

TESTIMONY OF  
JASON RANO  
VICE PRESIDENT, GOVERNMENT RELATIONS  
NATIONAL PARK FOUNDATION

Before U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources

March 6, 2017

On “Exploring Innovative Solutions to Reduce the Department of Interior’s  
Maintenance Backlog”

Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Grijalva, and Members of the Committee, thank you for holding this hearing on “Exploring Innovative Solutions to Reduce the Department of Interior’s Maintenance Backlog” and inviting me to testify. My name is Jason Rano and I am the Vice President, Government Relations at the National Park Foundation, the Congressionally-chartered 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. As we celebrate our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary throughout this year, 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.

As you know, 2016 was the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the National Park Service. The National Park Service and National Park Foundation worked together hand in hand to take advantage of this ‘once in a lifetime’ opportunity to bring Americans of all ages, races, genders, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and political affiliations together to celebrate the Centennial and look forward to the second century of our national parks.

Thanks in part to these efforts 2016 saw a record level of visitation to our parks with 331 million visits. Just last week NPS released visitation numbers for 2017, which showed a similar number of visits to our 417 national parks. In fact, according to NPS, there were only 88,000 fewer visits to our parks in 2017 from the record setting number we saw in 2016.

That visitation has risen and maintained these levels is a testament to the love and importance of our national parks for Americans and people from around the world. Our national parks tell the story of America – including important and difficult stories in our history.

However, increased and sustained visitation to our national parks increases the already high strain on the facilities, roads, bridges, trails as well as hurting the visitor experience by creating traffic jams and not having enough staff to effectively interact with visitors.

Secretary Zinke and many members of this Committee have made tackling the nearly \$11.6 billion deferred maintenance backlog (as of September 30, 2017) a priority.

The focus of my testimony today is the role of philanthropy in tackling the maintenance backlog – basically what can philanthropy do and what is best done with federal dollars.

### **Centennial Campaign for America's National Parks**

As many of you are aware, one of the National Park Foundation's priorities over the several years has been to capitalize on the philanthropic enthusiasm for our parks as part of our Centennial Campaign for America's National Parks. Launched in February 2016 with an initial goal of \$350 million, the campaign has raised \$494 million to date towards a goal of \$500 million. We look forward to reaching this historic goal in the next several months.

This money has been spent with an eye toward improving the visitor experience through the rehabilitation and repair of trails and facilities, protecting and restoring wildlife habitat, connecting 4<sup>th</sup> graders and their families to parks, and supporting the work of youth and veterans corps to enhance our parks.

### Deferred Maintenance

The deferred maintenance backlog is a top priority for anyone who loves our national parks. As we see increased visitation we see increased strain on our parks – the facilities, the trails, the roads, the bridges, and the staff – all of which can have a negative impact on the visitor experience.

The National Park Foundation's Find Your Park/Encuentra Tu Parque campaign targeted the millennial generation as the next generation of park visitors, many of whom may be first time or infrequent visitors. Imagine being a first time visitor to a park and encountering closed bathrooms, washed out trails, and impassable roads. Needless to say that may impact whether you return to the park. And that doesn't just impact the park. It also plays a role in the financial health of the hundreds of gateway communities that rely on park visitors for their survival.

In 2016 the 331 million visits to our national parks resulted in \$18.4 billion in spending and supported 318,000 jobs.

### **Philanthropic Role in Deferred Maintenance**

As the conversation has increased around how to tackle the deferred maintenance backlog there has been more discussion about what role philanthropy can play in helping to tackle the deferred maintenance backlog. Philanthropy can play a role but it is limited to specific areas and often provides the margin of excellence. Philanthropy is not a panacea for deferred maintenance.

Through our fundraising campaign, the Foundation has found that donors are enthusiastic about projects in national parks that rehabilitate, repair, and build trails as well as

restoring historic buildings and Memorials – like the Lincoln Memorial and Washington Monument.

A few projects include:

- \$189,885 to date to support restoration and preservation of **Grand Canyon National Park's** historic Train Depot. This ongoing project will address accessibility to the Depot for people with disabilities and support structural repairs to the Depot's foundation.
- \$2 million in matching funds for a 2016 Centennial Challenge project to restore the Drakes Estero marine wilderness at **Point Reyes National Seashore**. NPF's partnership with Point Reyes National Seashore allowed NPS to clean up five miles of oyster racks and remove more than 500 tons of aquaculture debris.
- \$303,034 to **Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks** and Sequoia Parks Conservancy to fund the parks' 21st Century Conservation Service Corps since 2015. The Corps recruits disadvantaged young adults from Fresno and Los Angeles to work in the front and back country of Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks. Corps members gain a deep connection to the park and valuable training while completing projects such as wilderness trail maintenance, watering and care of restoration area plantings, interpretive services for visitors, boundary fencing assessment and repair, exotic vegetation removal, and more.
- \$26,000 for a 2015 Centennial Challenge project at **Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument**. NPF's support was matched with \$26,000 in federal funds to help the park establish an interdisciplinary Youth Conservation Corps crew. The crew consisted of nine underserved youth from Colorado Springs who developed skills in trail maintenance, trail design and safety features, and protecting and monitoring paleontological sites.
- \$150,000 to restore the helical staircase and replicate and install the original light fixtures at **Glacier National Park's** historic Many Glacier Hotel. In partnership with Glacier National Park Conservancy, NPF's funds helped restore the lobby to its historical significance.
- Over \$110,000 to support work on highly trafficked trails at **Glacier National Park**, including funding for a 21st Century Conservation Corps to reconstruct the park's iconic Hidden Lake Trail at Logan Pass in 2016.
- \$121,250 to support a five-year grant for **Yellowstone National Park's** Youth Conservation Corps in partnership with Groundwork USA. In August 2017, participants created 60 feet of buck and rail fence, built and installed 20 bumper guards, revitalized four campsites, maintained six miles of trail, revegetated 50 yards of steep mountain, and installed and maintained 47 bear proof boxes.
- \$18.5 million for the rehabilitation and restoration of and expanded public space at **The Lincoln Memorial**
- \$12.35 million for the full restoration of **Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial**
- \$5.3 million to renovate and rehabilitate the **Marine Corps War Memorial (Iwo Jima)**
- \$3 million to renovate the elevator at the **Washington Monument**

What we haven't found in our fundraising is donors who are willing to support roads, bridges, sewer systems, water pipes or other hard infrastructure. This type of maintenance is viewed by donors as inherently governmental responsibilities that should be funded by Congress.

Donors understand that our parks need their support but also understand that our parks belong to all of us and that the government has a responsibility to fund them. Donors prefer to provide that margin of excellence that NPS can't provide because of lack of funds or because it will take too long.

Another important note on the role of philanthropy's limitations is the overall dollars raised. NPF is very proud of our Centennial Campaign for America's National Parks, which upon its completion will have raised \$500 million over five years (including the quiet phase of the campaign). In contrast, the Fiscal Year 2018 Interior Appropriations bill passed by the House last year provides \$2.9 billion for the National Park Service. Even if donors were willing to fund hard infrastructure, the dollars aren't there to cover the needs.

## **Conclusion**

The National Park Foundation is committed to continuing to work with Congress and our partners at the National Park Service to raise philanthropic funds to support key projects and programs throughout the park system including those that help with the deferred maintenance backlog.

It's important to note though that while NPF and local friends groups around the country have raised hundreds of millions of dollars for projects and programs and while philanthropic enthusiasm for our parks has never been higher, philanthropy is not a panacea for deferred maintenance.

There are a lot of tools that must be utilized to begin the process of improving the visitor experience for everyone.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.