



**STATEMENT OF TOBY O'ROURKE,  
PRESIDENT & CEO OF KAMPGROUNDS OF AMERICA, INC.  
BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS**

**AUGUST 8, 2019**

Senator Daines, thank you for the opportunity to speak before the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources' Subcommittee on National Parks. I appreciate the invitation to discuss the topic of expanding visitation in our national park system, specifically to the lesser-known parks across the country, as it has a direct overlap with my business

My name is Toby O'Rourke, and I am the President and CEO of Kampgrounds of America, Inc. commonly referred to as KOA. KOA is the world's largest network of privately owned campgrounds with nearly 520 locations across the United States and Canada. We were founded in 1962 in Billings, Montana, and our headquarters remain there today. Our mission is "connecting family and friends to the outdoors and each other" and we are committed to delivering quality outdoor hospitality at each of our locations.

The majority of our campgrounds are franchises that are privately owned and operated businesses who partner with KOA primarily for brand awareness and marketing but also for technology and program support. We at KOA, Inc. also own 31 locations ourselves in various destinations across the country. Because of our large footprint there is a KOA location near most every national park, memorial, monument or historical site. For example, here in Montana, not only do we have parks surrounding Glacier and Yellowstone, but we also have a campground near the Big Hole National Battlefield, the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument and here in Deer Lodge near the Grant-Kohrs National Historic Site. We promote these locations to our guests on our website by linking to the KOAs near each national point of interest organized by state.<sup>1</sup>

Camping is increasingly growing in popularity. Based on the 2019 North American Camping Report<sup>2</sup> (NACR), research we publish annually that measures overall camping activity, an estimated 78.8 million households consider themselves active campers, and there have been roughly 7.2 million households who are new to camping over the past five years. Thirty-nine million of those camp every year and the number of annual campers has increased by 22 percent since we first started measuring this information over five years ago. Not only are more people camping, they are camping more frequently. Since 2014, we have seen a 72 percent growth in households taking more than three camping trips per year. Those who camp enjoy the activity and return to it multiple times during the year as a leisure activity.

I share these numbers because the growing population of campers represents a growing market for national park visitation. We find that most campers use our campgrounds as base camp locations for exploring the surrounding area. When asked what activities campers leave the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://koa.com/blog/koa-campgrounds-near-national-parks/>

<sup>2</sup> 2019 North American Camping Report. Unless noted otherwise, all data referenced is cited from this report. Report can be downloaded at <https://KOAPressRoom.com/>.



campground for, 50 percent say for sightseeing and scenic drives, 40 percent cite outdoor recreation and 30 percent mention visiting local attractions. All of these align with visiting and engaging with national parks and monuments. Not surprisingly, camping in the national parks themselves is also extremely popular. Our research shows that forty percent of camping nights nationally are spent in national or state park campgrounds.

There are several trends worth noting that have an impact on my business that I believe would likewise affect the national parks. Understanding these trends allows us to build effective marketing programs and similarly could help define a communications strategy focused on driving visitation to lesser known national parks.

- **Diversity:** There has been significant increases in diversity in camping over the past five years. The 2019 NACR shows that 29 percent of camping households are multi-cultural, a 17-point increase since 2012. There is now just a seven-point delta to what the census measures for ethnicity in the general population. New campers are increasingly more diverse, in fact, 51 percent of new camping households in 2018 were from minority demographics. Key to attracting more diverse visitors is focusing on representing inclusion in not only marketing but also in operations and staffing.
- **Millennials:** Younger generations are driving the growth in camping. Millennials represent the largest segment of camping households at 41 percent, a 7-point increase since 2015. Among new campers in 2018, 56 percent were millennial. Millennials are a large focus of the travel market in general due to their size and the importance they are believed to place on experiences. I believe it is difficult to market effectively and generalize the entirety of a generation and feel there's more value in looking at life stage. The *millennial family* is a prime target for our business that should overlap well as a target for the parks. When asked of millennial campers what was the key trigger in getting them to camp more, the majority said having kids. Tapping into reasons for engaging children with the park system will speak to these families. This includes educational purposes and the importance of time outside. The NACR shows that 62 percent of campers believe getting their kids involved in outdoor activities is "very important." The Family Travel Association has also shared that a 33 percent of American families say they would like to take their children on a national park vacation.
- **Road Trips:** KOA was built around the concept of the road trip as our founder developed a campground system after recognizing people traveling through to the Seattle World's Fair. A trend that we've found very interesting over the past couple of years is the increasing interest again in road trips. The 2019 Portrait of the American Traveler<sup>3</sup> research shows that the percentage of American travelers taking a road trip has increased 64 percent since 2015. More than half of American travelers took a road trip during the past year and two-thirds intend to take one during the next twelve months. Respondents to this survey showed that those that took road trips were motivated by exploration and 77 percent indicated going on vacation brings their family closer together.

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<sup>3</sup> 2019 Portrait of the American Traveler, MMGY. <https://www.mmgys.com/services/research-data/portrait-of-american-travelers/>



The research also noted that some road trips also included flying to a city and then beginning from there. Millennial families engaged the most in this activity with 57 percent saying they took a road trip that began in another city. National parks and monuments are an ideal road trip destination, and there are a number of road trip oriented sites and apps that are designed to help people map their routes and points of interest.

- **Close to Home:** On the other hand, one of the most interesting trends in our data is that people are camping closer and closer to home. Our North American Camping research shows that 54 percent camp within 100 miles of home and 70 percent within 150 miles, a 15-point increase in the past five years. Our take on this is that people are increasingly busy and time starved. The US Travel Association reports that a significant number of employees have unused vacation at the end of the year<sup>4</sup>. Camping provides an easy way for people to get away with their friends and family over a weekend close to home. While we at KOA do market destinations we find that promoting to locals what is in their backyard can have a large impact on business. Likewise, increasing awareness of nearby national parks to local markets and not just tourists may do the same.
- **Overtourism:** Finally, many in travel point to the increasing awareness of overtourism - or the congestion or overcrowding at popular destinations. The Portrait of the American Traveler research cites that 60 percent of travelers say that tourism overcrowding will have a significant influence on what destinations they choose to visit in the next five to ten years.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, Baby Boomers were even slightly more so to say this than Millennials. Encouraging more exploration of lesser known national parks would likely appeal to those falling into this category.

We at KOA have a shared interest with you in increasing visitation to all of the national parks, monuments and historical sites in the system. Not only are we passionate about the benefits of the outdoor experience to be found at these special places, the livelihood of our small business entrepreneurs that surround these points of interest depend on it. I believe camping households are a prime target for the park system, and we look forward to doing our part to help increase the collective awareness of our national wonders.

Toby O'Rourke  
President & CEO  
Kamgrounds of America, Inc.

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<sup>4</sup> State of the American Vacation, US Travel Association. <https://www.ustravel.org/research/state-american-vacation-2018>

<sup>5</sup> 2019 Portrait of the American Traveler, MMGY. <https://www.mmgy.com/services/research-data/portrait-of-american-travelers/>