their ancestors came over on the Mayflower or whether they just arrived; whether they're from a big city or a farm; whether their father runs a factory or their mother is a maid––every American is a part-owner of some of the best seafront property in the nation; they own magnificent waterfalls and stunning views of majestic mountains and gorgeous canyons. They have a stake in making sure that, as Roosevelt said, these places "are preserved for their children and their children's children forever, with their majestic beauty all unmarred."

You represent those people and are entrusted with protecting and nurturing this precious inheritance of theirs. I hope you take that responsibility seriously.

Let me conclude with a story from history that, I think, reverberates with today's situation.

About a decade after Yellowstone was set aside as the first national park and before any other national park had been established, the Senate actually debated whether this new park––this new idea––was worth keeping.

One Senator (I won't bother you with his name) rose in the chamber and proudly declared: "I should be very glad myself to see [it] surveyed and sold, leaving it to private enterprise." "The best thing that the Government could do with the

Yellowstone National Park," he argued, "is to survey it and sell it as other public lands are sold."

But Senator George Vest of Missouri answered him. "I am not ashamed to say that I shall vote to perpetuate this park for the American people," he said. "I am not ashamed to say that I think its existence answers a great purpose in our national life. There should be, [in] a nation that will have a hundred million or a hundred and fifty million people, a park like this as a great breathing place for the national lungs."

"A great breathing place for the national lungs." Nearly a century and a half later, in a nation of 330 million people emerging from the lockdowns and restrictions––and the terrible suffering, anxieties and exhaustion––caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, our "national lungs" ache for great breathing spaces.

The national parks are still here to provide them. Thank you.