



July 27, 2021

The Honorable Angus King
Chair
Subcommittee on National Parks
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Steve Daines
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on National Parks
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chair King, Ranking Member Daines and Members of the Committee,

On behalf of the Outdoor Recreation Roundtable (ORR), thank you for bringing attention to the recreation experience in national parks by holding tomorrow's hearing on the impacts of overcrowding in our national parks on park resources and visitor experiences, and strategic approaches to visitor use management. We are pleased to provide the perspective of the outdoor recreation industry and share strategies and opportunities to maintain a sustainable and memorable visitor experience in our national parks.

ORR is the nation's leading coalition of outdoor recreation trade associations — made up of 34 national members, as well as other non-profit organizations and business entities — serving more than 110,000 businesses. According to the most recent data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis released last year, the recreation industry generated \$788 billion in economic output, accounted for 2.1 percent of GDP, supported 5.2 million jobs, and was growing faster than the economy in every indicator.

COVID-19 turned a spotlight on the outdoor recreation industry like never before. As Americans craved safe, rejuvenating activities during the pandemic, millions turned to the outdoors — many for the first time. A survey published in May 2020 found that 81 percent of Americans had already spent time outside at that point in the pandemic, with 32.5 percent turning to outdoor recreation for the first time. 8.1 million more Americans hiked in 2020 vs. 2019 (a 16.3 percent increase), and the total percentage of Americans who participate in outdoor recreation rose from the previous ten years. Many sectors within the industry saw record participation numbers in the past year: freshwater fishing added 3.4 million participants in 2020, shipments of RVs reached an all-time high in the first quarter of 2021, new model powersports sales increased 40 percent in 2020 over 2019 levels, and retail unit sales of new powerboats in the U.S. increased by 12 percent in 2020 over 2019. These figures capture our nation's recognition over the past year that outdoor recreation provides significant physical health, mental health, and community benefits. Importantly, new participants in outdoor recreation are younger, predominantly female, and more diverse.

While ORR celebrates the increase in participation, and the countless physical and mental health benefits of time spent outside, and their associated economic activity in communities nearby national parks, we share the Committee's concerns about unsustainable visitor pressures on the National Park System. After all, our national parks are only as healthy and memorable as the support we provide them, and our shared American outdoor experience is only as equitable as those who can access it. Many of these issues — overcrowding in some places, and lack of green space and access in others — have been growing for years and the pandemic has exacerbated their impacts. For these reasons, we share the following recommendations for the Committee's consideration:

- **Invest in visitor use data capture and utilization**

- Currently, national parks primarily capture visitation data at park entrances and overnight campgrounds and share these statistics to the public monthly and annually. While this data is useful for informing processes within, and appropriations for the National Park Service (NPS), it is not particularly useful to the public, who lack real-time, transparent visitation data to make choices about where to recreate within a park or where to plan their vacation. NPS and other public land management agencies can invest in big data strategies with novel data sources like cell phone data, search engines, fitness tracking apps and social media platforms to provide real-time indicators of visitation use.¹ In today's increasingly connected society, visitors could interpret this data to make the best decisions on where and when to go for the park experience they want and what might be a more suitable or sustainable recreation experience at a land unit nearby.
- **Communicate openly with guides, outfitters, and concessioners**
 - Expanding reservation systems across the National Park System could challenge business operations and planning for guides, outfitters, and concessioners, who have forecasted attendance based off visitation policies in years past. Should reservation programs be expanded across national parks, NPS should communicate early and openly with these service providers and incorporate them into the policymaking process.
- **Ensure equitable access**
 - The rise of reservation systems could entrench a lack of access for communities without reliable internet access like those in rural America, as well as low-income, tribal, and/or communities of color. Proactive efforts should be made to ensure equitable access to reservation systems for all Americans.
- **Support surrounding communities**
 - When national park visitation breaks records, surrounding communities also bear the burden of increased pressure on roads, sewer systems, emergency services, and affordable housing. Congress should take an all-of-government approach to support communities surrounding national parks and other public land units by increasing investments to existing NPS community partnership programs as well those from other agencies including USDA Rural Development, EDA Public Works and Economic Adjustment Assistance, HUD Public Housing, and the EPA's Recreation Economy for Rural Communities.
- **Work with the private sector to highlight lesser-visited parks and promote responsible recreation**
 - NPS should see outdoor businesses as critical partners in mitigating visitor use impacts. By creating an advisory council to talk about visitor use across the National Park System and develop marketing strategies to mitigate overuse, NPS and the outdoor industry both win as the national park experience improves to the average user. Outdoor businesses, especially retailers, campground and marina operators and boat and RV dealers could be informed to point customers to the recreation experience they are looking for, as opposed to a popular destination.
- **Enhance Interpretation at Park Units**
 - NPS Interpreters are critical on-the-ground resources to shape and manage visitor experience at our national parks. By increasing funding for, and supporting interpretive staff, NPS can helpfully intercept new and existing users early in their experience to promote responsible recreation habits and spread visitation use to meet visitor capacity objectives.

¹ Lawson, Megan, "Innovative New Ways to Count Outdoor Recreation." Headwaters Economics, March 2021

- **Re-examine FLREA to match modern visitation pressures**
 - Since the signing of the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) in 2004, visitation patterns have increased and shifted dramatically, and some parks have begun to enact limits on visitation. To ensure that fee revenue collection strategies continue to match recreation needs, the outdoor recreation community is ready to work with agencies and Congress to determine whether FLREA reform may be necessary to meet the demands of modern visitation pressures.
- **Implement GAOA to expand public land access and address deferred maintenance**
 - Finally, these pressures underscore the need for efficient implementation of the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA), which provided permanent full funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) and established a new Legacy Restoration Fund to address the deferred maintenance backlog across the public land system. By seeking swift implementation of GAOA, Congress reduces visitor use pressure by creating more recreation opportunities through LWCF and enhances those that already existing park assets through the Legacy Fund.

We appreciate the focus of tomorrow's hearing and see both Congress and NPS as important partners in stewarding Americans' love and enjoyment of outdoor recreation activities. We look forward to working with your subcommittee in the coming months to support healthy parks, people, communities and economies.

We hope the Senate Energy & Natural Resources Committee in the 117th Congress will see us as a key partner in this work going forward.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Turner", is enclosed within a thin black rectangular border.

Jessica Turner
Executive Director