

Testimony of Denis P. Galvin before the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands of the Committee on Natural Resources
May 25, 2010, 10:00 am, Room 1324, Longworth House Office Building

Mr. Chairman it is a pleasure to testify before this distinguished Subcommittee once again. As a former Deputy Director of the National Park Service I appeared here many times before your predecessors, including Mr. Udall, Seiberling, Vento, Hansen and Pierce. I feel privileged to have played a small part in their deliberations. The decisions arising out of this Subcommittee have built the world's finest park system.

As members of the Second Century Commission each of us served on multiple committees. One of my assignments was to chair the "Future Shape of the National Park System" Committee. It is the recommendations from that effort that I will concentrate on in this testimony.

Early in our deliberations we realized that one cannot envision a future National Park System without placing the parks in the larger contexts that comprise the surrounding lands, the regions, and indeed, the nation and the world. We asked ourselves, in that broader picture, what role the National Parks, present and future should play. The words that kept recurring were 'cornerstone' and 'keystone'.

The congressional mandates that define the mission of the National Park Service direct it to preserve everything, "...the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life". Those words define the highest standard of preservation in our system of public institutions. Paradoxically we found that this mission cannot be accomplished within the boundaries of our present system or of any imagined future system. In our committee report we noted, "...the forces affecting this network have grown in complexity and scope. They are the same forces that affect the places we live. They are regional, national, and global in their reach. The National Park Service alone cannot contain or limit their impact."

A viable system must deal with this reality. So there are two actions that form our primary recommendation: that the future growth of the system is guided by a strategic vision or plan, and that plan should be part of a national conservation strategy. With respect to the latter idea we are encouraged by the recent White House conference on America's Outdoors. Members of the Second Century Commission, including some testifying here today, were among the invitees. We look forward to the subsequent actions, led by Interior Secretary Salazar, Agriculture Secretary Vilsak, and Council on Environmental Quality Chair Sutley to create a grass roots approach to developing this national strategy.

Before I turn to specific national park system recommendations I would like to share with the Subcommittee some of the facts that underline the urgency of this task. Our report noted that in the United States over 1,000,000 acres of open space are being developed each year. The President's Conference put the figure at 2,000,000 acres per year. To put that area in perspective we are erasing a Yellowstone every year or two. By contrast the

National Park System grew by less than 100,000 acres in the last decade. We found that 30 % of the counties surrounding national parks are developed to the extent that they struggle to support biodiversity. On the cultural side examples abound of external development threatening some of our most treasured national heritage. The controversy over proposed new development at the Wilderness battlefield near Fredericksburg, Virginia provides a close to home example of a problem that is all too pervasive.

.The Commission Report addresses the role of National Parks and the National Park Service as part of this vision. It is to achieve a system that works for all. Our “Future Shape” committee report describes that as a system that, “...commemorates a past we revere and from which we learn to build a better future...(a) present defined by all who are served by the parks and those who should but are not...The future is those to whom we pass the legacy ‘unimpaired’. It is a duty of the present to those yet to come, who now have no voice.”

We believe there is ample room for robust growth. The current system is 3.7% of the area of the United States. Excluding Alaska that figure drops to only 1.6%. In 35 states national park areas comprise less than 1% of the land and water. There are few areas devoted to preserving freshwater and marine environments. Grasslands and some areas of eastern and midwestern forests are not well represented. In general the current system is high, western, characterized by thin soils, snow and ice. It is not the system one would build if protecting biodiversity were a national goal. On the cultural side we noted the importance of stronger representation of race, ethnicity and gender in building a system that, “...represents all of our people”.

There is grassroots support for additional growth. During its deliberations the Commission heard from supporters of an enhanced National Park Service presence at Fort Monroe, Virginia, on the Chesapeake Bay, and in the Maine Woods.

Current boundaries of existing park units should be adjusted to improve their capability to achieve the National Park Service mission.

If one could build such a system there is still a need for cooperative approaches to caring for the large landscapes surrounding the parks. Heritages Areas have been an important Congressional initiative in this regard. There is a need for consistent actions by other agencies to ensure that the parks are preserved. The private sector has an important role to play. The vigorous growth of land trusts in the past two decades is illustrative of the power of private initiatives. Additional incentives to support private conservation should be considered.

We propose a new program that would use the National Park Service restoration expertise within park boundaries to benefit local communities. Most of these Ecological Restoration Areas would be returned to local jurisdictions upon completion. Some might become units of the national park system.

Managing parks in this complex mix of land practices will demand much of the National Park Service. Our Committee noted, “An organization designed around management of lands in dispersed locations must be re-shaped to reflect new roles as a catalyst, a convener, and cooperator with a suite of tools that extend far beyond park operations.”

We need to recognize though, that achieving the vision of protecting our natural and cultural heritage cannot be solved in national parks alone. Other public land agencies, state and local government, and the private sector must act in a coordinated and consistent way to achieve a landscape that achieves preservation while providing productive, healthful, and beautiful places to live.

Mr. Chairman, the Second Century Commission has defined a future for parks that is challenging, but filled with opportunities. Achieving this vision will not only build a better park system, it also has the potential to support a citizenry using its heritage to build a better nation.