

TESTIMONY OF
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“The Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Users of Public Lands, Forests, and National Parks”

Chairman Murkowski, Ranking Member Manchin, members of the Committee, thank you for holding this hearing today on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on public lands, forests, and national parks and inviting me to testify. My name is Will Shafroth and I am the President and CEO of the National Park Foundation, the official philanthropic partner of the National Park Service.

Chartered by Congress in 1967, the National Park Foundation was founded on a legacy that began more than a century ago, when private citizens from all walks of life acted to establish and protect our national parks. Today, the National Park Foundation carries on that tradition as the only national charitable nonprofit whose sole mission is to directly support the National Park Service. Working together with the National Park Service and a dedicated community of passionate park champions, the National Park Foundation strives to ensure that all people are able to discover their own personal connections to national parks, because these places don’t just stand for where America has been—but inspire where we go next.

Unfortunately, had you invited me to testify before this committee about the status of parks, gateway communities, tourism, and philanthropic partners in January, I would likely have painted a much more optimistic picture than I will today. One commonly reported statistic is that in 2019, according to the National Park Service, approximately 328 million park visitors spent an estimated \$21 billion in local gateway regions while visiting National Park Service lands across the country. These expenditures supported a total of 341,000 jobs, \$14.1 billion in labor income, and \$41.7 billion in economic output in the national economy.¹

As we sit here today, seven months into 2020, five months into a global pandemic, it remains difficult to gauge the full impact that COVID-19 will have on those who work in and near our parks. However, I can say with confidence, because of our mission, and the dedicated partners who support them, national parks themselves will be here for good. Even in the throes of a global pandemic, the National Park Service and, by extension, the National Park Foundation are obligated to preserve unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of current and future generations. Simply put, national parks are forever.

I know that there will be questions from the committee, and rightly so, regarding the impact of park closures on visitation, the visitor experience, and other issues of note that have taken place during the pandemic. I represent the Foundation, not the National Park Service, and defer any questions outside of our scope of work to my accomplished counterparts at the National Park Service or the Department of the Interior.

¹ <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/socialscience/vse.htm>

Park Visitation During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Although official National Park Service visitation numbers for all park units in 2020 are not currently available, some parks are able to provide optional monthly visitor counts.² In Alaska, the situation appears particularly dire, with Glacier Bay National Park reporting an 83.24 percent reduction in visitation as of April, and Kenai Fjords National Park reporting an 85.21 percent reduction in total visitation as of May. On the other end of the spectrum, New River Gorge National River in West Virginia reported only a 1.83 percent decline in visitation for the month of May from the year prior, and a 9.58 percent decline in visitation year to date.

In addition to official National Park Service statistics, the U.S. Travel Association recently released a report³ showing visitation at a few national park units returning to pre-pandemic levels. According to data aggregated from cell phones, more than two-thirds of visitors travelled from out of town to reach a park unit, and more than half travelled 200 miles or more to reach these parks.

We may never have an accurate depiction of the visitation statistics and patterns for 2020, as necessarily, during the early months of the year, most Americans remained at home, with visitation likely low in most units. Moreover, the National Park Service, during this time must turn their focus to the health and safety of visitors and employees. With many employees and volunteers teleworking, obtaining accurate data in the field likely presents particular challenges for the 2020 season. As more Americans begin to travel, visitation patterns will likely remain fluid, with numbers continuing to fluctuate depending upon conditions at individual park units. However, the focus for the National Park Service, Foundation, and individual partner organizations for the foreseeable future will remain on the health and safety of visitors and employees. It may not be 2021 until we have an accurate picture of what the “new normal” looks like in terms of visitation in our national parks.

The Visitor Experience During the COVID-19 Pandemic

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, many states and local governments issued stay at home orders that included options or even encouraged outdoor recreation or exercise. During this time many Americans turned to the outdoors as a valuable venue for stress relief and healing during a time of great uncertainty across our society.

Recognizing that national parks became less accessible to many, especially in the earliest days of the pandemic, the Foundation looked for ways to bring parks to people at home. In collaboration with the National Park Service, the Foundation has been a leader in bringing parks to people through digital experiences, and moved quickly to offer even more virtual park offerings in response to COVID-19.⁴ Such offerings include virtual tours and webcams⁵, free educational

²<https://irma.nps.gov/STATS/SSRSReports/Park%20Specific%20Reports/Monthly%20Public%20Use?Park=ACAD>

³ <https://www.ustravel.org/news/americans-are-hitting-roads-and-heading-national-parks>

⁴ <https://www.nationalparks.org/parks-at-home>

⁵ <https://www.nationalparks.org/connect/blog/take-virtual-visit-national-park>

activity booklets for families⁶, and auditory experiences like PARKTRACKS, which allows people to tune into the sounds of national parks from anywhere.⁷

This year's celebration of National Park Week coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. The Foundation and the broader national park community, including members of this committee⁸, embraced the #FindYourVirtualPark message⁹ by bringing the beauty and wonder of parks to people digitally.

I encourage members of the committee (and any of your children and grandchildren) and your constituents to visit nationalparks.org for additional options such as virtual Junior Ranger booklets that can be printed and completed at home, instructions to earn a Girl Scout 19th Amendment Badge, and even a way to virtually explore Alexander Hamilton's journey through our national parks after you watch the musical.

As in-person park visitation resumes, the Foundation is actively collaborating with the National Park Service as well as corporate partners and other entities on the #RecreateResponsibly campaign¹⁰, which urges those who choose to visit parks now and in the future to do so in the safest possible manner.¹¹

Among others, core #RecreateResponsibly tenets include knowing before you go by checking individual park websites for information regarding closures or limited services and facilities, practicing social distancing, packing in and packing out necessary food or supplies, and limiting high-risk activities to reduce the likelihood of injury and the need for emergency medical response.

National Park Foundation's Response to COVID-19

Much like the National Park Service, as well as nonprofit and for-profit organizations across the globe, the Foundation was forced to rapidly adapt its operations in response to the pandemic. From the early days of the pandemic to this very moment, the National Park Foundation's primary focus has been on the health and safety of its employees as we explore new ways to accomplish our mission, primarily in a virtual environment.

The Foundation prides itself on being a nimble organization. Prior to the pandemic, many of the Foundation's activities—programmatic or otherwise—took place in person. Like its engagement with the park community, the Foundation also shifted to virtual platforms in engaging donors and corporate partners. The Foundation's board meetings, all-staff updates, and other routine activities are now conducted virtually. Newer technologies, while far from perfect, do allow us a degree of business continuity that would have been unthinkable just a decade ago.

⁶ <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1207/05-08-2020-junior-ranger-railroad.htm>

⁷ https://findyourpark.com/about/news/parktracks?_ga=2.101801153.1739016871.1594903764-1268492069.1555952959

⁸ <https://www.nationalparks.org/about-foundation/newsroom/national-park-foundation-celebrates-presidential-proclamation-and>

⁹ <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1207/04-14-2020-national-park-week.htm>

¹⁰ <https://www.recreateresponsibly.org/>

¹¹ <https://www.nationalparks.org/about-foundation/newsroom/return-parks>

Because the National Park Foundation exists to encourage private gifts to benefit the National Park Service, this begs the obvious question: how did COVID-19 impact the Foundation’s ability to fundraise? Again, I would point to our ability to remain nimble, creative, and most importantly, to listen to our donor community. NPF is on track to meet many of its annual revenue targets.

This pandemic will have long-term implications on how we conduct much of our fundraising work. Stewardship remains a top priority; however, as we establish a new “normal,” it is important that we continue solicitation and cultivation efforts. Now is the time to connect with our donors and prospects—finding pathways that help them further the causes and priorities that matter to them most.

Many Americans are experiencing unforeseen financial losses during the pandemic, and NPF has exercised sensitivity with donors during this time. Thanks to the insights and advice of financial experts, board members, donors, and prospects, we now know that some are beginning to resume temporarily postponed financial planning conversations, which can and do include philanthropy.

As fundraisers, our job is to determine people’s willingness to invest philanthropically in the National Park Foundation and help donors align their passion with national park priorities. We anticipate shifts in philanthropic focus for many of our prospects and donors, and we are prepared to present new opportunities—ones that speak to emerging priorities in response to this pandemic.

Impact of COVID-19 on the Park Partner Community

The Foundation’s Congressional Charter directs the organization to “provide support, national consistency, and management-improvement suggestions for local nonprofit support organizations.”¹² Part of our core work includes a community partnership staff whom provide support for the over 450 park partner organizations (often referred to as “friends groups”) that support national parks across the nation. The park partner community collectively reported an aggregate revenue of approximately \$1.2 billion in 2018, an increase of 30 percent from just five years prior. Slightly more than 10 percent of these groups report annual revenue over \$1 million. Park partners provide a range of vital services from fundraising and contracting large-scale restoration projects, to managing volunteers completing clean ups and trail restoration, to providing concert and performance programming at parks.

Revenue for partner groups generally falls into three categories: philanthropy and earned revenue, or a blend of the two. Earned revenue can come from a variety of sources, such as running field institutes and youth programs, or sales from a bookstore inside a visitor center. There is no singular model for a park partner organization, as they tend to fit the needs of the park unit. In late March and early April, the Foundation began to hear from numerous partner organizations that the situation in the field was increasingly uncertain. As the American public began to “shelter in place” and visitor centers in parks and schools closed to protect public safety, those groups most reliant on earned revenue generally felt the most painful and immediate impacts.

¹² 54 U.S.C. 101120

For example, a large, well supported partner organization recently made the difficult decision to lay off most of their staff, leaving only a part-time Executive Director in place. Another large organization recently reported that the lack of earned revenue continues to significantly impact operations. Although this organization received a Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loan, which allowed it to retain employees for several additional months, it also had to concurrently retool its entire business model with limited operational dollars, while considering new revenue models such as e-commerce and virtual programming and interpretation. Such retooling, while important, requires significant investments of both time and money. Other organizations that traditionally rely on philanthropy have needed to cancel annual fundraisers, which often serve as their primary fundraising mechanism in a given year. Some organizations have found ways to refocus on virtual fundraising, with varying degrees of success. In addition to these concerns, some groups report increased visitation in park units as visitors seek to get outside and recreate responsibly, which only increases the need for a partner's services without ensuring them a guaranteed revenue stream.

In response to these challenges, the Foundation offered additional outreach to impacted park partners. Action items included hosting webinars on navigating the PPP loan process, establishing best practices during a crisis, and shared experiences on fundraising. The Foundation also began a series of virtual forums with park partners, convening National Park Service leadership with partners in the field to discuss emerging issues in real time.

Great American Outdoors Act

In the midst of so many challenges across the National Park System, the Foundation has been grateful to see significant progress toward enactment of the Great American Outdoors Act into law. I'd like to personally thank members of this committee for your support and leadership in the Senate, as this historic legislation, combined with the work of the Foundation, will provide much needed funding for deferred maintenance in our national parks.

This funding could not come at a more important time, as individual park units, park partner organizations, and gateway communities have faced reduced revenue over the last few months while looking into an uncertain future. While it is not a jobs bill in the classic sense, the Great American Outdoors Act will support projects that provide opportunities in the design, planning, engineering, and construction sector across our country.

Beyond those vital benefits, the Great American Outdoors Act will allow the Foundation to focus on what it does best—adding a margin of excellence for our parks that the National Park Service alone cannot provide. With increased federal investment to address our parks' long overdue maintenance needs, the Foundation and its fellow park partners can refocus on funding innovative projects that enhance the visitor experience and ensure our parks reach their highest potential.

Conclusion

Like the rest of our society, the Foundation, our partners at the National Park Service, and park partners across the nation have and continue to face considerable challenges in adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, the National Park Foundation has maintained operational continuity while being nimble in adapting our programmatic, philanthropic, and capacity-building

functions to a virtual landscape. The philanthropic climate has certainly changed, and we have marginally revised our forecasts to reflect a different economy than we had at the start of this year.

But the fact remains: national parks are beloved and a core aspect of the American DNA. I am confident that those who love our parks will continue to respond, particularly in this moment of need. The Foundation's work is more important now than ever. We take that responsibility with great seriousness.

I would like to leave you with the parting thought that is routinely said, though perhaps not enough: we are truly all in this together. If we want to ensure that our parks, their philanthropic partners, and gateway communities survive a global pandemic, we all must unite now, closer than we ever have before, and work together. Congress has taken important steps already, for which the entire park community is extremely grateful, and I look forward to working with you as we do even more. I appreciate your time today and welcome your questions.

ADDENDUM: Background on the National Park Foundation & Its Ongoing Impact

As the official nonprofit partner of the National Park Service, the National Park Foundation generates private support and builds strategic partnerships to protect and enhance America's national parks for present and future generations. The success of the National Park Foundation is intrinsically tied to the passion, engagement, and contributions of its board of directors, many donors, and corporate partners.

In fiscal years 2018 and 2019, the National Park Foundation supported the National Park Service with close to \$85 million in grants, program support and in-kind contributions, reaching more than 400 national park service units and trails.

Highlights of the Foundation's work during fiscal years 2018 and 2019 include:

- Creating and enhancing recreational access on the Snake River in Grand Teton National Park and at 22 river and trail sites across the country in support of the 50th Anniversary of the National Trails and Wild & Scenic Rivers Acts;
- Renovating visitor centers at Wilson's Creek National Battlefield and the Statue of Liberty National Monument;
- Purchasing and working to preserve the birth and life homes of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to anchor Atlanta's Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. National Historical Park;
- Contributing nearly \$5 million in funding for service corps that improve trails and campgrounds across the nation; and
- Investing in facilities and interpretation at newer national park units including Flight 93 National Memorial, Katahdin Woods and Water National Monument, and Pullman National Monument.

More recently, in fiscal year 2020, the Foundation has:

- Secured \$7.8 million for the replacement of visitor centers at Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument and Badlands National Park to reduce the infrastructure needs in those parks and enhance the visitor experience;
- Raised \$10 million for the renovation and restoration of the Jefferson Memorial; and
- Deployed \$2 million to enhance the Gardiner visitor entrance at Yellowstone National Park to facilitate a better visitor experience.

African American History

During a time when national attention is focusing on African American history and heroes more broadly, the National Park Foundation is proud to expand upon its previous work, decades in the making, to connect all Americans to the role of African Americans in our history and society. Through a generous donation from the Fund II Foundation, the National Park Foundation is contributing to this movement by restoring and preserving key sites that honor the African American experience and tell the fuller story of our nation. The long-term vision of this work is to fully restore and enhance select sites with sustainable facilities and digital immersive programming that focuses on the ideals of history and freedom while celebrating African American history and

culture. Current approved sites include Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument, Booker T. Washington National Monument, Camp Nelson National Monument, Carter Woodson National Historic Site, Frederick Douglass National Historic Site, Freedom Riders National Monument, Harriet Tubman National Historical Park, Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historical Park, Pullman National Monument, Reconstruction Era National Historical Park, Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail, Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site, and Tuskegee Institute National Historic Site.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted some work at these sites. For example, the National Park Service acquired the Life Home of the King Family located in Atlanta, Georgia, on January 8, 2019, through philanthropic support from the National Park Foundation. With this new acquisition, the National Park Service began planning for extensive oral histories with family, friends, and community members who played important roles within the Civil Rights movement and the King family. Collecting and preserving oral histories about the King family and the Life Home is essential and timely. In light of the pandemic and rapidly evolving CDC guidance, the National Park Service's oral history efforts have shifted to conducting socially distanced interviews that ensure the safety of all participants.

Open OutDoors for Kids

COVID-19 notwithstanding, transportation continues to be one of the greatest accessibility barriers for allowing young people to experience national parks. To address this challenge, the National Park Foundation has invested more than \$10 million in transportation grants to connect more than one million 4th graders from Title I and other underserved schools across around the country with national parks and other public lands. Importantly, based on surveys of our grantees, many of the children are visiting national parks and public lands for the first time. We've also allocated resources to twelve focus cities: Atlanta, Baltimore, Cleveland, Houston, Los Angeles, Madison-Milwaukee, Miami, New York City, St. Louis, St. Paul, Seattle, and Washington, DC. Focus city funding allows parks to collaborate and leverage capacity with their surrounding communities to scale up programming and develop additional partnerships. Program highlights include:

- The Anchorage Alaska Public Lands Information Center brought more than 100 students from the Anchorage School District for three days of place-based experiential learning in the outdoors from field professionals on subjects from forestry and plants to salmon and watersheds.
- Cuyahoga Valley National Park partnered with James A Garfield National Historic Site to connect more than 3,000 students from Cleveland and Akron bringing the history of the river and Ohio to life.
- Canyonlands National Park hosted more than 700 students to experience the ecologically diverse outdoor classroom of Southeastern Utah.

Find Your Park/Encuentra Tu Parque

In April 2015, NPF and NPS kicked off the Find Your Park/Encuentra Tu Parque public education and engagement campaign, which continues today. Fully funded by corporate partners, the

campaign utilized those partnerships, earned and donated media, NPS and celebrity storytellers, members of Congress, social media, and other technology to engage Americans with their national parks. The goal of Find Your Park is to increase visitation to our national parks with a focus on multicultural millennials and families with young children. The Find Your Park/Encuentra Tu Parque campaign is just one example of how the Foundation is actively working to engage the next generation of national park champions, ensuring these special places thrive for another century.

The campaign has been a resounding success, measured by the record visitation to national parks and more than 15 billion views of Find Your Park social media content, including the Find Your Park hashtag and publicly-generated stories. Across NPS and NPF organizational social media accounts, we've seen 1.8 million new followers in recent years. These channels in and of themselves attract and educate visitors through stunning pictures as well as important safety information for visiting parks during COVID-19.

In June, the Foundation launched a "Thank You" spot expressing gratitude to national park rangers and employees who work tirelessly during COVID-19 to keep the parks ready for our return. People consider parks a place for renewal, comfort, and peace. A tremendous amount of work goes into keeping the parks ready for visitors, and NPF and our FYP corporate partners thought it was important to acknowledge them with a message of gratitude. The spot is running on Hulu, Vice, Oprah.com, and YouTube, among other online outlets through mid-summer. The campaign will transition into spots that feature the rich and diverse jobs that National Park Service employees do, thus featuring the diversity of the parks themselves. This campaign is expected to generate 14 million impressions.

Natural Resources & Habitat Conservation

The National Park Foundation maintains a robust natural resources and habitat program dating to back to its 1967 Congressional Charter. Despite the pandemic, work continues on many priority projects, including the following examples:

- *Natural Resources Conservation Initiative:* The Foundation continues to work with the National Park Service's Natural Resource Stewardship and Science Directorate to develop its natural resource program. Although COVID-19 has delayed this process, individual projects have continued to progress. Staff are working with regional staff, superintendents, and park natural resource chiefs to gather information on natural resource priorities within the parks.
- *Yellowstone National Park Golden Eagles Study:* The Foundation continued to support Yellowstone Forever for the 10th and final year of golden eagle habitat, prey, and tracking studies. Golden eagles were previously unstudied and unmonitored in Yellowstone. A species of conservation concern, 2011 surveys noted that the park included a sizeable population of golden eagles. This finding led the park to determine it may serve as a refuge for threats that impact the species across the West. In partnership with the University of Montana, the ten-year program is providing the park with information on this species to guide park management decisions on what additional conservation measures may be necessary.

- *Glacier National Park Bison Reintroduction:* For nearly 150 years, Glacier National Park has been without bison, a native keystone species and key contributor to grassland diversity. The National Park Service, Wildlife Conservation Society, U.S. Geological Survey, and the Blackfoot Tribe will study the greater Glacier National Park habitat, its species, and cultural resources in preparation for the return of bison to the landscape. The Foundation granted \$200,000 to this effort for habitat studies, a cultural resource survey, and a condition assessment. These findings will be critical to understanding landscapes and the impacts of this keystone species on the local environment.
- *Everglades National Park Bonneted Bat Monitoring:* The Foundation provided a grant to Everglades National Park for population studies on the endemic and federally-listed Florida bonneted bat. The distribution and habits of this species are not well documented, but they are known to roost in both natural structures such as tree cavities, and man-made structures such as buildings. This research will help inform future management decisions for infrastructure projects at the park to better protect and encourage bat population growth.
- *Everglades National Park Wildlife Signage:* The Foundation awarded a grant to Everglades National Park for new signage designed to protect critical species and address emerging challenges, including a rising American crocodile population (formerly endangered), an increase in flocks of wading birds, and increased recreational activity. As the American crocodile population continues to increase in south Florida, female crocodiles are increasingly building nests near parking lots and roadsides. Signs will be placed as needed to slow traffic and protect female crocodiles that may remain in the vicinity of their nest and are thus in danger of being hit by vehicles. Large flocks of wading birds that nest and feed in ponds and mudflats are also at great risk of being hit by vehicles. Signs will be placed where birds are foraging to help slow traffic and protect their population.

Youth Service Corps Projects

The National Park Foundation is an active partner and grantee in youth service corps. In 2019, NPF granted over \$3.5 million service corps for projects at 30 national park sites around the country. These projects worked to support more than 420 miles of trail building and maintenance, protect the habitat of 14 species, plant 71,600 trees and other types of vegetation, and restore 190 miles of waterways.

The National Park Foundation, working with corporate sponsors and private individuals, planned a robust investment in youth service corps for the 2020 season. These activities, which typically take place in the summer months, were temporarily placed on hold as the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the country. All service corps stakeholders collaborated to ensure safe environments, if possible, for participants. In some cases, issues like a lack of socially distant housing, limited opportunities for certain corps this season. However, after robust engagement, 31 of 43 Foundation-supported service corps projects are now moving forward in calendar year 2020, representing an investment of nearly \$2.9 million, with the remaining to begin in 2021, for a total investment of \$3.8 million. Of this total, \$2.7 million represents philanthropic donations, with \$1.147 from the Foundation's Centennial appropriation, a greater than 2:1 ratio in terms of federal matching requirements.