



THIS LAND IS OUR LAND

**RESTORING THE NATIONAL PARK
SERVICE AND OUR NATIONAL PARKS:
RECOMMENDATIONS FROM
THE COALITION TO PROTECT AMERICA'S NATIONAL PARKS**



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RESTORING THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE AND OUR NATIONAL PARKS: RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE COALITION TO PROTECT AMERICA'S NATIONAL PARKS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Coalition to Protect America's National Parks (Coalition) is a non-profit organization composed of more than 1,900 retired, former and current employees of the National Park Service (NPS or Service), who collectively have nearly 40,000 years of experience managing and protecting national parks. We believe that our parks and public lands represent the very best of America, and advocate for their protection. Coalition members strive to apply their credibility and integrity by supporting the NPS mission and its employees, and by speaking out for national park solutions that uphold the law and apply sound science. A little over a hundred years ago, Congress created the NPS to manage the areas it had set aside as our national parks, where the Service was directed to "conserve the scenery and the wild life therein and to provide for their enjoyment for future generations." The NPS has successfully fulfilled its mission through two world wars; through times of social turmoil that threatened to tear the country apart when the rights of its citizens were denied; through a cold war; up to the present when terrorism confronts us both here and abroad.



Cape Hatteras National Seashore

Despite these challenges, a dedicated group of men and women committed themselves, often for their entire careers, to caring for and preserving the significant resources of our nation found in our national parks, and through the Service's programs working with state, local and tribal governments. This work is frequently done without sufficient resources to do the job properly, and with little departmental or public recognition. Their efforts have been complimented by many ordinary citizens, who advocate for the parks' preservation, or who volunteer their time, so that millions of Americans can continue to enjoy our national parks each year.

While our national parks have remained popular, the mission of the NPS has been politicized over the past four years and its employees have been made pawns in the process. This assault

commenced literally the day after the inauguration in 2017 when the president personally called the acting director of NPS to have him produce evidence that would support the false claim that the president's inauguration had been the most attended in American history. The politicization of our national parks continued throughout the administration's term up to the 2020 election year where numerous events were held at national park sites to support the reelection efforts of the president. The dedicated employees of the NPS have been put in the difficult position of supporting these political park events, making it nearly impossible for them to avoid a violation of the Hatch Act and government ethics rules.

Nowhere has the disregard for employees been more obvious than in the administration's refusal to disclose the number of employees infected with the Covid-19 virus and the parks in which they work, or its requirement that our national parks reopen without adequately protecting the health and safety of park employees from visitors who disregard public health directives.

"It is time to restore the National Park Service to the proud agency it has been for over a century and to allow our national parks to be able to fulfill the mission set by Congress so that these nationally significant natural, historic, and cultural resources can continue to be enjoyed by millions of visitors each year."

The disdain for the NPS mission and its employees also was visible with the administration's decision to leave the agency rudderless by choosing not to nominate and have confirmed by the Senate a director for the NPS for the entire first term of the administration – something that has never happened in the over hundred-year history of the NPS. Many senior leadership and superintendent positions remained vacant throughout the past four years, leaving NPS employees with no idea who was in charge, or how long acting leaders would be in place. Additionally, NPS employees were muzzled from speaking with members of Congress and the general public and efforts to obtain agency information by the public were ignored or delayed by months.

This neglect of the NPS was demonstrated in the budgets the administration submitted to Congress during the past four years. Each year from the FY 2018 budget through the pending FY 2021 budget, the administration has called for reductions of between \$400 million to \$581 million. Stagnant budgets over the past decade already had resulted in reduced hours of park operations, more deferred maintenance, inadequate staffing resulting in fewer visitor services, and decreasing morale among employees. Fortunately, Congress rejected the administration's budget recommendations each year and allowed the parks to slowly rebuild.

It remains to be seen what impact some of the administration's actions will have on our national parks as revised regulations affecting endangered species, migratory birds, clean air and clean water, along with a host of others are still tied up in litigation. The one thing that has spared the national parks from further degradation is the administration's long losing streak in the courts where the decisions outlined continued violations of the Constitution or laws passed by Congress. It is time to restore the National Park Service to the proud agency it has been for over a century and to allow our national parks to be able to fulfill the mission set by Congress so that these nationally significant natural, historic, and cultural resources can continue to be enjoyed by millions of visitors each year.



Yellowstone National Park

To achieve this restoration, the Coalition has identified five specific areas for consideration to carry out this change in direction for our national parks:

- 1. NPS Leadership and Organization**
- 2. Resource Stewardship**
- 3. Visitor Experience**
- 4. Employee Support**
- 5. Special Attention Items**

These areas, along with recommendations for restoring the NPS, are discussed further below. The Coalition remains committed to working with the new administration to implement these recommendations in order to restore the agency's mission and to ensure its employees are supported with strong leadership and a rededication to the NPS mission that has been sorely missing during the past four years.

NPS LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATION

The NPS is steward of the nation's most important natural, cultural and historic resources. The agency must have fully qualified, experienced, Senate-confirmed leadership, as required by law. In addition, the Department of the Interior's organizational structure, of which the NPS is a part, must be re-aligned to remove unnecessary and redundant layers of bureaucracy designed to reduce NPS effectiveness. Further, leadership positions for associate and assistant directors, superintendents, and program managers must be prioritized for hiring so that all staff have clear leadership support and direction.

Recommendations:

Restore effective leadership within the NPS by promptly nominating a director for Senate confirmation, and by prioritizing the filling of senior vacancies, including superintendent and program manager positions.

For the first time in its history, the NPS has been without a director for an entire term of presidential administration. Several members of the senior leadership within the agency consisting of associate and assistant directors, regional directors, and superintendents have been vacant for months while individuals perform acting assignments for long tenures. The administration should prioritize filling each of the vacant senior leadership positions within the first six months of the new administration and commit to filling new vacancies within 120 days whenever they occur. Individuals nominated for these positions should have experience in public resource management, and a clear commitment to and understanding of the mission and purpose of the NPS and the National Park System, and the laws, regulations and policies that guide the agency and direct its program responsibilities. The NPS director should be an individual who possesses the skills and experience as required by P.L. 104-333, who is committed to the NPS mission, who will be the public face of the Service representing and advocating for the NPS and its programs in the new administration, before Congress and the American people, as well as someone who will be a leader of and role model for the NPS workforce.

Restore the previous NPS regional structure and deliver a clear message to all employees about their supervisory reporting requirements.

The regional structure created by the last administration increased the number of NPS regions from seven to twelve. Although current regional directors remained in their original locations, park superintendents were required to report to the newly established regional directors. This new reporting structure was overlain with field special assistants who came from various Department of the Interior bureaus that report directly to the secretary and who, in most cases, had no NPS experience or little knowledge of NPS laws, regulations, and policies. This structure has created chaos within the NPS with many employees uncertain to whom they report and unsure of whether their decisions can, or will be undermined by political appointees lacking knowledge of NPS laws, regulations, and policy. This structure also effects public confidence in

NPS decisions and makes it difficult for partner organizations and the public in general to know where NPS decisions are made and where the responsibility for such decisions lies. To have effective administration, the NPS needs a clear structure that employees, and the public, understand. NPS employees need to know to whom they are responsible in their daily work. The new administration must eliminate the political field special assistants, restore the seven previous NPS regions, fill leadership vacancies promptly, and ensure all NPS employees know to whom they report on a daily basis.

Address a demoralized NPS workforce.

Low employee morale has been a concern for many years, primarily brought on by reduced resources both in personnel and funds to manage parks and NPS programs. The last four years have only exacerbated the situation with the politicization of decision-making and leadership. The new administration will inherit a frustrated, demoralized NPS workforce and must commit to addressing the situation by appointing experienced and knowledgeable leadership in a timely manner who are committed to listening to employee concerns and by creating a plan for improvement within six months after taking office.

Establish a task force to create a plan for diversifying the NPS workforce.

Efforts to diversify the NPS workforce at all levels have been underway for many years. The new administration must commit to creating a plan that will build on previous efforts to diversify employees at all levels of the NPS. That plan needs to look at all obstacles that have hindered previous efforts from being successful, including career ladders; the myriad of hiring rules and regulations that make it difficult to bring new people into the NPS; housing shortages and the high cost of living in many of the urban areas where national parks exist; as well as incentives such as signing bonuses and relocation costs for initial appointments.

Establish a task force to look at needed reforms for the U.S. Park Police and recommit to the holistic mission of NPS law enforcement rangers.

From the death of an unarmed individual by the U.S. Park Police along the George Washington Memorial Parkway over three years ago, to the involvement of the Park Police along Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C. during demonstrations involving a photo opportunity for the president in his reelection campaign, the mission and the performance of the Park Police has come under question by many individuals, including members of Congress. The new administration needs to reexamine the role and function of the Park Police and set clear and transparent policies that align the mission, values, and practices of the Park Police as an organization that protects park lands and ensures that visitors have a safe and enjoyable experience. The traditional role of NPS law enforcement rangers also has been questioned in this last administration, with some expressing a desire that the responsibilities of this category of rangers be narrowed to only law enforcement functions at a time when NPS staffing continues to suffer and when park law enforcement rangers are needed more than ever as resource educators (the first level of enforcement) and park ambassadors. The new administration needs to recommit itself to identifying actions that will guide NPS law enforcement rangers to more effectively perform the full range of duties needed to ensure that visitors are fully informed and have safe and enjoyable park experiences.

Include in the new administration's first budget request to Congress a provision for two-year availability of funding for the Operations of the National Park System (ONPS) and the National Recreation and Preservation (NR&P) accounts for each FY.

In order to allow park superintendents to provide more effective leadership through consistent budget planning, and to provide predictability to park staff and the public they serve, two-year funding availability of annual appropriations is strongly needed. Allowing two-year availability of funding for the ONPS and NR&P accounts will allow NPS to manage available resources more efficiently, and to adjust for any disruptions in operations that impact parks in a given fiscal year such as natural disasters or unforeseen expenses. This authority is consistent with the period of availability of the operating funds at other land management bureaus within the Department of the Interior.



Canyonlands National Park

RESOURCE STEWARDSHIP

Congress has charged the National Park Service with managing every unit of the National Park System “in such manner, and by such means, as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” The NPS faces enormous challenges in fulfilling this mission, from climate change, to invasive species, to impacts from excessive visitor use. The NPS must be provided with the support and necessary resources to achieve this critical work.

Recommendations:

Recommit to the resource protection mission of the NPS by providing funding for a second natural resource challenge of an additional \$122.5 million over the next five years with an emphasis on the value of large landscape protection and wildlife corridors.

Building from the Natural Resource Challenge funded by Congress 20 years ago, the national parks have built a rich legacy of science-based conservation projects and activities. They have included a sweeping array of initiatives ranging from reintroducing keystone species such as elk and wolves, to restoring tens of thousands of acres of degraded critical habitat including majestic redwoods and wetlands, and to installing hundreds of miles of feral animal fencing that protect critically endangered plants and animals. Through leadership, science, creativity, and funding, our parks have been able to make significant headway with some of their most challenging resource issues. However, just as our park roads, visitor centers, and trails need constant upkeep, our recovering resources also require ongoing maintenance and additional resource efforts to keep them healthy. If new actions are not implemented, these precious areas run the risk of slipping back to degraded systems once again. The nationwide commitments to these legacy projects and critical resource issues continue to expand every year, while the NPS’ capacity continues to erode, leaving natural resource managers unable to fulfill their commitments to maintain and protect America’s most beloved places. The NPS has made a promise to the American public to take care of these protected sites, and the parks need help in doing so.

Reestablish the NPS as a global leader in climate change by restoring funding for a robust NPS Climate Change Response Program (CCRP) and by identifying parks most likely to be impacted.

Research from national park areas shows that climate change is melting snowpack and glaciers, shifting the ranges of plants and animals, altering wildfire patterns, raising sea levels, and causing other impacts. Continued climate change threatens the health and functioning of plant and animal species, ecosystems, cultural sites, and infrastructure in national parks. Analyses of vulnerability to climate change exist for a very limited set of resources in fewer than half of the national park units in the National Park System. Funding for the CCRP would: (1) support the Service’s comprehensive efforts to provide scalable analyses to managers on the implications of environmental change for national park resources from the landscape-level to park-level; and (2) fund high-priority projects in parks designed to add resilience, adaptation and

protection for some of the most vulnerable natural and cultural resources within the National Park System. All national parks are experiencing the effects of climate change, with particular vulnerability among parks at high elevations, high latitudes, in arid lands, or coastal areas. The requested funding of \$6 million would support major project funding and the preparation of park assessments of resource vulnerabilities to environmental change.

Recommit to the NPS role in the international arena of parks and protected areas including World Heritage Sites.

The United States was a leader in developing the World Heritage Convention in 1972. Today the NPS oversees the process to designate new sites in the United States for inscription on the World Heritage list and also coordinates sharing of international best practices for parks and protected areas. Funding should be restored and increased for the Office of International Affairs to meet its mission in these two critical areas.

Invest in a cultural resource challenge with a total of \$200 million requested over the next five years to help restore cultural resource staffing and preservation efforts that have been lost over the last decade.

Almost two-thirds of our national parks, such as Gettysburg, San Antonio Missions, Valley Forge, the Frederick Douglass Home, and Little Bighorn, to name just a few, were designated specifically to preserve the nation's cultural heritage. However, the needs of these national parks, as well as regional preservation offices, and many cultural resource partnership programs, have been unmet over the last decade as funding for cultural resource programs within the NPS has been severely reduced. The goal of a cultural resource challenge is to raise public awareness of the entire breadth of the NPS' mission, including the important work in historic preservation and cultural resource management. The challenge encompasses not only park stewardship needs but also support for NPS partnership programs with the states and tribes, including preservation assistance envisioned by the Historic Preservation Fund.

Provide increased funding for wildland and structural fire programs to ensure the integrity of park natural and cultural resources.

The NPS is now facing increased and more intense wildfires in units across the western United States. California alone had over 4 million acres scorched with massive fires in 2020, affecting many national parks including Yosemite, Sequoia, and Kings Canyon. Climate change has lengthened the fire season and the severity and intensity of wildfire. Structural fire programs, in turn, are woefully understaffed, under equipped, and leave employees and visitors with inadequate protection. Many parks do not meet basic structural fire protection standards. The NPS needs an infusion of leadership and funds to meet the increased challenges they are now facing in these programs. Increases in staffing for wildland fire are needed for preventive actions such as controlled burns and defensible space, and also for large-scale suppression activities. Fire plans, in parks across the nation, need to be reviewed to ensure visitor and employee safety, and modified to meet the demands of unprecedented fire activity caused by previous inaction and climate change. (Note this recommendation affects both the resource stewardship and visitor services accounts of the NPS budget).

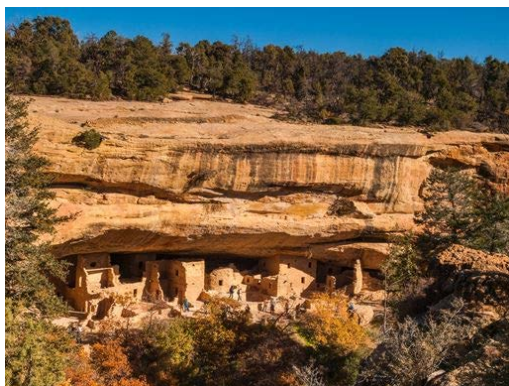
Establish a plan to ensure that full funding of the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) will go to the highest-priority land acquisition needs.

Now that full funding of the LWCF has been made permanent in law, criteria should be established and made available to the public that the NPS will use in selecting land acquisition projects. Consistent with recommendation #10 below, develop a five-year priority list for acquiring existing non-federal mineral rights in parks using LWCF funding. Land and mineral rights acquisition decisions should be based on merit, consistent with the purposes for which these funds were appropriated, and not on politics. Additionally, the public should be fully informed following the allocation and expenditure of funds.



Grand Teton National Park

Create a task force to identify potential new natural, cultural, or historical sites to be added to the park system and prioritize the transmittal of legislation to Congress to establish these areas with an emphasis on people, places, and stories that reflect the diversity of our country.



Canyon de Chelly National Monument

In its continuing effort to remain relevant to the diverse people and culture of our nation, the national parks need to ensure that their stories are reflected in our parks. In recent years, the NPS has completed several theme studies, including those for Latino Heritage, Civil Rights and Reconstruction, Asian American and Pacific Islanders, Japanese Americans, and LGBTQ history, that could form the basis for identifying individuals and sites that could be added to the national park system in order to make it more representative of the diversity of America. To help with this process, a task force should be created to offer expert scientific and scholarly advice for evaluating natural and cultural resources consistent with NPS standards, and to recommend individuals and

sites for which legislation is developed and transmitted to Congress for the establishment of new park units in the new administration.

Submit to Congress and work for enactment of National Heritage Area program legislation.

For over two decades, the NPS has supported legislation to authorize a foundation for the National Heritage Area (NHA) program. The NPS 21st Century Report recommended that a formal Heritage Areas program should be established to support partnerships among communities, so that the full scope of the American experience is revealed. The National Park System Advisory Board in 2006 followed up with a report that detailed the benefits of the NHA approach to conserving nationally important living landscapes and cultures, which adds to the

diversity of the stories the NPS tells. The continued popularity of and Congressional support for the program demonstrates the need for a defined legislative policy framework and budget.

Reinstate Director's Order 100, Resource Stewardship for the 21st Century.

This Director's Order (Order) was rescinded by this last administration on August 16, 2017, because of content related to climate change. The intent of the Order was to provide needed guidance to NPS superintendents and resource managers because of unprecedented resource challenges parks are facing from climate change and mass extinction of species. The Order states "The National Park System and related areas face environmental and social changes that are increasingly widespread, complex, accelerating, and uncertain. Addressing these challenges requires updates of NPS policy to reflect the complexity of decisions needed for resource stewardship. This Order is intended to guide the Service in taking the necessary actions to support resource stewardship to fulfill its mission in the 21st century." The Order provides critical guidance for developing resilience in park ecosystems, developing adaptation and mitigation strategies for climate change, and maintaining ecological integrity. The Order also reaffirms the intent of Congress to preserve resource integrity and conduct resource stewardship.

Proactively protect park resources and values from adverse impacts associated with federal oil and gas leasing and development on park lands (under NPS management), as well as on public lands adjacent to parks (under management by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM)).

- **Actively support and enforce the existing NPS "9b" regulations (36 CFR Part 9 Subpart B), revised in 2016, pertaining to non-federal oil and gas rights on park lands.** Develop a 5-year priority list for acquiring existing non-federal mineral rights in parks using LWCF funding. Give priority to parks under threat or experiencing documented impacts to resources and values from exploration and/or development.
- **Support legislation, such as S. 4223, the Leasing Market Efficiency Act, from the 116th Congress, to reform BLM oil and gas leasing practices, improving both efficiency and transparency.** S. 4223 would end BLM's inefficient policy of offering low-cost, non-competitive leases for parcels with low potential for oil and gas production.
- **Work collaboratively with BLM to establish a mutually acceptable interagency programmatic agreement to guide planning and management of BLM's oil and gas leasing within ten miles of any unit of the National Park System.** Provisions of the agreement should be incorporated into a major revision of BLM Instruction Memorandum (IM) # 2018-034 Updating Oil and Gas Leasing reform, which overturned IM # 2010-117, Oil and Gas Leasing Reform - Land Use Planning and Lease Parcel Reviews. Key elements include consolidating quarterly lease sales into one annual opportunity; allowing time for BLM to prepare a fully adequate National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) document on each lease sale opportunity with 30 days minimum for public comment; including in the NEPA document analysis of potential impacts to any NPS unit within a ten-mile radius of the proposed lease; establishing a minimum five- to ten-mile

No-Surface- Occupancy stipulation for all leases adjacent to parks; and requiring updating of existing Resource Management Plans, EA/EIS documents, or other planning or compliance documents that do not consider the potential impacts of all current extraction technologies.

Establish a cooperative agreement with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) establishing early notification and coordination requirements with NPS regarding proposed development of electricity, natural gas, and oil transmission facilities through or within units of the National Park System.

As part of this agreement, develop and annually update an inventory (list) of pending requests for development of such facilities. Based on such information, determine if NPS or FERC need further legislative authority to minimize and otherwise address impacts of such facilities to park resources and values.

Seek rescission of the following rules under the Congressional Review Act:

- **Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) Final Rule on NEPA, Issued July 16, 2020.** NEPA, one of our nation's preeminent environmental laws, requires federal agencies to evaluate the potential environmental impacts of its proposed actions. CEQ issued a final rule substantially weakening the procedural requirements for how agencies prepare environmental analyses under NEPA. The new rule eliminates the requirement for public review and comment in many cases; drastically reduces requirements for analysis of potential effects; and places substantial limits on both the time allowed for the process, and on the length of the final compliance document. This will inevitably lead to dangerously inadequate environmental analyses and a great loss of public transparency. The 2020 rule should be rescinded and the longstanding prior NEPA requirements should be reinstated.
- **NPS Final Rule: Hunting and Trapping in National Preserves in Alaska, Issued June 9, 2020.** This rule overturned NPS regulations, last codified in 2016, that prohibited egregious predator hunting methods, such as baiting bears and coyotes with artificial light and human food, and taking females and young from dens. These practices have been in conflict with NPS policies under the NPS Organic Act and the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, which are intended to preserve the natural abundance and diversity of native species even where hunting is mandated, such as in Alaska's national preserves. The 2020 rule should be rescinded; and the 2016 rule reinstated.
- **NPS Final Rule: NPS Jurisdiction in Alaska (the "Sturgeon Rule"), Issued November 16, 2020.** In *Sturgeon v. Frost* (139 S. Ct. 1066, March 26, 2019), the Supreme Court held that the NPS could not enforce a system-wide regulation prohibiting the operation of a hovercraft on part of the Nation River that flows through the Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve (Preserve) based on the statutory principle of state-ownership of submerged lands under navigable waters. While that decision was specific to the Preserve, for many other submerged lands in federally managed areas in Alaska,

there is longstanding disagreement between state and federal agencies regarding what constitutes “navigability” for determining title. By not acknowledging this in the rulemaking, NPS appears to be making a blanket concession that the state has jurisdiction over thousands of miles of rivers and streams within National Park System units in Alaska. And because rivers and streams function as the “roads and trails” in many National Park System units in Alaska, the rule will substantially weaken NPS’s ability to manage a host of recreational and commercial activities occurring on park lands under NPS jurisdiction. The 2020 rule should be rescinded and replaced with one applicable specifically to the Nation River, consistent with the Supreme Court ruling; and all other unconfirmed claims of state ownership of submerged lands in Alaska should be determined in accordance with the processes mandated under 43 U.S.C. § 1745.

- **NPS Proposed Rule on Electric Bikes, Issued April 8, 2020. Final rule pending; publication date TBD.** This draft rule should be suspended or rescinded. It was prepared without the full review of potential impacts on park values and visitor use mandated by NPS Management Policies 8.1.2 for proposed new uses because e-bikes were found to be a preexisting use in 380+ parks. However, that “preexisting use” was authorized solely via Secretarial Order in 2019, absent any impact review and in defiance of policy and regulation existing at the time, thus sidestepping the protective intent of those processes.
- **NPS Proposed Rule: Changes to the regulations governing the listing of properties in the National Register of Historic Places, Issued – March 1, 2019. Final rule pending; publication date TBD.** The National Register serves as the nation’s official list of historic places deemed worthy of preservation. On March 1, 2019, several adverse regulatory changes were proposed to the National Register process without the necessary consultation with state and local authorities, and with Native American tribes. One change allows a federal agency to put a nomination of its property on hold and keep it from even being considered for listing. In another change, owner objection provisions to a listing on the National Register also would be based on the size of the property, instead of ownership of the property. These revisions are clearly inconsistent with the intent of Congress in establishing the National Register and should be repealed if finalized.
- **NPS Proposed Rule: Commercial Visitor Services – Concession Contracts, Issued – July 20, 2020. Final rule pending; publication date TBD.** At the end of this last administration, new concessions regulations were promulgated with many of them weighted in the financial favor of concessioners to the detriment of the Service, the visiting public, and the United States taxpayers. These regulations need to be withdrawn either through the Congressional Review Act process, or with revisions proposed by the new administration in order to return to the intent of Congress under the 1998 Concessions Management Improvement Act.

Update the NPS Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) website to allow uploading of comment documents to make the website more user friendly and consistent with other federal agency's public comment websites, and require the use of the PEPC website among all parks and program offices.

The NPS site for submitting comments on a number of proposed NPS actions, such as general management planning documents, and draft regulations, is cumbersome for the public to use and not up to the standards of public comment sites for other land management agencies. Most other agencies allow individuals to upload separate comment documents; however, the NPS site mandates a strict 10,000-word limit on comments, which must be copied and pasted into an on-line form that eliminates much of the formatting integral to the organization of the original document; and which precludes the submission of attached information documents relevant to the proposed action. NPS should update PEPC to allow commenters to upload documents (letters, reports, maps, etc.) for on-line submission. This is particularly important when the proposed actions are complex or controversial in nature; and merit a more detailed comment letter or attached information that is not constrained by an arbitrary word limit. Further, the NPS should require all parks and program offices to use the PEPC website as the NPS' first line of communication on park projects and regulation reviews. This will ensure a definitive place for the public to review and comment on major NPS actions.



Manzanar National Historic Site

VISITOR EXPERIENCE

Visitors to every unit of the National Park System deserve world-class service, which can only be provided with adequate, highly trained staff and facilities.

Recommendations:

Build upon previous efforts to increase diversity of park visitors and their access to parks through a plan to make parks better known to the entirety of the American public and to provide transportation and other means to allow them access.

To ensure all communities know about and have access to the national parks, NPS needs to understand better the barriers that currently exist and to find ways to address those barriers. The NPS needs to recommit to previous programs, such as Every Kid Outdoors program for fourth-grade students, and include funding in NPS budgets for transportation programs that bring individuals from underrepresented communities to the national park sites close to their homes. These efforts need to be complimented by additional efforts to diversify the NPS workforce to have it reflect the diversity of the country and, in turn, make its employees welcoming to all Americans.

Create a group within NPS to prioritize projects for implementation of the Great Americans Outdoors Act deferred maintenance program and have them serve as a liaison to the Department of the Interior, while reporting on progress on a regular basis.

Rebuild the DOI Task Force established in 2009 that successfully implemented the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, and fill the task force primarily with career staff of the agencies, instead of political appointees.

Send Congress legislation and work for the implementation of a permanent reauthorization of the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA).

The NPS estimates it will receive over \$340 million in FY 2021 from recreational fees charged to visitors to the national parks. These fees are a critical supplement to annual appropriations that gives the Service the ability to extend that extra measure of excellence to its work as Congress intended when it created the program. To accomplish this, these annual recreational fees should not be used by NPS in lieu of annual appropriations. Many of the fees collected are dedicated to address the NPS' deferred maintenance backlog, while others enhance park visitor services and interpretation programs that provide better park experiences. For too long, the FLREA program's authorization has been extended on a year-by-year basis. The program has proven its importance to the NPS and other public land management agencies and it deserves to be permanently established in law in order to provide certainty to the Service and other land management agencies as they carry out their programs into the future.

Provide a budget to Congress with a goal of adding 500 employees in each of the next five fiscal years to partially restore the NPS park and program office staff lost over the last decade.

National parks still suffer from significant reductions in staffing over the past decade due to decreased annual appropriations and parks having to absorb fixed costs many of those years. To put this in perspective, appropriations of \$3.37 billion provided by Congress for the NPS in FY 2020 was the first time the FY 2009 appropriation was exceeded in ten fiscal years. This occurred at the same time inflation had increased by 20.25%, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' consumer price index. The NPS would need \$3.93 billion in appropriations in FY 2021 just to stay even with inflation. NPS appropriations in FY 2009 supported 24,444 staff, while the level of NPS staff had fallen to 20,967 in FY 2019 – a loss of 3,477 employees over the past decade. The administration needs to commit to providing increased funding for the Service so that staffing levels can be increased by at least 500 FTE each year for the next five fiscal years to partially restore the lost staff capacity in several parks, to allow new parks established by Congress and by presidential proclamation to provide basic public services, and to allow regional and program offices to restore positions to assist parks with services that do not exist at the park level.

Increase the far-less-than-sufficient \$750,000 provided to newly established park units to an amount that makes their opening to visitors feasible, and send to Congress a budget that reflects this new commitment while also including targeted funding for parks that have experienced increased visitation.

For several years, it has been the policy of NPS to make available only \$750,000 to begin planning for new parks established by Congress or through presidential proclamation. Often this minimum amount continues for several years, hindering parks from being open to the public and frustrating members of Congress when parks they labored to create remain delayed due to the lack of staffing and even minimal facilities for park operations. Similarly, budgets need to be adjusted for parks whose visitation increases dramatically to ensure those parks can meet the needs of the public through appropriate staffing and resources.



Cesar E. Chavez National Monument

Reaffirm the previous commitment to the safety of park facilities by increasing funding for structural fire programs as well as wildland fire activities throughout the service.

(See recommendation #5, above, under Resource Stewardship).

EMPLOYEE SUPPORT

The employees of the National Park Service are some of the most dedicated public servants in all of government. However, to perform well and thrive, they must have adequate housing, administrative support, training, and career paths.

Recommendations:

Direct the NPS Human Resources Office to hold listening sessions that identify barriers to career progression and achievement of career goals within NPS and have the office establish a plan within six months of the new administration to address those barriers.

Individuals entering the NPS workforce today have different career expectations than people who have been in the service for a number of years. Further, those with several years of NPS experience find their careers stagnating as they lack the ability to get needed training to move ahead. The new administration presents an opportunity to review how careers develop within the Service and to find ways to help employees advance in their careers. Listening sessions can begin this process and help lead to a plan for new and creative paths of career development that are more responsive to employee expectations and the work environment the country is experiencing in the 21st Century.

Issue a directive from the leadership of NPS to reform the hiring process to make it more responsive to parks and programs with a goal of hiring for positions within two months of a vacancy.

Several efforts have been made over the past two decades to expedite the hiring process, and to allow parks and program offices to make job offers to employees that meet their needs. Unfortunately, most of those efforts have failed, and hiring continues to take too long, fails to attract candidates from diverse communities, and many times results in veterans and other preference individuals without the correct skill set being placed at the top of hiring lists. Some of this is a result of preference laws passed by Congress, but it also is a result of hiring practices and policies that are inappropriate for the parks or program offices involved. The new administration needs to commit to eliminating the hiring practices that have produced such poor results for way too long.

Gather input from park contracting managers and create a plan for reforming the contracting functions of NPS to make them less cumbersome and responsive to park and program needs.

In order to bring the contracting functions of the NPS up to date, listening sessions should be conducted among park contracting managers at the park, regional, and Washington levels to determine changes that are needed to make the program more responsive to park needs.



Tidepool Monitoring

Conduct an evaluation of the existing employee development and training programs and based on its findings, establish a new strategic plan for these programs that address employee needs on a consistent basis.

NPS development and training programs are often the first to be reduced or eliminated when budgets are tight. This leads to park and program employees going years without adequate training to remain current with their responsibilities, while also hindering their efforts to advance in their careers.

Efforts need to be made to stop this cycle through an evaluation of existing development and training programs and by committing to more consistent opportunities for all NPS employees by allocating at least 1% of the NPS OPNS budget for employee development and training needs.

Explore whether NPS needs additional authority to select and hire long-term seasonal employees in a timely manner and seek that authority from Congress, if needed.

The current regulations governing seasonal employment in national parks are outdated and do not recognize the fact that parks are often open for more months each year than in the past, resulting in parks needing seasonal employees for periods of time that exceed those allowed under the regulations. Further, recent Office of Personnel Management (OPM) interpretations of seasonal employment have disallowed individuals holding more than one seasonal assignment within a year. If changes to OPM's interpretation of seasonal employment are unavailable, the NPS needs to work with Congress to provide new authority that would allow longer or different periods of seasonal employment that are responsive to the on-the-ground realities faced by parks.

Commit to providing additional resources for employee housing needs in each of the next four fiscal years.

Providing for housing needs of park employees has been a long-standing issue within the NPS, especially in remote parks that lack adequate and affordable housing. This issue has also been one of the impediments to hiring seasonal staff, with many parks lacking sufficient housing to meet their seasonal needs. The problem has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 virus and the Center for Disease Control's guidelines. The new administration needs to commit to increasing funding for employee housing consistent with identified needs from the parks.



Zion National Park

Ensure NPS has the capacity to respond to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests consistent with the law.

FOIA requests from the public have been delayed or ignored by the NPS, and by the Department of the Interior, contrary to what is required by law. The NPS often acknowledges that responses will be delayed due to the lack of staff capacity, which often means that the intent of the law is undermined due to a lack of timeliness. FOIA was intended to hold federal agencies responsible to the American public and to have the agencies be transparent in their decision-making processes and in the expenditure of federal funds. The NPS needs to commit to providing sufficient capacity within the bureau so that its actions under FOIA are consistent with the law.

Conduct a review of the need for additional staff capacity in the NPS regional offices.

Over the past decade, most NPS regional offices lost half of their FTEs, which impacted those office's ability to assist parks with services that did not exist at the park level. The review needs to identify the number of FTEs lost over the past decade, the functions performed by the lost staff, an examination of how the parks made up for the lost regional services, and recommendations for the best ways to address those lost services in the future.



Muir Woods National Monument

SPECIAL ATTENTION ITEMS

The Coalition believes the following additional items warrant special attention from the new administration. Some of these recommendations can be implemented within the NPS, while others will require NPS participation in support of other agencies to ensure their implementation.

Recommendations:

Explore ways NPS retirees can contribute to the work of a new administration by mentoring current employees.

Retirees could be part of various task forces and committees that may be established during the transition period. As federal retirees they could be brought in as Volunteers in Parks or under hiring authorities that allow retirees to compete non-competitively. The new administration needs to explore a variety of opportunities for use of the knowledge and experience of NPS retirees that may benefit new and current employees in undertaking their work.

Determine if revisions are needed in law or regulations governing the use of park lands for partisan political purposes and seek those changes, if needed.

This last administration used national park lands for several events to promote the president's reelection efforts, including the Lincoln Memorial, the National Mall and Memorial Parks, the White House, the Lincoln Home National Historic Site, and Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine. The decisions by political appointees to use park lands for partisan purposes demonstrated a disregard for the mandates of the Hatch Act and basic governmental ethics rules, put NPS employees in the difficult position of supporting these political park events, and made it nearly impossible for them to avoid a violation of federal laws and ethics rules. NPS employees or any other federal employees should never be placed in such situations again. Any laws or regulations affecting the use of park lands for partisan political purposes need to be clarified so that parks remain open and available to the public as Congress intended and that NPS employees do not violate any applicable laws or ethics rules.

Work with OPM on strengthening, through the establishment of penalties, the Federal Vacancies Reform Act to ensure acting assignments do not extend beyond 120 days consistent with the law's intent.

This last administration disregarded the time limit established in the Vacancies Act to install individuals well beyond the period allowed by law for the acting director and other vacancies throughout the Service, as well as the department. This disregard of the law resulted in confusion in the NPS among employees and resulted in many NPS decisions being made by the secretary of the interior or his staff. This practice needs to stop with appropriate sanctions or penalties to ensure compliance with the law.

Establish a dialogue through the secretary of the interior with the White House about the importance of quickly nominating and seeking confirmation of federal judges as well as vacancies in the Merit Systems Protection Board.

A good deal of environmental law emanates from federal court decisions, making it critical for the administration to fill judicial vacancies. This is especially important to reverse the damage done to the federal judiciary in this last administration where many young, unqualified, and right-leaning individuals, were confirmed by the Senate at an unprecedented rate. These judges have the ability to make bad environmental law decisions for decades to come as they roll back environmental protections and regulations designed to preserve the nation's natural resources and address the ever-increasing causes and impacts of climate change including the use of fossil fuels. The new administration needs immediately to begin the process of vetting and nominating qualified candidates to fill federal judicial vacancies at every level. Making this a priority will have a large impact on environmental law for many years into the future. In a similar manner, the Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) has been dysfunctional over the last four years due to a lack of appointees to the board. This renders the board ineffectual in making decisions involving the federal workforce and demonstrates the lack of regard for federal employees. The new administration needs to make it a priority to vet and nominate qualified board members to fill the MSPB board vacancies.

Work with other agencies, as appropriate, as well as the new administration to inventory and seek regulatory rollbacks of this last administration that are not available for Congressional Review Act action, primarily through various Environmental Protection Agency programs such as clean air & water, migratory bird treaty regulations, etc.

This last administration made it a priority to revise or eliminate a number of regulations from various agencies that impact the national parks' air, water, wildlife, and its natural, historic, and cultural resources. These actions need to be reversed, either through Congress via the Congressional Review Act, through funding prohibitions, or through the regulatory process, as appropriate. The NPS needs to be an active partner in these agencies' actions providing detailed impact information and scientific analysis that will lead to better protection of the resources of our national parks



Rocky Mountain National Park