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United States/Mexico Sister Parks Conference to be Held at Grand Canyon

Grand Canyon, Ariz. – On Monday, February 25, 2008, participants will gather to kick off *Shared Heritage, Shared Stewardship: Connecting Sister Parks in the U.S. and Mexico* – a 3 ½ day, United States/Mexico Sister Parks conference being held at Grand Canyon National Park. The conference, jointly organized by the National Park Service (NPS) and Mexico's Comisión Nacional de Áreas Naturales Protegidas (CONANP), will bring together representatives from ten United States park units, seven Mexican protected areas, regional and central offices of CONANP and NPS, four U.S. federal agencies, and nine non-governmental agencies from both sides of the border.

In today's global community, finding ways to overcome the language barriers and cultural differences that lead to misunderstandings can be critically important even for the managers of protected areas. For instance, parks and reserves in both the United States and Mexico independently protect fragments of large but fragile ecosystems like the Sonoran and Chihuahuan Deserts. Coordinating efforts and information could save land management agencies both time and money and could prove critically important to the preservation of species of birds, bats, butterflies, and even whales that regularly migrate from country to country. The NPS Office of International Affairs' Jonathan Putnam is quick to point out, "Our parks and protected areas share numerous species...which pay no attention to park or international boundaries."

Sister Park arrangements are partnerships intended to improve international cooperation and cross-cultural understanding by increasing the exchange of lessons learned, techniques and practices, and information and ideas between internationally recognized protected areas with similar concerns and challenges. According to Putnam, "Sister parks facilitate cooperation at the field level on joint projects that provide benefits to both partners."

The first U.S./Mexico Sister Parks established provide excellent examples of what these arrangements can achieve. In 1997, sister park relationships were established between Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument and El Pinacate Biosphere Reserve and between Big Bend National Park, Maderas del Carmen and Santa Elena Cañón Flora and Fauna Reserves. Ten years later, Big Bend, Maderas del Carmen and Cañón de Santa Elena have worked together on a

bi-national tamarisk eradication/native plant restoration project, and have participated in joint wildlife monitoring, protected area manager training, and environmental education for area residents. Organ Pipe Cactus and El Pinacate have spent the last ten years collecting data on air and water quality, threatened and endangered species, species of special concern, mammals, reptiles, and weather; all of which has contributed to a joint understanding of the Sonoran Desert ecosystem and their related management concerns.

Today, nine National Park Service units have sister park relationships with eleven Mexican protected areas; and more parks, on both sides of the border, are interested in pursuing these relationships. Grand Canyon National Park Superintendent Steve Martin believes a sister park relationship with a Mexican reserve “just makes sense” for Grand Canyon. “Mexico is our closest neighbor; we share portions of the Sonoran Desert. There is a park in Mexico, Sierra de San Pedro Mártir, which like us, recently reintroduced California Condors. We have migratory species like bats that winter in Mexico; and each year our number of visitors from Mexico increases. If we share all of these resources, we should be working together to find the best ways to manage them.”

The *Shared Heritage, Shared Stewardship* conference is intended to serve as a platform for parks, protected areas and various government and non-government agencies to learn from the experiences of existing partners, to explore potential new relationships and to identify and develop action plans for overcoming some of the obstacles that hinder these relationships. “Our hope,” said Putnam, “is that the Sister Park conference at Grand Canyon National Park will stimulate new ideas for collaboration, bring in new partners to the initiative, and lay the foundation for an expanded and more active program of cooperation between NPS, CONANP and others over the coming years.”

For more information on the *Shared Heritage, Shared Stewardship* conference, contact Jacob Fillion at 928-638-7762. For more information on the NPS Sister Parks Initiative, please visit the NPS Sister Parks web site at www.nps.gov/oia/topics/sisterparks/sisterparks.htm, or call Jonathan Putnam at 202-354-1809.

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