

REMARKS AT URBAN PARKS CONFERENCE

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I am delighted to have this opportunity to join Michael DiBerardinis in providing some brief closing remarks to this historic conference on parks and the health of our great cities. It has been a delight to get to know this national audience of urban park advocates the past three days. We are all enriched for this experience, and so are our parks. And it is great to have this meeting in Pennsylvania, home of 18 very diverse units of the national park system.

I would like to help us all leave Pittsburgh on a note of optimism about the future of our park systems across the country and especially in our metropolitan areas. As a long-time advocate of the national park system and as a representative of the 90 year-old National Parks Conservation Association, I'd like to make a few comments about the future role of the national park system and the National Park Service in serving the needs of our people in and around our cities.

America will celebrate the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the National Park Service and the national park system in 2016. The upcoming centennial is already enjoying a great deal of public attention and political support. The national parks have at last received some of the much-needed and long-overdue additional funding to manage the 391 park units under their jurisdiction. As a result of a \$122 million increase in its Fy '08 operating budget, NPS is hiring up to 3,000 new seasonal employees to expand interpretation, visitor enjoyment and protection. Additional new money could come to the Park Service for the next fiscal year if and when the current budget deadlock between Congress and the administration ends.

There are other hopeful developments on the horizon.

- NPCA has convened a National Parks Second Century Commission that is co-chaired by former Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker and past Senate Energy/Natural Resources Committee Chair Bennett Johnston. The Commission has 28 prominent and enthusiastic park advocates including education reform leaders, the outdoor recreation industry, noted scholars and authors and former senior government officials, governors and other members of Congress. They plan to release a report next September directed at the next administration and Congress that includes key recommendations for action necessary to enhance the value of our national parks for all Americans.

- Ken Burns and his partner Dayton Duncan are in the final stages of editing a six-part PBS special on the history of the national parks. Those who have seen the rough cuts of the series report it is an uplifting and breathtakingly beautiful portrayal of the evolution of what many believe to be the best idea America ever had.
- For the first time in history we have two Presidential candidates who have made it clear they are personally attached and committed to the national parks and are prepared to lead the 2016 national park centennial celebration.

How can all of this enthusiasm and interest help our parks in the great cities of this country? Well, the National Park Service has a substantial presence in many of those urban areas—Golden Gate NRA in San Francisco, Santa Monica Mountains NRA in the Los Angeles basin, Gateway NRA in New York, Cuyahoga Valley between Cleveland and Akron, Independence Hall, the Liberty Bell and the historic Independence Mall in Philadelphia, and the magnificent monuments and memorials in Washington, DC are just some examples. In addition, the Park Service’s external Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program has been a reliable partner for the past several decades with local communities and coalitions across the country.

I see several important urban parks initiatives for the National Park Service as it approaches its 100th birthday.

- First, it must redouble its commitment to preserve the natural, cultural and recreational value of the parks it manages in our metro areas. That means acquiring private inholdings in parks threatened by development such as the lands north of the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia within Valley Forge National Historical Park where NPCA and local citizens are opposing a proposed hotel and conference center. That means not allowing business interests in St. Louis to take over NPS lands for riverfront development adjacent to the famed Jefferson Expansion Memorial Gateway Arch. And that means finally creating a compelling vision and plan for a worthy Gateway National Recreation Area in New York City nearly 40 years after it was created.
- Second, the Park Service should expand its role as a key partner for parks and protected areas in our cities and metro areas. Through its role in preserving natural and cultural resources in small and large cities across the country, and as a partner, technical advisor and collaborator through its external outreach, NPS must strive to create a truly seamless system of parks in urban communities. This is one of the most important governmental and private partnerships in America.
- Third, it is beyond time for the national park system to more completely honor and represent the racial and ethnic diversity that is the strength of this country. While we have made some progress in establishing park units that reflect African American history and culture, there is little representation of Latino culture. Some important aspects of the peopling of America are

reflected in the system; others are not. Our park and historic preservation agencies at all levels of government should collaborate on a plan of action to make this happen during our Second Century. The National Heritage Area model is a good start in that direction.

It is such a pleasure to be here, and to be reminded by the presence of the National Association for Olmstead Parks that America's greatest park planner helped design our national parks and our city parks.

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