

September 20, 2010

Committee on Natural Resources  
U.S. House of Representatives  
1324 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Grijalva, Chairman Napolitano, Ranking member Bishop and other members of the subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony to the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands of the Committee on Natural Resources with specific regard to "*The role of partnerships in National Parks.*" We intend to highlight the enormous benefits to citizens, especially our youth, that are the result of effective and highly productive partnerships with our National Parks. We also will focus on some of the hurdles that must be overcome if we are to make this relationship sustainable over the long term.

We are very pleased that the Subcommittee is seeking information from National Park partners that will enhance our ability to work together more productively. We all understand that partnerships are mutually beneficial and an excellent way to leverage limited resources.

NatureBridge has been working in partnership with the National Park Service (NPS) for almost 40 years. NatureBridge currently operates residential environmental education programs in four National Park locations: the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, Yosemite National Park, the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, and Olympic National Park. Launching more campus programs in National Parks in the eastern United States is contemplated in our recently completed Strategic Plan. Ours is a history of mutually beneficial collaboration. Indeed, there is great excitement about the impact we are able to have on the lives of youth and the quality of life in their home communities through our partnership with the National Park Service.

One of the top priorities of NPS Director Jon Jarvis is to increase environmental education and outreach to underserved youth. The recent launch of the President's America's Great Outdoors Initiative speaks to the need to reconnect Americans to the outdoors. It emphasizes reaching out to underserved youth and building new constituencies for our treasured parks. Director Jarvis' priorities and the President's initiative both highlight the need to expand the very programs that NatureBridge offers. The success of these efforts can only be achieved with increased and more effective and efficient public/private partnerships.

NatureBridge is looking to strengthen an already rewarding partnership with the NPS. We seek to advance our common mission and develop a closer working relationship. We are concerned that the hurdles to effective and sustainable partnerships have increased and indeed may severely limit our ability to expand beyond our four campuses.

Our testimony focuses on broad issues that impact our entire organization rather than one specific park. We start with the assumption that we are building on a successful model of shared mission with the National Park Service and this testimony is offered in the spirit of increased effectiveness and the need to leverage increasingly scarce resources.

## **Partnership Limitations, Barriers and Frustrations**

### **1. Difficulty of Completing Legal Agreements**

The increasing complexity of public/private partnerships has resulted in Agreements (Cooperative, Fundraising, etc.) that are overreaching and unworkable. The staff time and financial resources spent on reviewing and redoing agreements is frustrating and wasteful, can take several years to complete and in the end fosters a climate of legal adversaries rather than partners.

The process of reviewing agreements is highly centralized; drafts acceptable to the Park or the Region may be extensively questioned by the Washington Support Office (WASO), which can at times seem disconnected from the field. "No risk" partnerships do not exist and should not be the legal bar that is set.

For example, our Yosemite Institute has operated under a series of agreements with the NPS since 1971, but in 2010 questions from WASO about the NPS's legal authority to allow us to enter into agreements has caused extensive delays. Our most recent experience with the Fundraising Agreement for our proposed new Environmental Education Center in Yosemite National Park is a perfect example of what is not working. We first received a 20 page draft modeled from former partner agreements that has now mushroomed into over 40 pages after review by NPS solicitors.

Meanwhile, at Golden Gate National Recreation Area, NatureBridge's Headlands Institute campus is operating under its fourth successive one-year extension of its general agreement. After operating and providing programs for over 30 years in the Park, the partnership feels more like a landlord/tenant arrangement as we are now being asked to pay approximately \$140,000 annually in "service district charges" to continue our programs in the Park.

NatureBridge recognizes and values the uniqueness of each park but is frustrated by our inability either to use agreements signed in one park as a template for a similar agreement in another park, or to negotiate a master agreement that would cover NatureBridge operations in multiple parks.

**Suggestion:** NatureBridge supports streamlined and standardized partnership agreements. For example, the National Park Service should consider "proven partner status" for longtime partners that have a strong mission alignment and have met their program and financial obligations for a number of years. This would involve setting up a vetting system for new partners and enabling them to use streamlined processes once certain conditions are met and a proven track record is established.

## 2. Inconsistency of Policies Across Parks

In four different parks, NatureBridge helps the NPS implement its educational mission. Our educational programs are the same in each location, but NPS administration varies significantly from park to park. For example, at Olympic National Park, private bidding and private construction were allowed on a project funded by NatureBridge and located on our Institute's campus. At Yosemite National Park, great uncertainty surrounds whether private bidding

and construction will be allowed for the new Environmental Education Center, which has important cost implications.

Another example has to do with park facilities assigned to us so that we can provide the educational programs that the parks have requested. In Olympic National Park, Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area and Yosemite National Park there is a strong partnership relationship. Unfortunately, the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, as mentioned above, apparently sees us as a tenant and wants to charge rent.

As we make plans to expand our programs to new parks, it will save countless hours and money if there is a more standardized approach to the manner in which partnerships are established and administered.

**Suggestion:** For partners who operate in multiple parks, NPS should standardize its administrative requirements and employ a more uniform approach to working with partners.

### 3. Cultural Challenges

The cultural differences between government and nonprofits are often a barrier to effective partnerships. Understanding this is a key for both the NPS and their nonprofit partners. We recommend that a central part of the NPS partnership training be on the differences in how nonprofits and how government agencies operate, and how to bridge the gap. NatureBridge would gladly participate in this type of training.

**Suggestion:** Include and engage nonprofit partners in operational leadership (multi-level) training opportunities, and already existing National Park Service training. This type of collaborative training will greatly benefit both the nonprofit partners and the National Park Service.

### 4. Decision Making

Decisions must be made more quickly. This mainly has to do with the layering of agreements and multiple written approvals that are time-consuming, cumbersome and difficult to manage and enforce. Often it seems the delays come from divisions within a particular park's management. These kinds of delays are

costly, frustrating and can inhibit timely implementation and execution of partnership agreements as well as program and fundraising activities.

**Suggestion:** Approval processes should be streamlined to fit the pace of business in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This will improve mission-related results for both partners and will save both donor and taxpayer money.

## 5. Sharing Information/Changes in Rules

The complexity of the rules/regulations that we operate under in the national parks makes it difficult to stay abreast of changes in the rules.

**Suggestion:** In order to facilitate compliance on the part of NatureBridge and other partners, NPS should consider a system of alerts and better communication to assure timely notification of changing requirements.

We welcome the opportunity to work with the Subcommittee to find ways to build and foster more effective partnerships while honoring and enhancing the mission of both of our organizations.

Best regards,



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NatureBridge