National Park System Advisory Board

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE DIRECTOR OF THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Principles and Guidelines for a New National Park Plan for the 21st Century

June 30, 2011

Introduction

The National Park System Advisory Board was asked to develop principles and guidelines for a national park system that would guide the Service for the 2016 Centennial and into the next century. This request was made in response to the recommendations of the National Parks Second Century Commission Report. It also follows up on recommendations in the America's Great Outdoors initiative.

A planning committee was established including fifteen members who were appointed on November 1, 2010, representing a wide base of expertise in natural resources, cultural resources, urban communities, and national park management. A list of the committee members is attached.

After many conference calls, the committee met in person on March 9, 2011, at Stanford University. The committee submitted an initial presentation of their recommendations at the April 14, 2011 meeting of the Advisory Board. There was unanimous agreement by the Board regarding all of the major points outlined in the report. On June 30, 2011, the committee's final recommendations were presented to and adopted by the Board.

The Board anticipates that the planning committee will continue to meet in the future to further develop the ideas of this report. The Board looks forward to assisting the National Park Service in addressing these recommendations for the NPS centennial.

This report presents three major initiatives and outlines specific actions that will need to be implemented by 2016 as the basis of a new national park plan.

The three major concepts are:

1. Create an integrated system of national parks, programs, landmarks, and protected areas that more fully represents and safeguards our Nation's natural and cultural heritage.

2. Sustain the integrity of parks, historic sites, and other protected areas by creating corridors to link habitats, and promote compatible uses of surrounding lands and by planning for risk management and adaptation to respond to a changing environment.

3. Improve connections for all Americans, especially urban populations with the recreation, public health, economic, cultural history, civic engagement, and other benefits of parks and NPS technical assistance programs.

Context

Rapid changes in our world: natural systems, cultural resources, population, technology, science and scholarship all suggest an urgent need to have clear direction for the National Park Service's role in conserving our nation's heritage.

The actions outlined below would provide principles and guidelines for a plan to guide the National Park Service as it goes forward toward its centennial in 2016 and for the 21st century. The products and processes are intended to provide immediate support for NPS initiatives, as well as a framework for future planning.

Planning for the future of the National Park Service needs to consider a wide range of technical and financial assistance programs and other designations such as national heritage areas, wild and scenic rivers, trails, and landmarks as well as the "units" that NPS directly manages. Although the national park "System" is defined in current law as the 394 units NPS manages, the committee believes that to meet the challenges of the future the NPS units, other designations, and programs must work together to achieve a common purpose.

The committee considered the term "parks" to include historic sites and cultural resources. The term "landscape" also encompasses the ecological and cultural context for historic and cultural sites, as well as the ecosystems and human communities surrounding those sites.

Planning for the future should identify themes missing in the current system but allow and encourage initiatives from local communities and national constituencies to find the best strategy to conserve the resources they consider important. A national park plan could be a continuing, dynamic process rather than production of a single document. The process should be interactive and iterative. It should promote conservation at the landscape scale considering integration of natural, historic, cultural resources and human communities.

Planning for the future of the parks and protected areas should begin by engaging all interested individuals, groups, and levels of government to define a collaborative vision. A draft statement to begin the discussion is:

> A national system of parks, protected areas, and programs that fully represents and adequately protects our heritage of natural and historic resources, reflects the breadth of our nation's cultural experience, and provides opportunities for education and recreation that inspires and engages our population, leaving an enduring legacy for future generations.

Opportunity and risk assessments need to inform planning, and management needs to be adaptive. NPS units, designations and programs can be cornerstones and catalysts in a system of protected areas. Corridors and partnerships with adjacent landowners and managers are important tools to promote meaningful conservation beyond traditional boundaries. Open space and recreational needs of disadvantaged communities need to be addressed throughout the process.

NPS should encourage the development of community capacity to engage on a long term basis in identifying important natural and cultural resources near home, finding ways to protect them, and promoting access to existing parks. NPS should explore new ways to engage underserved communities by providing information about park opportunities and technical assistance programs.

NPS should communicate more effectively that establishing and maintaining parks and protecting cultural sites are investments in community infrastructure that support broad national priorities. Parks, historic preservation, and heritage areas generate jobs, promote education, enhance civic engagement, support public health and provide a host of other valuable ecosystem services. These investments are valuable in times of plenty and scarcity: some of our nation's most widely respected and appreciated protected areas were established during previous eras of severe fiscal challenges.

The following actions recommended by the planning committee recognize the need for continued coordination with other Advisory Board Committees addressing science, relevancy, financing, landmarks, workforce development and other topics.

1.0 Create an integrated system of national parks, programs, landmarks, and protected areas that more fully represents and safeguards our Nation's natural and cultural heritage.

1.1 Gain endorsement with DOI, constituents, and congressional committees for the vision statement for the National Park Service and System and its relationship to a broader network of protected areas and the landscapes that sustain them.

1.2 Develop the administrative structures and capacity for planning an integrated system of parks, protected areas, and programs for the National Park Service working in collaboration with a wide variety of partners.

1.3 Identify significant unprotected natural areas: working with the USGS Gap program and other sources, identify the ecological regions including marine areas that are not adequately represented in the national park system or other protected areas. Consider the potential for ecological restoration areas and opportunities to establish or enhance connections with Canada and Mexico.

1.4 Identify significant cultural themes not adequately represented: in cooperation with the National Historic Landmarks Committee and professional organizations, identify the major cultural themes that are not currently well represented in the national park system or other protected areas.

1.5 Conduct historic context studies that will provide the basis for evaluation of additional national historic landmarks, national heritage areas, and other NPS program designations to tell the whole American story and increase representation of themes not now well covered including: Latino and Asian Americans, other minorities, labor, arts, science, and technology. A context study of sites related to leaders and critical events in the history of conservation that would be especially relevant to 2016.

1.6 Prepare a new national park plan to meet the needs of the next century.
Based on the identification of thematic gaps, invite local initiatives, consult with interested individuals and organizations, and conduct studies as authorized. Once specific sites or themes have been studied, NPS should develop a list of candidates for new park authorizations and forward that list to Congress as directed in the 1998 Omnibus Parks Management Act.

1.7 Review and recommend updates to current NPS criteria for significance, suitability, feasibility, and management alternatives to consider contemporary ideas about representation, redundancy, resilience, restoration areas, history within the past 50 years, intangible resources, industry, science, technology, and other issues.

1.8 Update guidelines for conducting special resource studies to make the process more responsive to the public and to Congress. This effort should help educate the public about the potential for national monument designations under the Antiquities Act.

1.9 Continue to seek authorization for a system of national heritage areas and develop guidelines for encouraging these designations as a collaborative tool for protecting natural and cultural resources.

2.0 Sustain the integrity of parks, historic sites, and other protected areas by creating corridors to link habitats, promoting compatible uses of surrounding lands, and by planning for risk management and adaptation to respond to a changing environment.

2.1 Establish at least 10 projects to expand on existing models of success in creating effective corridors of conservation and stewardship for protection of larger landscapes.
These projects should apply a wide range of partnership tools including national heritage areas, boundary adjustments, ecological restoration areas, technical assistance wild and scenic rivers, trails and other designations.

2.2 Develop guidelines for determining what uses are compatible with park resources and values and what protective conditions or actions are needed to ensure the integrity of protected areas.

2.3 Expand on the capability of NPS programs to document changes in land use around parks, and coordinate with the landscape conservation cooperatives and other similar activities to gather the scientific information needed to create corridors effective in helping park resources adapt to changes in climate, land use, and other influences.

2.4 Utilize successful partnership programs, like the national heritage areas, to significantly expand community based resource conservation and stewardship ethics in urban and rural areas across the country.

2.5 Expand on the capability of park staff to engage more effectively with neighbors to collaboratively identify and promote compatible uses and implement new tools to allow for risk assessment and adaptive management to address changes in climate, land use and demographics, and natural or human-caused disturbances.

2.6 Evaluate experience to date with large scale landscape conservation initiatives; undertake model projects to improve the effectiveness of parks as cornerstones in networks of protected areas, and identify changes in authorities, management structures, or other capabilities required to expand capacity. Identify and communicate the distinctive qualities parks offer that make them unique as cornerstones in a system of protected areas.

3.0 Improve connections for all Americans, especially urban populations with the recreation, public health, economic, cultural history, civic engagement, and other benefits of parks and NPS technical assistance programs.

3.1 Identify and highlight 10-15 new projects to build on existing models of success for NPS engagement with urban populations by working through RTCA, NHAs, NHLs and other programs or designations. Consider focusing on opportunities for adaptive re-use of urban areas where existing infrastructure and development is being abandoned and is not sustainable. Recognize and apply the community based partnerships provided by many existing national heritage areas as a model for urban engagement and community revitalization.

3.2 Evaluate the existing NPS presence through parks, historic sites, programs, and other designations in the top 20 or 30 major metropolitan areas and recommend new initiatives to fill gaps where access to NPS sites and programs is not adequate. This will help address recreational program deficits and promote physical activity and health of urban residents. It will also ensure that the diversity of our national historic and cultural experience is maintained.

3.3 Develop a community of practice for park managers to share experience and promote innovation in urban parks, especially considering how to improve partnerships and reach communities without connections to parks and historic sites. Develop educational approaches to serve diverse communities that encourage an appreciation of nature.

3.4 Identify and apply opportunities to leverage support from other federal, state, local, and private sources in meeting the recreation, health, and educational needs of urban populations. Identify and implement new types of parks and opportunities for heritage areas to meet the needs of urban populations.

3.5 Develop partnerships to highlight opportunities for parks to inform urban populations about the educational opportunities, public health, and ecosystem values of parks and protected areas, especially the values of urban ecological restoration, and ecological integrity of urban areas by linking urban parks, riparian areas, and other open spaces near cities.

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(Attachment)

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