



# United States Department of the Interior

## NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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Washington, DC 20240

[As amended by Memorandum dated March 3, 2025]

### Director's Order #56: International Activities

Approved:   
Director

Effective Date: April 2, 2011

**Duration:** This Order will remain in effect until amended or rescinded

This Director's Order states the basic principles and strategic guidelines governing the conduct of international activities by the National Park Service. The provisions of this Director's Order supplement information contained in *Management Policies 2006* and supersede all previous NPS instructions, requirements, and statements of policy that may be in conflict.

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#### **I. Background and Purpose**

##### **A. Why the NPS Conducts International Activities**

**Our Mission.** The National Park Service conducts international activities—defined here as any activity involving contact with a foreign entity in which an NPS employee represents the

Service in an official capacity—in order to support a mission that is global as well as domestic. Through its international activities, the Service is able to extend the benefits of its recognized leadership in natural and cultural resource stewardship and visitor services to an international audience.

**A Source of Inspiration.** The National Park Service has been engaged in international activities since the tenure of its first director, Stephen Mather, who frequently received requests from other countries seeking advice in developing their own national park systems. The United States’ “national park idea,” spawned by the creation of Yellowstone National Park in 1872, has inspired the creation of thousands of other national parks and preserves worldwide.

**The Need for Cooperation.** As the Service moves into its second century, the successful management of park resources depends increasingly upon cooperation with partners outside of U.S. borders. International engagement improves the capability of the NPS to remain a global conservation and preservation leader. Invasive species populations, trans-boundary pollution, the effects of global climate change, the use of protected areas by indigenous peoples, and migratory wildlife species are just a few examples of the many issues that cross international borders and have a major impact on the future health of America’s national park system.

**Contribution to Conservation of Natural Resources.** Species migration is perhaps the clearest example of the need for international cooperation in the management of park natural resources. Hundreds of wildlife species migrate from NPS units to habitats in other countries, including more than half the bird species found in the national park system. Many of these species play critical ecological roles and are a part of the iconic park visitor experience. The NPS also manages hundreds of miles of borderlands with Canada, Mexico and Russia, and in the Caribbean. In these areas even “non-migratory” species regularly cross park and international borders and require international cooperation for their preservation.

**Contribution to Conservation of Cultural Resources.** In the cultural resources sphere, many national park units, as well as sites and areas that have received recognition through the National Register of Historic Places, the National Historic Landmarks program, and the National Heritage Areas program, hold tremendous significance for immigrant and ancestrally related communities from a wide range of countries. Many of these sites cannot be adequately interpreted without an international perspective. Trans-border cultural resources, such as the Spanish missions along the U.S.-Mexico border, require international cooperation if the resources are to be preserved and interpreted comprehensively for the education and enjoyment of park visitors.

**Employee Development.** International activities also represent tremendous learning opportunities for the Service. They enable NPS employees to cultivate or improve skills and gain fresh insights into the challenges and opportunities facing their counterparts. Over its history, the NPS has adopted some of its most successful practices from other countries. International activities help sustain relationships and promote increased understanding. By sending NPS employees abroad to provide technical assistance, and by training foreign park managers in the U.S., the NPS strengthens the management, operation, and preservation of parks and protected areas internationally.

**Assigned Responsibility.** Finally, the National Park Service conducts international activities to meet mandates from the Executive and Legislative branches and to fulfill international treaty obligations.

#### **B. Function of the Office of International Affairs (OIA)**

The National Park Service Office of International Affairs was created in 1961 as a focal point for international activities and serves as the primary contact for other bureaus, agencies, foreign governments, and international and private organizations on related matters. Having a single office coordinate the Service's international activities allows the NPS to maximize the impact and effectiveness of limited resources and offer international opportunities to the greatest possible number of NPS employees.

In addition to facilitating the Service's international activities, the OIA strives to instill a culture of international interest and engagement throughout the NPS. The OIA serves as the Director's representative and advisor on international issues and keeps the NPS leadership abreast of pertinent international and conservation-related developments, thereby enabling the Service to identify its interests and strategically prioritize its international activities.

In order to effectively perform its function and successfully support the Service's domestic and global mission, the OIA must rely upon the cooperation of, and close coordination with, field, regional and central office personnel.

#### **C. Purpose of this Director's Order**

The purpose of this Director's Order is to outline and describe the National Park Service's legal authorities, guidelines and criteria, organizational responsibilities, and policies and procedures for conducting international activities. By defining these points, this Order will improve communication and coordination between the Department of the Interior, the NPS Office of International Affairs, and NPS field, regional, and central office staff on matters related to international activities. This improved communication will enable the Service to better address its own strategic priorities while responding to the most pressing needs of its partners in the international community, and thereby uphold the Service's role as a leader in the fields of international conservation and preservation.

## **II. LEGAL AUTHORITIES**

#### **A. Authority to Issue this Director's Order**

The legal authority to issue this Director's Order is contained in the 1916 NPS Organic Act (16 U.S.C. 1 through 4), and in delegations of authority contained in Part 245 of the Department of the Interior (DOI) Manual.

#### **D. Major Federal Laws Authorizing International Activities**

The NPS is authorized to participate in international activities pursuant to several major Federal laws that apply either to all Federal agencies or specifically to the NPS:

1. Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 (22 USC 2151 *et seq.*; Pub. L. 87-195, as amended). Among other things, authorizes the employment or assignment of Federal government agency personnel to perform the functions called for by the Act outside the boundaries of the United States. See especially, 22 USC 2357, 2362, 2385, 2387, 2388, 2392, 2421 and 2151q.

2. Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act of 1961 (22 USC 2451, 2452, 2453, 2454, 2455, 2456, 2457, 2458, 2458a, 2460, 2461, and 2463; Pub. L. 87-256, as amended). Authorizes U.S. representation at international, nongovernmental educational, scientific and technical meetings, and permits U.S. Government agencies to accept foreign nationals for training or other meetings in and out of the U.S. The authority to provide exchange visitor programs in the U.S. has been delegated to the NPS and many other Federal bureaus by the Department of State's Exchange Visitor Program Office. This is the basis for the Service's International Volunteers in Parks program.

3. National Historic Preservation Act (1966) (16 USC 470—470x-6; Pub. L. 89-665, as amended). Enables Federal agencies to “provide leadership in the preservation of the prehistoric and historic resources of the United States and of the international community of nations.” 16 USC 470-1(2). Directs the Secretary of the Interior to “develop and make available to ... other nations and international organizations pursuant to the World Heritage Convention, training in, and information concerning, professional methods and techniques for the preservation of historic properties.” 16 USC 470a(i). Further, requires the Secretary to “direct and coordinate United States participation in the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage,” and to “periodically nominate properties he determines are of international significance to the World Heritage Committee on behalf of the United States.” 16 USC 470a-1(a) and (b).

4. National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (42 USC 4321—4370d; Pub. L. 91-190, as amended). Directs Federal agencies “where consistent with the foreign policy of the United States, [to] lend appropriate support to ... programs designed to maximize international cooperation in anticipating and preventing a decline in the quality of mankind's world environment.” 42 USC 4332(2)(F).

5. Endangered Species Act of 1973 (16 USC 1531—1544; Pub. L. 93-205, as amended). Provides legislative mandate for the Department of the Interior to move beyond the traditional levels of occasional cooperation with other nations. In particular, 16 USC 1537(b)(1) and (2) direct the Secretary to carry out such actions as may be necessary to “encourage foreign countries to provide for the conservation of fish or wildlife and plants,” including endangered and threatened species. Similarly, 16 USC 1537(c) permits the Secretary to assign employees to cooperate with foreign countries and international organizations to further such efforts.

6. International Environment Protection Act of 1983 (22 USC 2151q and 2452(b)(11); Pub. L. 98-164, as amended). Authorizes Federal agencies “[i]n order to preserve biological diversity ... to assist countries in protecting and maintaining wildlife habitats and in developing sound wildlife management and plant conservation programs.” 22 USC 2151q(b). Additionally, subsection 2151q(g)(7) directs the Administrator of the Agency of International Development to “cooperate with and support the relevant efforts of other agencies of the United States Government, including the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service, the Forest Service, and the Peace Corps.”

Further information regarding laws, treaties, and conventions related to international affairs may be found at: <http://www.nps.gov/oia/> or the OIA website on InsideNPS.

### **III. ORGANIZATIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES**

#### **A. NPS Office of International Affairs**

The Office of International Affairs will have primary responsibility for the Service's conduct of international activities. In addition to a variety of general responsibilities, the OIA will also be responsible for managing a small number of international programs - World Heritage, International Volunteers in Parks, Park Flight, and Sister Parks - on behalf of the NPS.

#### **OIA's General Responsibilities**

1. Serving as the primary NPS contact for other bureaus, agencies, foreign governments, and international and private and non-profit organizations on all international activities and related matters.
2. Coordinating the fulfillment of the Service's mandates, obligations, and responsibilities with regard to international activities.
3. Developing, managing, and coordinating the Service's programs for exchanging information with, or providing assistance to, other nations, international organizations, and territories, including bilateral relationships and technical assistance.
4. Facilitating and coordinating the Service's participation in international conservation and preservation programs, including UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere program, the Western Hemisphere Migratory Species Initiative, the World Protected Areas Leadership Forum, and the Convention on Biological Diversity.
5. Coordinating training and technical assistance programs and projects for foreign park and resource management personnel in the United States and NPS personnel in other nations.
6. Supporting and assisting park units and regional and central offices in the conduct of international activities and related coordination with other agencies, and providing them with information on NPS international activities and opportunities.
7. Monitoring international developments and coordinating with other agencies and partners to keep the NPS leadership, and the Service as a whole, informed and engaged.
8. Negotiating bilateral or multilateral agreements and/or memoranda of understanding with other domestic agencies and organizations, as well as with parks and protected areas agencies in other countries, to implement NPS international programs and projects.
9. Coordinating approval by the Service, DOI, and the Department of State of NPS official international travel.

#### **OIA's International Program Responsibilities**

1. **World Heritage Convention.** To help meet U.S. treaty obligations and the requirements of section 401 of the National Historic Preservation Act, the OIA will—

- Provide staff support to the Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks in implementing the U.S. Government's participation in the World Heritage Convention.
- Coordinate the development of U.S. World Heritage nominations.
- Coordinate the Service's response to any inquiries that may be made by the World Heritage Committee.
- Provide technical assistance to U.S. and international World Heritage Sites.

2. **International Volunteers in Parks (IVIP).** The IVIP program will be managed to encourage—

- International park professionals and university-level students to volunteer their expertise at NPS sites.
- Direct information exchange between NPS staff and their professional peers.

3. **Park Flight.** In coordination with the Associate Director for Natural Resources, the Park Flight Migratory Bird program will be managed to protect shared migratory bird species and their habitats in both U.S. and Latin American national parks and protected areas through developing bird conservation and education projects and creating opportunities for technical exchange and cooperation.

4. **Sister Parks.** Although the OIA will be responsible for managing and providing guidance on the Sister Park initiative, the management of the individual sister park relationships will be left to the respective park units to develop according to their own interests.

## **B. Park, Regional, and Program Offices**

Beyond those responsibilities specifically assigned to OIA, NPS field, regional, and central office personnel have a number of responsibilities and/or opportunities related to the Service's international activities.

1. **Range of Activities.** In consultation with OIA, NPS field, regional, and central office personnel are authorized to engage in or to assist with a wide range of international activities, including—

- Presenting papers and attending international conferences, meetings, and seminars to exchange information with their peers.
- Briefing visiting international officials and delegations in their areas of responsibility, providing them with information about the management and operation of the Service and their park/activity.
- Hosting and developing training programs for international volunteers.
- Managing NPS units that are also internationally designated according to Service policies and providing assistance to site managers of similarly designated properties.
- Partnering with staff in parks and protected areas in other countries, including "Sister Parks", to exchange information, expertise, and lessons learned.

- With appropriate approval from relevant ethics officials, participating on national, and/or international, committees and boards with a focus on, or interest in, international activities in an advisory capacity, in order to promote the exchange of information, expertise and best management practices.

2. **Special Regional Emphasis.** When it will support the Service's mission, regional offices may align their functions to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the International Affairs Program at the regional level. For example, regional offices may find it advantageous to focus special attention on trans-boundary issues, migratory species, shared cultural heritage, research, and/or technical assistance. Examples include the Intermountain Region's International Conservation Office, the Alaska Region's Shared Beringia Heritage Office, and the Pacific West Region's Micronesia and American Samoa Historic Preservation Assistance Program.

## IV. POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

### A. General Policies

The National Park Service will adhere to the following general policies in selecting and conducting international activities—

- The NPS is not the lead agency in the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. It is therefore imperative that all parks and programs considering international activities coordinate with the NPS's Office of International Affairs to ensure that these activities have the support of the Director's office and fit within broader U.S. foreign policy objectives.
- All NPS field, regional, or central office personnel must inform the Office of International Affairs of their plans before engaging in any international activity. This includes any discussions regarding funding from third parties or outside partners for international activities, as well as any effort to nominate properties to the World Heritage List. If the activity is part of a long term project or ongoing relationship (e.g., cooperative planning between a U.S. border park and its non-U.S. counterpart), the office or park unit does not need to inform OIA of each interaction. However, the office or park unit must inform OIA if there is a significant change in the relationship or if a major new project is being planned.
- All international activities must be well planned and justified. International activities often prompt inquiries from parties outside of the NPS, and parks and programs engaging in these activities should be prepared to provide detailed information justifying them.
- International activities should support the preservation and enjoyment of natural or cultural resources managed by the NPS or by the Service's partners outside of the U.S. International activities should also enhance the ability of Service and partner personnel to achieve these goals through the professional growth or experience gained.
- It is the responsibility of the NPS international traveler to become knowledgeable of all applicable U.S. government travel rules, regulations, and documentation requirements. Employees engaging in cross border travel must pay particular attention to U.S. travel rules and regulations, as border regulations can change quickly. NPS employees will comply with all Department of the Interior and NPS international travel policies, and

- Departments of State or Homeland Security policies that may supersede them. Prior to international travel, employees will consult the OIA website for the most current information.
- Every employee engaged in international activities must be diligent in ensuring that their actions reflect the goals and objectives of the National Park Service as a whole.

In addition to these general policies, the criteria in sections B and C below will apply.

## **B. Required Criteria for International Activities**

To help ensure the selection of feasible and suitable projects, proposed international activities must meet, at a minimum, the following criteria—

- The proposed activity must be compatible with U.S. foreign policy objectives and/or help implement U.S. obligations.
- The NPS must have a legal basis or mandate for providing assistance to or exchange with the country.
- The proposed activity must be compatible with the NPS mission.
- The proposed activity must respect the sovereignty of its international partners, including tribal nations, and involve them and other strategic stakeholders in the planning process.

## **C. Recommended Criteria for International Activities**

In addition to the required criteria listed in section IV.B above, when appropriate and feasible the proposed activity should—

- Promote and share “best practices” for park and conservation management.
- Promote connections with stakeholders that communicate the value of resource protection and involve them appropriately in park planning, management, and resource protection processes.
- Integrate conservation activities with strategies for sustainable development that strengthens the capacity of surrounding communities to preserve natural and cultural heritage in ways that support local and regional identity, economic development, and civic engagement.

## **V. THIRD PARTY ENFORCEABILITY**

This director's order is intended only to improve the internal management of the NPS, and is not intended to, and does not, create any right or benefit, substantive or procedural, enforceable at law or equity by a party against the United States, its departments, agencies, instrumentalities or entities, its officers or employees, or any other person.

*-----End of Director's Order ---*