



THE COALITION TO PROTECT AMERICA'S NATIONAL PARKS

— VOICES OF EXPERIENCE —

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Membership Update

The Coalition's membership currently stands at 1,886 members.

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Thank you to Our Members

Thank you all for your generosity during our annual giving campaign. Your donations help to support our advocacy efforts and allow us to continue to serve as the Voices of Experience in the fight to protect our national parks. Keep an eye out next month for the 2020 Annual Report and a summary of all we accomplished last year.

[Make Your Donation Today](#)

COVID-19 Numbers

While we continue to [submit FOIA requests](#) for COVID-19 infection numbers in NPS employees and a list of parks where cases are occurring, the NPS has failed to respond. This is even more concerning in light of the recent internal Interior [report](#) that revealed over 2,000 DOI employees have tested positive for COVID-19 and 17 have died. In response, the Coalition issued a press release calling on DOI for transparency and leadership. "The numbers revealed in the internal DOI report are concerning, particularly because most national parks remain open in some capacity - and wearing protective face covering is not required. This is a risk to the health and safety of park staff, volunteers, and residents of gateway communities."

Statement on Need for Transparency

Reckless Behavior by the Secretary

As COVID-19 infection numbers continue to rise, the Department of the Interior, led by Secretary Bernhardt, continues to make reckless choices. Coalition Chair Phil Francis [spoke with The Washington Post](#) about the Secretary's private tours of the Washington Monument which may have exposed NPS employees to COVID-19 and led to the Monument's temporary closure. In addition, word leaked that Deputy Secretary Katharine MacGregor is headed to Yellowstone and Grand Tetons for a visit. "It's truly unbelievable that DOI staff would plan a trip to Yellowstone at a time when the pandemic is raging," said Francis. "The lack of concern for others is astounding."

In an [interview](#) with *National Parks Traveler*, Phil added "we wish everyone and their families and friends the very best. Unfortunately, and especially in light of recent revelations about how the administration viewed the pandemic while meeting behind closed doors, it's more apparent than ever how little regard the (Interior) secretary has for those who work in Interior."

Celebrating the Legacy of Former NPS Director Everhardt

Gary Everhardt, former director of the National Park Service (NPS), passed away on the evening of December 27, 2020. His death followed the passing of his wife Nancy, on December 23, 2020. Coalition Chair Phil Francis, a good friend of the family, said, "we are deeply saddened by the loss of both Gary and Nancy. All of us who work for and with the National Park Service are indebted to them for their devotion and service. They will be long remembered." You can read our full statement [here](#).

Phil also [spoke with](#) several media outlets about Mr. Everhardt's lasting legacy.

Moving Forward

Coalition Chair Phil Francis composed an [oped](#) about the Coalition's vision for the future. The oped, which ran in *The Hill*, urged President-Elect Biden and his incoming administration to select leaders for our NPS who can "build up a demoralized workforce and correct the mistakes of the past...restore the NPS to the proud agency it has been for over a century and truly fulfill its mission: to preserve unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the NPS for the enjoyment, education and inspiration of this and future generations."

Phil also [spoke with National Parks Traveler](#) about the past 12 months in the parks and reflected on the task ahead for the Biden administration in the realm of parks and public lands. Click [here](#) to listen.

Celebrating Rep. Haaland's Nomination

President-Elect Joe Biden has selected Representative Deb Haaland as Secretary of the Interior. She would be the first Indigenous person to serve in that position. The Coalition issued a statement in support of this nomination, saying, "with the coronavirus pandemic continuing to impact the health and safety of NPS employees, volunteers, concessionaires, visitors, and members of gateway communities, we need a leader who will put not only our resources, but also our people first. We need someone like Deb Haaland running the Department of the Interior."

Statement on Haaland's Nomination

Coalition Signs-On to Transition Team Letter

The Coalition joined over 500 organizations in a sign-on letter sent to the Biden-Harris transition team, urging them to issue an Executive Order and enact their "day one" commitment, with no state exceptions, to ban new federal oil and gas leasing and permitting on public lands and waters. See the letter by clicking the box below.

[Sign On Letter](#)

Colorado Air Quality Concerns

The Coalition submitted [comments](#) in support of the Air Quality Control Commission's (AQCC) decision to reduce air pollution by accelerating the retirement dates of coal-fired power plants in Colorado through the regional haze rulemaking. Nine polluting coal plants would retire by 2028 - sharply reducing the pollution that causes haze in Rocky Mountain National Park among others. The comments were issued in light of pressure by industry lobbyists to reverse this decision.

Unfortunately, the Colorado AQCC did vote to reverse its decision to accelerate the retirements of three Colorado coal units. We issued a quote about our disappointment in this decision, linked in the box below.

[Coalition Comments](#)

Comments on James River Power Lines

The Coalition submitted a request to the Army Corps of Engineers regarding the Dominion Power Surry-Skiffes Creek-Wheaton Transmission Line Project DEIS. In it, we asked the Corps to extend the published 45-day comment period to a minimum of 120 days from November 27, 2020. This extension is needed due to the length and complexity of the DEIS; the time period during which it was published; and the relatively short opportunity for the public to comment.

[Extension Request](#)

Other Sign-ons

The Coalition joined several sign-ons in December, including [comments](#) on behalf of 31 organizations in response to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Final Environmental Impact Statement regarding regulations governing migratory birds, and [comments](#) on the interim final rule to revise rulemaking procedures to implement Executive Order 13891 entitled "Promoting the Rule of Law Through Improved Agency Guidance Documents."

What We're Reading & Tracking This Month

We are wrapping up the design and production on our 2020 annual report. Please take a moment and [update your mailing address](#) if you have recently moved. We'll be mailing hard copies to all our members in the new year!

Barry Lopez, an author and passionate traveler, [passed away](#) in December. His fiction and non-fiction works "embraced landscapes and literature with humanitarian, environmental and spiritual sensibilities that some critics likened to those of Thoreau and John Muir." Mr. Lopez lived in the Arctic for five years and penned the book *Arctic Dreams*, which won the National Book Award. He is a familiar writer to many NPS readers and spoke at an Association of National Park Rangers Rendezvous in the 1980s.

A recent *New York Times* piece explores the social life of forests. An old-growth forest is described as "a vast, ancient and intricate society." There is conflict, negotiation, reciprocity and perhaps even selflessness. The trees seem to communicate through a network of fungi. Read more [here](#).

President-Elect Joe Biden must tackle the Interior Department's oil and gas leasing programs, a huge issue for advocates of the protection of our national parks, public lands, and environment. During the campaign, Biden's platform explicitly proposed "banning new oil and gas permitting on the public lands and waters." What happens next? Read more in [this article](#) from *American Prospect*.