

White House Recreation and Parks Roundtable
February 7, 2007
Shenandoah National Park
Remarks by Derrick Crandall

Americans have long turned to the Great Outdoors for timber and food, for adventure and for health – for re-creation of mind, body and spirit.

The intertwining of American lifestyles and the outdoors has shaped our art, our literature, our music and has made us global leaders in creating systems like national parks.

Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, Denali – these are legacies we share regardless of our age, our state of residency, our ethnic background, our financial condition. Our parks and other public lands are glue that links all 300 million Americans. They provide more than one billion special experiences for us each year.

Today's careful management of the Great Outdoors is no accident. Americans with vision and Americans committed to action made it happen. How grateful we are for leaders like President Teddy Roosevelt and his work a century ago!

Vision and action today can insure that the legacy of the outdoors is just as important to Americans a century from now. And the recreation community is pleased and proud to join you, Mr. President, and your team including Secretary Kempthorne, as you demonstrate that vision about the Great Outdoors is still a vital force today. The Centennial Challenge is just what America needs.

Today, we face awesome challenges, externally and internally. I want to take a minute to address a challenge very much at home.

The news media talks about red states and blue states. The CDC puts a different meaning on this. The growth of red states in CDC maps between 1985 and 2005 is nothing to cheer about. It shows a dramatic increase in the percentage of Americans who are overweight and subject to higher health risks ranging from diabetes to hypertension to heart disease to cancer – and generally lower quality of life.

Governor Schwarzenegger gave us a rather dramatic image recently – Californians alone have added 360 million pounds of obesity in ten years. This problem costs our nation billions of dollars each year, contributing to the skyrocketing costs of health care. Even worse, the health problems from obesity are most acute with our youth and Americans of color.

And the cause? Partly diet. But a big factor is reduced levels of physical activity. And the Great Outdoors is symbolic of the problem. There has been no real growth in visits to federal recreation sites – and the benefits these visits provide – for years, despite a growing population.

You first addressed this problem in June 2002, asking the National Park Service and other public land managers to help the nation add more physical activity through time in the Great Outdoors. And just last week you added a new superstar in this campaign – Shrek – as you announced the combined efforts of the federal government, the Business Roundtable, the Ad Council and others to attack childhood obesity. You said it so well, sir:

"One way for this nation to cope with the issue of obesity is to get people outside -- whether it be through sports or hiking or conservation. So we'll encourage them to do that, encourage parents to encourage their children to participate in the great outdoors."

That is vision. And the Centennial Challenge adds the action piece. Your proposal gives the National Park Service, the recreation industry and the conservation community the resources to reach out to those Shrek touches to help them actually benefit from time in the Great Outdoors.

As you have made clear, gaining the benefits of the outdoors for all Americans is a big job. We need to put the outdoors on the radar screen of all Americans, and especially our youth. We need to help families enjoy the outdoors. We need to embrace the work of thousands of organizations and agencies across the country working creatively to invite Americans out to play – like the state of Connecticut with its No Child Left Indoors effort which includes state park passes that can be checked out at public libraries and free state park passes for every family caring for foster children.

Your proposal will let the National Park Service lead the way by adding interpretive rangers and using Mp3 players and iPods to tell stories that leave tomorrow's visitors as enraptured by the Great Outdoors as I was decades ago, when I first camped as a youth at Acadia and Cape Hatteras.

The Great Outdoors, and especially our parks, offer much to 21st Century America. Where can we learn better about our history than at the Lincoln Memorial and Gettysburg, or about geology than at Lassen and Crater Lake. And community service in the Great Outdoors for youth is fun, healthy and an effective tool in campaigns against substance abuse, vandalism and gang activities.

Mr. President, your Centennial Challenge offers companies and individuals a chance to play an active part in defining the future of our parks and in making visits to the Great Outdoors a part of healthy lives for all Americans, urban or rural, rich or poor, regardless of color or how many generations back our roots in America extend.

There are companies represented in this room – like Coleman and REI – ready to make quantum leaps in their efforts as partners with the National Park Service and other federal agencies through your challenge. We can do it – raise needed funds, create good information systems to connect people and places, communicate. Together, we can provide many, more memories and much more benefit to the nation while still caring for our Great Outdoors. After all, people are parks' best friends.

Thank you, Mr. President.

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