

Testimony of Stephen H. Lockhart, MD, PhD
National Parks Second Century Commission
before the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands of the Committee
on Natural Resources
Hearing: *“Building on America’s Best Idea: The Next Century of the National Park
System”*
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Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony before this distinguished subcommittee. It is an honor, a privilege and it is my sincerest hope that our remarks will be enlightening, informative and helpful in your consideration of how best to support and enhance one of our nation’s greatest treasures, our National Parks.

In 2016, the National Park Service will celebrate its centennial. In 2008, the nonprofit National Parks Conservation Association convened the Second Century Commission, an independent body charged with developing a vision that advances the national park idea for the next 100 years. We are a group of distinguished private citizens, including scientists, educators, conservationists, business people, and leaders in state and national government. We met at National Parks around the country and engaged in structured dialogue with concerned citizens and experts. We are grateful for the wisdom and leadership provided by our co-chairs, former Senators Howard Baker and Bennet Johnston. To accomplish more in-depth analyses and to develop a deeper appreciation for the issues involved, we formed eight committees. As Co-chair of the Education and Learning Committee, it is on this topic that I will be most expansive in my testimony. However, it should be recognized that our report and recommendations are reflected in all of the testimony you will hear today as well as in the written materials you have received. I ask that my remarks be considered within that larger context.

One of our first experiences as a Commission involved a visit to the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area. There we joined a group of 5th graders involved in a program called SHRUB (Students Restoring Unique Biomes). Two student teams adopt a designated plot of land and remove non-native plants and restore native species. They learn about the water cycle, soils, insects, plant adaptation and other ecologic concepts. Notably, these were all children from the urban environment of Los Angeles, the majority being introduced for the first time to this national park in their own backyard. Whereas park visitors typically do not reflect our nation’s diversity, these school aged children did reflect the diversity of their local communities. Due to this positive and memorable experience, many of these children return to introduce their parents and family members to the park. This is a powerful example of the power of education to engage future generations and to inspire a personal connection with our National Parks.

Education ranks among the highest of our nation’s priorities. As one of the largest providers of both informal and formal educational experiences, the National Parks offer an opportunity to engage in place-based, lifelong learning. This learning promotes a

more sustainable environment, enhances dialogue about the democratic principles at the core of our society, and encourages stewardship.

Just as the Organic Act established the framework needed to maintain the parks during the first century, education is core to the success of the parks during the next century. The Commission recommends that education be at the forefront of the National Park Service agenda, and that Congress establish a clear legislative mandate for education as a fundamental purpose of the parks.

Education is provided through the visitor experience, ranger led interpretation, formal educational programs and academic research. It is provided by the National Park Service, and in equal measure by partner organizations and volunteers.

Students who participate in park educational programs show measurable improvement in academic performance and achieve higher test scores. A significant amount of this educational programming in parks is provided by partner organizations. NatureBridge is an example of one such organization which for 40 years, has provided week long residential field science programs in National Parks, and currently educates 40,000 middle school and high school children per year. Program evaluation demonstrates a high level of student engagement, improved academic performance, and gender-neutral participation in scientific learning. Our programs also educate teachers on how to incorporate this learning into the classroom. In addition, there are professional development programs for teachers, all of which helps to further the primary objective of enhancing the quality of education in America.

As both Chair of the NatureBridge Board and as a parent of a program alumnus, I can testify to the transformative nature of these types of experiences. Interestingly, four current park superintendents are alumni of our programs who acknowledge that the seed of interest in a career was planted at that early stage. In order to support its human capital needs for the 21st century, the Park Service must develop a pipeline, creating a “ladder of learning”, including service learning, that plants these seeds of interest and captures the imagination of young people.

For the vast majority who will not pursue a career with the National Park Service, the benefit to society of developing leadership, stewardship, and a sense of personal responsibility for the environment cannot be overstated

Within the National Park Service, nodes of educational excellence exist but have evolved inconsistently due to chronic under-funding and lack of institutional commitment to professional development. We are heartened that, under Director Jarvis’ leadership, one of our recommendations, to create a senior level management position with sole responsibility to oversee educational initiatives has been accomplished. There are innovative programs within the Park Service, such as the Teacher-Ranger-Teacher program which offers the opportunity for teachers from Title 1 school districts to train and work as an interpretive ranger during the summer months prior to returning to the

classroom in the fall. Important programs such as these integrate learning in the classroom and park environments, and are deserving of increased support.

Another barrier to maximizing the educational impact of our parks is the failure of the Park Service to adapt to technologic change. The National Park Service must embrace technology as a means of providing place-based and distance learning. During our Commission meeting at Gettysburg, we were able to participate in a ranger-led program exploring the underwater ecosystems at Cabrillo National Monument. Although it was exciting to learn that programs like this are possible, it was disappointing to learn that this could only be provided through partner organizations because the infrastructure required to offer such programs is not available within the National Park Service.

Education is also a powerful tool to engage the broader American public, a public which is increasingly diverse and who struggle at times to find a personal connection with the parks. We should recognize and support the vital role of the National Park Service education and interpretation staff in engaging this diverse public.

We also acknowledge that, historically, important stories have been missing from the chronicle embedded in our parks. Which of our nation's stories are told, how they are told and by whom are critical elements of making a visitor experience relevant. Establishing parks such as Manzanar and the Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail, dedicated to uncovering and facing some of our most difficult stories, expands the dialogue. But we have also learned that stories of the Buffalo soldiers in Yosemite and the Native American communities around Mt Rushmore enrich the cultural and historic significance of our most iconic parks. The old concept of the ranger as an authority who provides education for the public must be replaced with the ranger who facilitates with audiences, and engages communities and partners to provide a relevant experience. Finally, if we expect to maintain a vibrant system of National Parks into the second century, it is critical for the National Park Service to create and foster a culture conducive to achieving workforce diversity reflective of the public it serves.

We see our national parks as the centerpiece of a 21st century America, enriched by its cultural and ethnic diversity, committed to education and public service, and celebrating our shared national heritage. Our recommendations are designed to advance the national park idea, making it relevant to all Americans for generations to come.