



US House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources

Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands

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Written Testimony - H.R. 3824 Cahokia Mounds Mississippian Culture National Historical Park Act

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Good morning, Chairwoman Haaland, Ranking Member Young, and honorable committee members. My name is Mary Vandevord. I am the President and CEO of HeartLands Conservancy.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of H.R. 3824, Cahokia Mounds Mississippian Culture National Historical Park Act of 2019, to designate the internationally important Cahokia Mounds and Mississippian Culture as a National Historical Park.

Joining me as a guest today is Mr. Pat Collier, Illinois Governor's Deputy Chief of Staff for Federal Affairs, as well as, project team members, supporters, and members of several Tribes and Nations.

I remember visiting Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site when I was a child and climbing the giant staircase to the top of Monk's Mound. From there, 100 feet above the Mississippi River valley, I stood in awe of where the Mississippians had lived a mere 600 years ago. I could only dream of what the largest ancient civilization north of Mexico must have been like. Walking through the visitor's center, I learned how sacred the mounds are to many of today's Indian Nations and Tribes. Today, I stand with many to elevate this sacred site and the most significant Mississippian archaeological resources to a formal unit of the National Park System.

The Mounds have been studied numerous times, a few of which are deemed significant by the National Park Service (NPS). Most notably was the study to establish Cahokia Mounds as a National Historic Landmark and UNESCO World Heritage Site, the only world heritage site in the Midwest and one of only 24 in the United States.

Other notable studies include the National Register of Historic Places, a feasibility study by my organization, and the NPS Reconnaissance Survey. All of these studies show that Cahokia and the surrounding Mississippian Mounds together emerge as the most significant and unsurpassed example of

its time period. As it stands today, Cahokia Mounds and the Mississippian Culture sites are under-designated within the National Park System.

When it comes to the suitability criteria of the National Park System, the reconnaissance survey made clear that there is no single National Park unit exclusively dedicated to the preservation and interpretation of the Mississippian Culture. As such Cahokia Mounds and satellite mounds provide the opportunity to interpret the Mississippian Culture in “unmatched in scale and importance”. The Reconnaissance Survey concluded that the mounds and archeological deposits at Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site definitively meet the national significance criterion.

In terms of feasibility, H.R. 3824 supports a partnership park model. One where the National Park Service, State of Illinois, Osage Nation, and other partners can work together to preserve and interpret the Mississippian culture. This enables shared resources, programming, and opportunities to connect the heritage of the Mississippian people. This model also makes the management of the proposed non-contiguous National Park, more efficient and capable of ensuring the long term protection of its resources.

With regard to the need for direct National Park Service Management, the state historic site has historically had severe cuts in funding and staffing, which has caused a strain on resources. The partnership park approach would be both a benefit to Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site and satellite sites while still remaining a feasible and manageable site for the National Park Service.

Countless mounds have been destroyed for development. As a result, the loss to this ancient cultural landscape continues. To quote the Governor of the Chickasaw Nation, “The preservation of the Mississippian mounds is a national responsibility.”

Likewise, Quapaw Nation Chairman, John L. Berry, wrote in a recent letter, “The National Park Designation is an opportunity to provide correct historical information regarding the people and civilizations of this region before European contact. The Quapaw Nation fully supports the National Designation... to tell our story and our history; and that we still exist today.”

To conclude, I would like to share a quote from Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker who summed it up perfectly, “The groundwork has been done... [we] have developed a thorough, compelling, and rigorous study that meets National Park Service standards and criteria... There is overwhelming support to create a collaborative partnership between the state of Illinois and the National Park Service, as well as other agencies.”

I echo the Governor’s comments in support of H.R. 3824, without amendment and without yet another study, on behalf of a state and region, and with the support of countless groups and individuals from across the country who care deeply for this effort.

Thank you again for allowing me to speak on this urgent and important matter.