

Briefing Statement

Bureau: National Park Service
Issue: Wilderness Stewardship
Office: National Park Service, Wilderness Leadership Council
Date: October 29, 2008

Issue

Improving agency and public stewardship of Wilderness areas

Background

The Wilderness Act of 1964 requires federal land managers to preserve unimpaired the special places that offer outstanding opportunities to experience solitude and a natural environment predominantly unchanged by man. This has become increasingly difficult as land use pressures and a fast changing climate threaten resources.

We must ensure that Wilderness is a fundamental consideration and focus of the National Park Service as it prepares for the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act in 2014 and the NPS Centennial in 2016 as benchmarks for organizational progress. Protecting the composite of all resources -an enduring resource for wilderness - must be institutionalized in servicewide programs.

The Bush administration challenged the National Park Service and the American people to work together to strengthen the parks and prepare them for another century of conservation, preservation and public enjoyment. This was the Centennial Challenge and it has direct application to Wilderness, which comprises nearly 53% of National Park System lands.

Current Status

- Despite the fact that the National Park Service administers 41% of the National Wilderness Preservation System, the NPS Wilderness Stewardship Program continues to be among the smallest, in terms of funding and staffing, of all the federal wilderness agencies.
- We rely on substantially outdated and obsolete media or information that fails to capture the attention of a younger, broader audience necessary for effective wilderness appreciation and advocacy. Many parks have inadequate wilderness management plans that cannot or do not convey current stewardship responsibility. In some cases Wilderness is managed “silently” and incidentally.
- Wilderness is the best natural context for understanding the environmental implications caused by global climate change. Wilderness serves as a benchmark to compare predominantly natural environments against changes to other environments. The protection of this critical benchmark must be the focus of the NPS as global climate changes intensify.

NPS Position

The NPS must embrace a meaningful vision for a second century of Wilderness preservation and enjoyment. This vision should emphasize our responsibility for environmental leadership through improved protection of existing Wilderness, achieving formal designation of long-pending proposed and eligible Wilderness and through on-

going and productive multi-level partnerships and collaboration with organizations such as:

- Emerging Environmental Groups
- Tribes and Native organizations
- State, county and municipal governments and gateways
- Tourism organizations
- The science community
- Schools and Universities

Stakeholder Positions

Attitudes towards wilderness have changed since 1964. There was originally much resistance to Wilderness designations in the developing west as Wilderness designation was often viewed as the most extreme deprivation of land use. It is past time to capture and draw attention to some of these attitudinal changes to enhance a broader appreciation for Wilderness. Engaging new Wilderness advocates, Native Americans and organizations who have come to appreciate Wilderness as the most special connection between humans and their true natural environment is a timely opportunity for this new administration.

Action Needed

We must improve federal emphasis and funding where possible, inspiring renewed interest and support of:

- Developing benchmarks for Wilderness character and values and implementing a monitoring protocol to measure changes
- Completing legislatively mandated wilderness review processes and developing/updating delinquent Wilderness plans and other management policy documents
- Advancing wild river management plans involving segments outside parks to assure desired conditions of entire watersheds are shared
- Achieving formal designation of long-pending proposed and eligible Wilderness areas
- Assuring the protection of Wilderness as a critical resource benchmark as global climate changes intensify
- Developing external Wilderness preservation programs/curriculum
- Developing an internal Stewardship Training requirement at the Fundamentals level; increasing understanding of wilderness by NPS staff and cooperators
- Expanding park base budgets to hire wilderness coordinators
- Completing legal maps and descriptions of all park units