

STATEMENT OF MARCIA BLASZAK, REGIONAL DIRECTOR, ALASKA REGION, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, HOUSE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES, REGARDING TRENDS IN VISITATION TO THE NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM.

APRIL 6, 2006

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide information on visitation trends to the National Park System. First, on behalf of the National Park Service, I would like to acknowledge and thank Congress for its continuing support of our parks and visitor programs. I am here today with Patricia Hooks, the Regional Director for the Southeast Region of the National Park Service.

Visitors have been welcomed to national parks since Congress established Yellowstone as the world's first national park in 1872. In its early years, Yellowstone received only a few thousand visitors. Today, the National Park System encompasses 390 natural, cultural, and recreation sites, representing the natural and cultural legacy of this Nation and hosts over a quarter billion visits annually. During this past fiscal year, visitor and park spending in gateway regions totaled \$11.9 billion, supporting 249,000 local jobs and creating \$5.7 billion in local wages and salaries.

The National Park Service works with its partners in the tourism industry and with cooperating associations, gateway communities, educational institutions, and transportation services to provide opportunities for enjoyment, education, and inspiration to every visitor. The 96 percent satisfaction rating the National Park System has received from visitors annually since 2003 is a testament to the success of our efforts to provide quality experiences to millions of people while conserving the natural and cultural resources of the System for current and future generations.

Even so, we face challenges in several areas related to visitors and visitation trends. The peak year for visitation to the National Park System during the past ten years was 1999, when 287 million visits were recorded. When we look at the decade-long trend of visitation to the National Park System, however, the overall trend line is flat, despite year-to-year fluctuations. Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, significant dips in visitation occurred in 2002 and 2003, partly as a result of partial closures of some sites including the Statue of Liberty National Monument and associated parks in New York Harbor. Sharply reduced international travel to the U.S. also contributed to this drop, since about one-fifth of international tourists visit a national park during their stay.

In 2004, the opening of the National World War II Memorial produced a sharp rise in visitation. System-wide, the growth was more than 10 million visits, with five million visits to the World War II Memorial alone. Our partnership with the Travel Industry

Association in the “See America’s National Parks” campaign also may have contributed to an increase in visitation to some less-visited parks in 2004.

We believe one of the reasons for a flat trend line for visitation, despite an increase in the size of the National Park System and the U.S. population, are the stricter controls over how we count and report visits. Prior to the mid-1980s, no standard Service-wide system existed for counting visitors. As a result, a considerable amount of mathematical errors and double-counting occurred. If a group entered a park, left the park and then re-entered on the same day, the group was often counted twice, even though it was on the same visit. In the 1980s, the National Park Service began developing counting instructions for each park, which sharply reduced double-counting. It also developed software that virtually eliminated mathematical errors and identified other reporting anomalies. In raw numbers, the combined effect of these changes sometimes looked like a decline or increase in visitation, when in fact the change was the result of more accurate counting. In all cases, we document changes in counting procedures on our Public Use Statistics Web site and note that a change has occurred in our annual statistical abstract.

We recognize that visitation trends are influenced by additional factors. Natural disasters, such as hurricanes and wildfires, affect visitation every year. The 1.3 percent decline in visitation in 2005 can be attributed almost entirely to the effects of tropical storms and hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico. Several parks in that region experienced significant drops in visits in 2005 as a result of heavy wind and flood damage to visitor facilities and access routes.

National park visitation is sensitive to macro-economic trends. Recent research performed by the University of Wyoming shows that real disposable income and unemployment are significantly associated with visitation. As disposable incomes rises, national park visitation decreases. As unemployment goes up, visitation declines.

We also know that people’s race and ethnicity may have some relationship to whether or not they visit national parks. National park visitors (and public-land visitors in general) do not reflect the demographic face of America. Researchers noticed this disparity after they started collecting data on it in the early 1960s. A national survey conducted for the park service by Northern Arizona University in 2000 showed that 36 percent of white Americans not of Hispanic origin had visited a national park within the previous two years. For Hispanic Americans, the figure was 27 percent, and for African Americans only 13 percent. It is a particularly compelling concern today because groups that are not traditional park-goers are driving population growth in the U.S. The survey identified several reasons for this difference which include high travel costs, lack of information about parks, and what to do once in them. Numerous focus groups identified additional reasons, such as the feeling that parks can be uncomfortable places to be when most visitors are of another race.

The National Park Service is also increasing its use of “culturally relevant” interpretation to connect with diverse ethnic and racial groups. Many Civil War battlefields now include interpretation not only of battle tactics, but of the greater fight to abolish slavery.

The 20th century fight for civil rights is told at several units of the National Park System, ranging from Brown vs. Board of Education National Historic Site in Kansas, to Little Rock Central High School, to the birthplace of Martin Luther King, Jr. in Atlanta. At Manzanar National Historic Site in California, the site of a Japanese American internment camp during World War II, culturally relevant interpretation could better serve the thirty-one percent of visitors to that park who are of Asian descent. In contrast, at nearby Pinnacles National Monument, which lacks the strong cultural affinity with Japanese Americans, only eight percent of the visitors are of Asian descent. While the sites listed may be more obvious candidates for increased culturally relevant interpretation, the challenge faced by the National Park Service is to extend this program to sites where the cultural connections are not as clear, but where the visitor experience could be enhanced through such interpretive services.

We are conducting a pilot project at Cuyahoga Valley National Park and the Ohio and Erie Canal National Heritage Corridor this year that involves outreach to predominantly African American neighborhoods in Akron, Ohio. The objective is to increase the use of the canal towpath by neighborhood residents for walking and bicycling. The park is working with leaders of the African American community to develop an effective outreach program, and it is cooperating with the National Park Service Social Science Program and university researchers to evaluate the impact of the outreach program.

A visitor's age also affects park visitation. Visitor surveys conducted since the 1980s show that the percentage of our visitors over 45 years of age—including most of the baby boom generation born between 1946 and 1964—increased from 31 percent in 1989 to 43 percent in 2004. This is greater than their representation in the U.S. population as a whole. It's possible that when the first baby boomers reach the traditional retirement age of 65 in 2011, we will see a sustained rise in visitation to parks.

At the same time, people from their mid-teens to mid-thirties dropped from 27 percent of park visitors in 1989 to 19 percent in 2004, a level significantly below the corresponding percentage in the U.S. population (28 percent). If we are to maintain our popularity in the 21st century, we need to understand the reasons for this declining visitation rate among young adults, and we must develop ways to engage a physically active younger generation in the adventure, discovery, and recreational opportunities offered by national parks. We know that people's favorite leisure-time interests as an adult are most often learned as a child.

The National Park Service, partnering with the National Park Foundation and First Lady Laura Bush, is revitalizing its Junior Ranger program to involve young visitors in hands-on park stewardship activities. The program has grown to serve nearly 330,000 children annually in 286 parks. In addition, the new WebRangers program allows the National Park Service to reach out to young people over the Internet using age-appropriate activities such as adventure tours and discovery tours featuring our national parks.

On April 25th, the National Park Foundation, in partnership with the National Park Service and Ball State University, will provide more than 34 million children in 49 states

and 11 countries with a simultaneous visit to one of America's greatest treasures—Carlsbad Caverns National Park in New Mexico. Through a live TV and Internet broadcast, children will take part in a 90-minute interactive virtual visit. Two other E-trips will take place in fall 2006 to Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia and Hawaii Volcanoes National Park in Hawaii.

Changes in the way Americans travel for leisure, education, and self-improvement profoundly affect national park visitation. Prior to the late 1970s, the great American highway experience dominated the way we traveled to our country's natural and historic treasures. Spurred by a growing post-war middle class—more than 80 percent of whom owned at least one automobile—and by completion of the Interstate Highway System and the National Park Service's own Mission 66 initiative to enhance visitor infrastructure, Americans became windshield tourists. National parks were conveniently accessible, and several of them could be lined up within about a days' drive from one another. Lodging services and other attractions proliferated along major highway routes as long-distance automobile travel between national parks and other attractions became the economic lifeblood of many communities.

Unlike today, the typical American vacation was taken for two week's time, usually during school holidays in the summer, which then included the full month of August. But two major events in the 1970s became significant catalysts for changes in pleasure travel. The first was the formation of the OPEC oil cartel, which demonstrated that price and availability of gasoline were not a certainty. This had a disproportionate psychological impact on the two-week vacation, more so than on transportation expectations near home. The second event was airline deregulation, which brought new low-cost carriers into the market, resulting in an expansion of routes and significant price competition. Another important social factor has been a rise in the number of two-income households, which makes it more difficult to coordinate the two-week family vacation. These have produced an increase in shorter, but more frequent, "one tank" driving vacations over three-day weekends.

As a result of the trend toward shorter vacations, the number of overnight stays in national parks has decreased every year for the last ten years. Pleasure travel by air is replacing the cross-country automobile trip of the post-World War II era. This allows people to spend more time at destinations and less time in reaching them. A growing number of people now fly to jumping-off points, then either rent a vehicle or take a charter bus or cruise ship to tour a circuit of attractions that often includes national parks. This pattern is reflected in significant growth in airport-based rental car inventories and in the increasing number and size of cruise ships.

Some parks, including Zion, Grand Canyon, Virgin Islands, and several parks in Alaska, have seen increased visitation because they lie along circuits originating in such thriving "regional gateways" as Las Vegas, Miami, and Seattle. But others located along former cross-country routes traveled by car are often now by-passed by air travelers and have experienced flat or declining visitation. The National Park Service believes that a key to addressing this issue is to work closely with gateway communities and the tourism

industry to promote the national parks as destinations offering recreational and educational opportunities consistent with our mission to protect natural and cultural resources for current and future generations.

Congress recently provided \$750,000 to the Alaska Region of the National Park Service through statutory aid to the Alaska Travel Industry Association to develop a national campaign to market Alaska's lesser known national parks, such as Wrangell-St. Elias, through publications, advertising, direct mail, Web site development, and direct work with media and industry representatives. The Alaska Travel Industry Association has joined discussions with Denali National Park about potential changes in its tour bus and shuttle bus management plans. National Park Service officials in Alaska are now regular participants in business meetings and policy discussion of the Alaska Travel Industry Association.

The eight-state Intermountain Region has updated its tourism plan, which the National Park Service expects to be a model for other regional tourism plans. Park staff and gateway communities can use the plan as a tool for visitor management and communications about conservation, interpretation, and safety.

The National Mall and Memorial Parks participate in the National Cherry Blossom Festival in Washington, D.C. each spring. The festival is the National Park Service's largest, single recurring tourism event anywhere in the country. Over one million visitors—with an increasing number from Japan—attend events related to the festival, or walk along the Tidal Basin and the Washington Monument grounds to see the blossoms.

At Gettysburg National Military Park in Pennsylvania, a partnership with Main Street Gettysburg and other community organizations enhances preservation and tourism within the town of Gettysburg. The partnership produced the "Gettysburg Borough Interpretive Plan" in 2000, which is now being implemented. To provide the best possible local tourism information to park visitors, Gettysburg Convention and Visitors Bureau staff work alongside park rangers at the National Park Service visitor center desk to welcome and orient visitors.

These are a few of the many regional and park initiatives to increase cooperation with the tourism industry and gateway communities. At the national level, the National Park Service recently reorganized its tourism office, hiring a new Director of Tourism. A key focus of the tourism program will be to facilitate the implementation of the Director's Legacy Initiative to promote a seamless network of parks by linking outdoor recreation opportunities in parks and communities to tourism, health, and conservation.

Finally, through its Social Science Program and its many research partners, the National Park Service is committed to increasing our storehouse of usable knowledge about the characteristics, preferences, and needs of visitors and non-visitors to the National Park System. In 2007, we will be repeating our 2000 Comprehensive Survey of the American Public (surveying visitors and non-visitors), which provided valuable data on why people do and do not visit national parks. The second survey will establish trend data and

provide greater insight into the current travel behavior of Americans, including how national parks fit into overall vacation patterns and travel preferences. At the same time, we are developing plans to increase our capacity to monitor visitors to national parks on an annual basis so that we can track trends in demographic characteristics, recreation activity preferences, and motivations for visits. The FY 2007 budget proposes an increase of \$250,000 to expand and refine the visitor services survey program.

The mission of the National Park Service is to preserve unimpaired the resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations. As the National Park Service approaches its centennial year in 2016, we are committed to maintaining the important roles the National Park System can play in contemporary America by engaging the public, developing a seamless network of parks and special places, and protecting America's cultural and natural heritage for our children and generations to come.

Mr. Chairman, I have given you an overview of some of the most important issues facing the National Park Service concerning visitors and visitation trends. I have also described some of our responses to the challenges presented by these trends. This concludes my testimony, and I will be happy to answer any questions you or other Committee members might have.