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Testimony

Before the Subcommittee on Parks, Historic Preservation and Recreation, Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, United States Senate, and the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Lands, Committee on Resources, House of Representatives

For Release on Delivery
Expected at
9:30 a.m., EST
Tuesday
March 7, 1995

**NATIONAL PARK
SERVICE**

**Difficult Choices Need to Be
Made on the Future of the
Parks**

James Duffus III, Director,
Natural Resources Management Issues
Resources, Community, and Economic
Development Division



062266/153664

Messrs. Chairmen and Members of the Subcommittees:

We are pleased to be here today to discuss conditions in the national parks. Our comments are based primarily on our work to date for the Chairman, Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources at 12 geographically dispersed sites within the national park system, including four national parks, two historic parks and one historic site, two national monuments, a civil war battlefield, a recreation area, and a seashore.¹ Our remarks also draw on the 28 reports and testimonies that we have issued over the last 8 years on the Park Service's activities and programs.²

As requested, our work focused on efforts of the National Park Service to meet its mission of serving visitors and managing park resources. Our specific objectives were to (1) determine what, if any, degradation in visitor services or park resources is occurring; (2) identify factors contributing to any degradation of visitor services or park resources; and (3) identify choices available to help deal with identified problems.

In summary Messrs. Chairmen, we found the following:

- The overall level of visitor services is deteriorating. While public satisfaction with the parks is very high, visitor services are being cutback and the condition of many trails, campgrounds, exhibits, and other facilities is declining. Since 1988, the Park Service estimates that the backlog of deferred maintenance has more than doubled to over \$4 billion. In managing resources, most parks do not have the data needed to determine whether the overall

¹App. I lists the 12 sites we visited.

²App. II lists these GAO products.

condition of the natural and cultural resources is deteriorating, improving, or staying the same.

- There are many factors that influence the level of visitor services and resource management activities. Our work identified two factors that were common to most of the parks we visited and had substantial impact on the level of visitor services and resource management activities. These factors were (1) additional operating requirements resulting primarily from over 20 federal laws affecting the parks and (2) increased visitation which drives up routine operating costs for many items that support visitor activities.

- Since substantial increases in appropriations are very unlikely in today's tight budget climate, difficult choices need to be made on the future of the national parks. These choices involve: (1) generating more revenue within the parks, (2) limiting the number of parks in the system, and (3) reducing the level of visitor services and expectations. Regardless of which of these choices are made, the Park Service needs to look for ways to operate more efficiently and improve accountability to ensure that the limited dollars are used most effectively.

BACKGROUND

The National Park Service is the caretaker of many of the nation's most precious natural and cultural resources. Today, more than 100 years after the first national park was created, the national park system has grown to include 368 units. These units cover over 80 million acres of land and include an increasingly diverse mix of sites, such as Yellowstone, Yosemite, and Grand Canyon National Parks; Independence National Historical Park;

national battlefields; national historic sites; national monuments; national preserves; and national recreation areas.

The Park Service's mission has dual objectives. On one hand, the Park Service is to provide for the public's enjoyment of the lands that have been entrusted to its care. This objective involves promoting the use of the parks by providing appropriate visitor services and the infrastructure (such as roads and facilities) that support these services. On the other hand, the Park Service is to protect its lands so that they will be unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations. Balancing these objectives has long shaped the debate about how best to manage the national park system.

The debate has also been shaped by a number of other developments. Despite the fiscal constraints facing all federal agencies, the number of parks continues to expand--31 parks have been added to the system in the last 10 years. In addition, the backlog of maintenance at national parks has increased substantially. In 1988, we reported that the amount of the backlog of deferred maintenance stood at about \$1.9 billion. Currently, while agency officials acknowledge that they do not have reliable data on this backlog, they estimate that it will cost over \$4 billion.

VISITOR SERVICES DECLINING; CONDITION
OF PARK RESOURCES LARGELY UNKNOWN

The natural beauty and historical settings of the parks makes visits by most people a pleasurable and often inspiring experience. Park Service surveys show that in general, visitors are very pleased with their experience at national parks. Nonetheless, our findings show cause for concern about the health of the parks.

Condition of Visitor Services

Of the 12 parks included in our review, 11 had recently cut back on the level of visitor services. This reduction is particularly significant considering that managers at most of the parks told us that meeting visitors' needs gets top priority, often at the expense of other park activities. For example:

- At Padre Island National Seashore in Texas, last summer for the first time in 20 years no lifeguards were on duty along the beach to help ensure the safety of swimmers. The beach is one of the primary attractions of the park.
- At Shenandoah National Park in Virginia, interpretive programs to assist visitors in understanding and appreciating the natural and scenic aspects of the park were cut by over 80 percent from 1987 to 1993, and one of the park's most popular campgrounds has been closed. In addition, because of other park priorities, park staff have been unable to remove numerous trees that hang precariously over roads and popular hiking trails, posing a hazard to visitors.
- At Bandelier National Monument in New Mexico, the park museum--one of the most popular stops at the park--was closed for more than a year because of problems caused by a leaky roof and an improperly installed security system.
- At the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, the extended hours of operation to meet visitor demand during the peak summer season have been reduced by 3.5 hours each day--a reduction of more than 25 percent. Furthermore, the duration of the season in which hours are extended was reduced from 3 months to 2 months.

-- At Lake Mead National Recreation Area in Nevada, during the summer months, park law enforcement personnel are often faced with a backlog of up to 12 calls in responding to health and safety needs of visitors.

As these examples illustrate, the cutbacks in services not only adversely affect visitors' convenience and enjoyment, but also reveal significant gaps in the Park Service's ability to meet visitors' safety needs.

Condition of Cultural and Natural Resources

Knowing the condition of the resources within the national park system is key to the ability of the Park Service to preserve and protect its cultural and natural resources. The Park Service's policy directs that parks be managed on the basis of a knowledge of the resources and their conditions. However, our review indicated that, by and large, the condition and trend of many park resources is largely unknown--particularly for parks featuring natural resources, such as Glacier and Yosemite.

Park Service officials at both headquarters and in the field emphasized to us that effective management of park resources depends heavily upon scientifically collected data that enables park managers to detect damaging changes to the parks' resources and guide the mitigation of those changes. Essentially, this approach involves collecting baseline data about the key park resources and monitoring their condition over time to detect any changes. One park official told us that without such information, damage to key resources could go undetected until it is obvious, at which point mitigation may be impossible or extremely expensive. However, while park officials emphasized the need for this kind of information, they also acknowledged that information is lacking for many of the parks' resources. A 1992 study done for the Park

Service by the National Research Council reported these same concerns.³

Managers at the culturally oriented parks we visited--such as Statue of Liberty/Ellis Island and Hopewell Furnace National Historic Site--generally have greater knowledge about their resources than do those at parks that emphasize natural resources. Even at the cultural parks, however, we found instances where (1) the condition of cultural resources was declining or (2) the location and status of cultural resources in many portions of the park remains largely unknown. For example:

-- Ellis Island was reopened in 1990 as the country's only museum devoted exclusively to immigration. While a portion of the Island's structures have been restored, 32 of 36 historic buildings have seriously deteriorated. According to park officials, about two-thirds of these buildings could be lost within 5 years if they are not properly stabilized. The structures are currently not available for public access. They include the former hospital, quarantine area, and morgue. In addition, although some new storage space is being built, much of Ellis Island's large collection of cultural artifacts is stored in deteriorating facilities. As a result, in one building, much of the collection is covered with dirt and debris from crumbling walls and peeling paint, and leaky roofs have damaged many artifacts.

-- Hopewell Furnace National Historic Site is an 850-acre park in Pennsylvania that depicts a portion of the nation's early industrial development. The main features of the site are a charcoal-fueled blast furnace, an ironmaster's mansion, and auxiliary structures. Although Hopewell

³Science and the National Parks, National Research Council, 1992.

Furnace has been a national historical site since 1938, the Park Service has not performed an archeological survey of the site. Also, the Park Service has not developed a general management plan--which would outline an overall approach for protecting and managing the site's resources--even though having such a plan is a key component of effective resource management.

These conditions at cultural sites raise questions about the Park Service's ability to meet its responsibilities to preserve and protect cultural resources. And even less is known about the condition of the Park Service's natural resources. For example:

- At both Yosemite and Glacier National Parks, data about many of the parks' natural resources has not been collected, and as a result the condition and trend of these resources is largely unknown. At Yosemite, officials told us that, except for reptiles and amphibians, little was known about the condition and trend of species inhabiting the park. Even for reptiles and amphibians, they said the extent of knowledge was poor because it was not based on scientific study but simply represented their "best guess" as to the condition and trend of these resources. At Glacier, baseline information on park wildlife was similarly inadequate.

- At Padre Island National Seashore, park managers told us that they did not have sufficient information on the condition of four of the seven categories of wildlife within the park. Park officials lacked detailed data on the condition of marine fish, terrestrial invertebrates, reptiles/amphibians, and terrestrial mammals. Furthermore, except for certain species, such as endangered sea turtles that use portions of the park as nesting areas, officials had little knowledge about whether the condition of

wildlife within the park was stable, improving, or worsening.

The Park Service began efforts several years ago to gather better information about the condition of the parks' resources. However, progress has been limited, and the completion of much of the work is many years away. In the meantime, park managers often make decisions about the parks' operations without knowing the impact of these decisions on the resources. For example, at Yosemite National Park, after 70 years of stocking nonnative fish in various lakes and waterways, park officials realized that indiscriminate stocking had done more harm than good. As a result, according to park officials, the park's waterways have been compromised. Nonnative fish introduced into the park now outnumber native rainbow trout by a 4 to 1 margin. According to park officials, this stocking policy, which continued until 1990, has also resulted in a decline of at least one federally protected species.⁴

MAJOR FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE CURRENT SITUATION

Since 1985, the Park Service's operating budget has risen from about \$627 million to about \$972 million--or by about 55 percent. After allowing for inflation, the increase still amounts to about 18 percent. At 11 of the 12 parks we visited, funding increases outpaced inflation from 1985 to 1993.⁵ Increases ranged from 5 percent to about 200 percent. However, despite these increases, additional demands on the parks are eroding the Park Service's

⁴The federally protected species was the mountain yellow-legged frog.

⁵Because the Statue of Liberty was closed for much of 1985 and 1986, we used the period from 1987 to 1993 for our analysis of that park's budget and visitation trends.

ability to keep up with the needs for visitor services and resource management.

Many factors influence the level of visitor services and resource management activities. While these factors are not necessarily the same at all parks, our work identified two factors that were common to most of the parks we visited and had a substantial impact on the level of visitor services and resource management activities. These factors were (1) additional operating requirements and (2) increased visitation.

Additional Operating Requirements

Many additional operating requirements are passed on to the parks through federal laws. In many cases, funds are not made available to the parks to cover the entire costs of these requirements. Park managers cited numerous requirements from such laws as the Clean Air Act and the National Environmental Policy Act and from the implementing regulations of the Environmental Protection Agency and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Overall, at the 12 parks we visited, park managers cited over 20 different federal laws affecting the parks' operations.⁶

Park managers told us that meeting these requirements meant diverting money from day-to-day park activities. In 1994, for example, Yosemite National Park spent about \$100,000 to address the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's regulations and \$80,000 to identify and remove hazardous waste. At Glacier National Park, federal requirements for lead paint abatement, asbestos removal, surface water treatment, waste water treatment systems, and accessibility for disabled visitors required park managers to divert operating funds from other park activities.

⁶App. III lists these laws.

While Glacier's records do not track the total costs associated with meeting these requirements, park officials told us these costs were substantial and significantly eroded the amount of operating funds available for day-to-day park activities. Each park we visited had similar examples. These costs are significant since only about 25 percent of a park's operating budget remains to meet day-to-day park needs after paying salaries and benefits.

Furthermore, because salaries and benefits are such a large portion of the parks' budgets, even small increases in these costs can diminish a park's ability to meet its needs for visitor services and resource management. These costs include expenditures for new law enforcement certification and training requirements for park rangers, increased compensation for rangers, full background checks on law enforcement personnel, cost-of-living increases, and retirement costs. For example, last year at Yosemite National Park the cost of doing routine background checks for park rangers was about \$200,000. At Lake Mead, less than half of the cost of the increased compensation for park rangers was met through budget increases, leaving an additional \$200,000 to be paid from the park's operating funds.

Increased Visitation

The second factor eroding the parks' operating budgets is the increase in visitation. Eight of the 12 parks showed increases in the number of visitors; the average increase was 27 percent since 1985. The four parks where decreases occurred were small historical parks where visitation averaged less than 200,000 in 1993. These substantial increases in visitation drive up costs for many items that directly support visitor activities, such as waste disposal, general maintenance, road and trail repair, employees' overtime, and utilities. For example, at Lake Mead National Recreation Area, the costs of trash disposal have more than tripled from \$47,000 in 1990 to \$152,000 last year. As a result, a portion

of the increased funding that the parks have received has been spent to cover the costs associated with meeting the needs generated by increased visitation.

CHOICES WILL BE DIFFICULT

Messrs. Chairmen, many of the problems we have told you about today are not new. At the same time that visitor services are being cut back and parks are operating without sufficient information on many of their resources, the Park Service faces a multibillion dollar maintenance backlog and, like all federal agencies, increasingly tight budgets. In addition, infrastructure and development needs on the system continue to grow as new units are added--31 since 1984.

Under these circumstances, it is difficult to envision a turnaround in the short term. Dealing with this situation calls for making difficult choices about how parks are funded and managed, some of which may require legislative changes. Our work indicates that these choices, or a combination of them, need to address three areas: (1) the amount of revenue going to the parks, (2) the number of units in the park system, and (3) the extent to which current park operating standards and visitor expectations can or should be revised. In addition, the Park Service needs to look for ways to operate more efficiently and improve accountability to assure that the limited dollars are used most effectively.

While substantial increases in appropriations are not likely in today's tight budget environment, other sources of revenues need to be considered. These could include (1) increasing park fees, such as entrance fees, concession fees, and fees for other in-park services, and allowing parks to retain more of these revenues to address their needs, and (2) encouraging park managers to be more entrepreneurial in addressing their park's needs by entering into partnership arrangements with the private sector or other parties.

However, any increase in revenues must be accompanied by improvements in the Park Service's accountability. The need for improved accountability is critical in light of the broad discretion given to individual park managers in determining how to spend operating funds. Park Service officials indicated to us that they plan to improve accountability.

A second choice would be to limit additions to, or perhaps decrease the number of units in the national park system. To the extent that the system is permitted to grow, associated infrastructure and development needs will also grow. As this growth occurs, more park units will be competing for limited federal funding. While certainly not an easy decision, limiting the number of parks, or perhaps even reducing the number until the parks' current conditions can be adequately addressed will help ease the financial pressures now facing the park system. In both the last and current Congress, proposals have been offered that would address this alternative.

A third choice would be to reduce the level of visitor services, as well as visitors' expectations, to more closely match the level of services that can realistically be provided with available resources. The Park Service could, for example, limit operations to fewer hours per day or fewer days per year, limit the number of visitors, or perhaps temporarily close some facilities to public use. We believe that the Park Service should make the choice to provide the public with a lower-quality experience only after developing a carefully thought-out strategy and consulting with the Congress.

Regardless of which of these choices or combination of choices are made, the Park Service needs to look for ways to stretch its limited resources by operating more efficiently. Toward this end, the Park Service has developed a restructuring plan to meet the goals of the first phase of the administration's National

Performance Review. However, this restructuring plan is limited primarily to changes that can be accomplished within the Park Service's existing structure. The plan does not address the potential to improve operations through a collaborative approach to land management involving other federal land management agencies. The current fiscal climate demands that federal land management agencies look beyond existing jurisdictional boundaries in their search to reduce costs, increase efficiency, and improve service to the public. Park Service officials told us they are currently working with other land management agencies to improve operations and will continue to do so.

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In summary, Messrs. Chairmen, our work reveals that the future of the parks is at a crossroads. While more people are visiting parks, the services available to these visitors are deteriorating. The Park Service, as the steward for many of the nation's natural and cultural treasures, has a myriad of problems to address ranging from insufficient data on the conditions of resources to an ever increasing maintenance backlog. While the Park Service has recognized its problems and has taken some actions to address them, we believe that because of their magnitude, difficult choices must be made. Unless these choices are made, the Park Service's ability to preserve these treasures for the enjoyment of future generations may be in jeopardy.

Messrs. Chairmen this concludes our statement. We would be glad to respond to any questions that you or other members of the Subcommittees may have.

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE SITES VISITED

<u>Park unit</u>	<u>Location</u>
Antietam National Battlefield	Maryland
Bandelier National Monument	New Mexico
Denali National Park and Preserve	Alaska
Glacier National Park	Montana
Harpers Ferry National Historical Park	Maryland, Virginia and West Virginia
Hopewell Furnace National Historic Site	Pennsylvania
Lake Mead National Recreation Area	Nevada and Arizona
Padre Island National Seashore	Texas
Pecos National Historic Park	New Mexico
Shenandoah National Park	Virginia
Statue of Liberty National Monument and Ellis Island	New York and New Jersey
Yosemite National Park	California

PERTINENT GAO REPORTS AND TESTIMONIES
BY SUBJECT AREA

PARK SERVICE MANAGEMENT ISSUES

National Park Service: Better Management and Broader Restructuring Efforts Are Needed (GAO/T-RCED-95-101, Feb. 9, 1995).

National Park Service: Reexamination of Employee Housing Program Is Needed (GAO/RCED-94-284, Aug. 30, 1994).

National Park Service: Activities Outside Park Borders Have Caused Damage to Resources and Will Likely Cause More (GAO/RCED-94-59, Jan. 3, 1994).

Department of the Interior: Transfer of the Presidio From the Army to the National Park Service (GAO/T-RCED-94-64, Oct. 26, 1993).

Department of the Interior: Transfer of the Presidio From the Army to the National Park Service (GAO/RCED-94-61, Oct. 26, 1993).

National Park Service: Condition of and Need for Employee Housing (GAO/RCED-93-192, Sept. 30, 1993).

National Park Service: Scope and Cost of America's Industrial Heritage Project Need to Be Defined (GAO/RCED-93-134, May 14, 1993).

National Park Service: Status of Development at the Steamtown National Historic Site (GAO/T-RCED-92-6, Oct. 11, 1991).

Air Pollution: Protecting Parks and Wilderness From Nearby Pollution Sources (GAO/RCED-90-10, Feb. 7, 1990).

The Maintenance Needs of the National Park Service (GAO/T-RCED-88-27, Mar. 23, 1988).

Parks and Recreation: Park Service Managers Report Shortfalls in Maintenance Funding (GAO/RCED-88-91BR, Mar. 21, 1988).

Parks and Recreation: Limited Progress Made in Documenting and Mitigating Threats to the Parks (GAO/RCED-87-36, Feb. 9, 1987).

CONCESSIONS ISSUES

Federal Lands: Improvements Needed in Managing Short-Term Concessioners (GAO/RCED-93-177, Sept. 14, 1993).

Federal Land: Little Progress Made in Improving Oversight of Concessioners (GAO/T-RCED-93-42, May 27, 1993).

National Parks: Issues Involved in the Sale of the Yosemite National Park Concessioner (GAO/RCED-92-232, Sept. 10, 1992).

National Park Service: Policies and Practices for Determining Concessioners' Building Use Fees (GAO/T-RCED-92-66, May 21, 1992).

Federal Lands: Oversight of Long-Term Concessioners (GAO/RCED-92-128BR, Mar. 20, 1992).

Federal Lands: Improvements Needed in Managing Concessioners (GAO/RCED-91-163, June 11, 1991).

Recreation Concessioners Operating on Federal Lands (GAO/T-RCED-91-16, Mar. 21, 1991).

OTHER MANAGEMENT ISSUES

Management Reform: Implementation of the National Performance Review's Recommendations (GAO/OCG-95-1, Dec. 5, 1994).

Ecosystem Management: Additional Actions Needed to Adequately Test a Promising Approach (GAO/T-RCED-94-308, Sept. 20, 1994).

Ecosystem Management: Additional Actions Needed to Adequately Test a Promising Approach (GAO/RCED-94-111, Aug. 16, 1994).

Addressing the Deficit: Budgetary Implications of Selected GAO Work (GAO/OCG-94-3, Mar. 11, 1994).

Forest Service Management: Issues to Be Considered in Developing a New Stewardship Strategy (GAO/T-RCED-94-116, Feb. 1, 1994).

Management Reform: GAO's Comments on the National Performance Review's Recommendations (GAO/OCG-94-1, Dec. 5, 1993).

Natural Resources Management: Issues to Be Considered by the Congress and the Administration (GAO/T-93-5, Feb. 2, 1993).

Natural Resources Management Issues (GAO/OCG-93-17TR, Dec. 1992).

Interior Issues (GAO/OCG-89-24TR, Nov. 1988).

SELECTED FEDERAL LAWS AFFECTING THE NATIONAL PARKSGeneral Park Administration

Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972
Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965, as amended
National Park Service General Authorities Act of 1970 (PL 91-383)
Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970, as amended

Cultural Resources Management/Protection

American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978
Antiquities Act of 1906
Archeological and Historic Preservation Act of 1974 (PL 93-291)
Archeological Resources Protection Act 1979, as amended
Historic Sites, Buildings and Antiquities Act of 1935
Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act
National Historic Preservation Act

Natural Resources Management/Protection

Clean Air Act
Clean Water Act
Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and
Liability Act of 1980, as amended
Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended
Mining in the Parks Act of 1976 (PL 94-429)
National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, as amended

Visitor Services/Safety

Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990
Architectural Barriers Act of 1968, as amended
Resource Conservation and Recovery Act of 1976
Safe Drinking Water Act
Solid Waste Disposal Act
Toxic Substances Control Act