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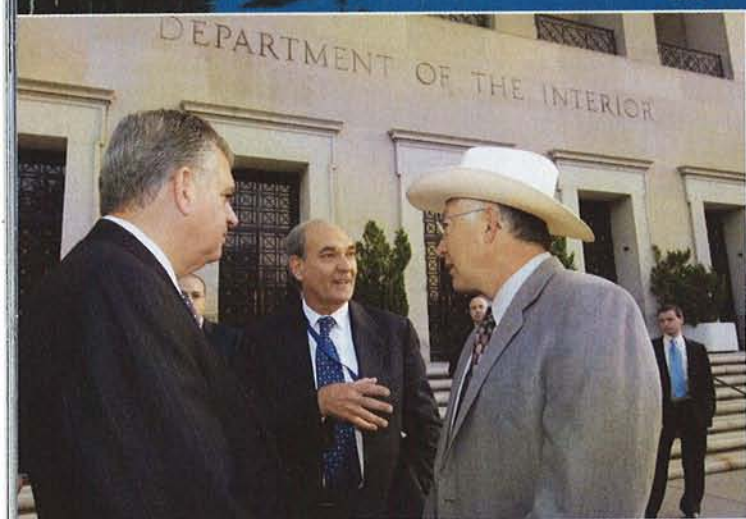


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# FROM THE TOP

## BOLD INITIATIVES SEEK TO BOOST VISITS TO AMERICA'S NATIONAL PARKS

by MICHAEL SCIULLA



American Recreation Coalition President Derrick Crandall, center, makes a point with U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, left, and U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar outside the U.S. Department of Interior in Washington, D.C.



RVIA President Richard Coon, left, shows off some of the amenities of a Winnebago Via to U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar during a recent conference promoting outdoor recreation in Washington, D.C.

**L**ong a favored destination for RVers, our national parks got a welcome dose of attention last summer as the first family took advantage of one of three “fee-free” weekends by visiting Yellowstone and Grand Canyon national parks. Add in Ken Burns’ 12-hour PBS documentary, “The National Parks — America’s Best Idea,” and renewed interest in getting Americans off the couch and out into the great outdoors has definitely taken hold.

To that end, steps are being taken by the Obama administration to reverse a two-decade decline in visits to national parks. U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, whose

department manages 25 percent of the nation’s surface, used a June 2009 visit to Cuyahoga Valley National Park in Ohio — where he was joined by Airstream President Bob Wheeler — to announce the first of the fee-free weekends to kick off a promotion of the 391 national park units.

More recently, at a Washington, D.C., forum on stimulating gateway communities through park visitor spending, Salazar was joined by U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, who outlined a new “livability” focus for transportation policies that encourages time outdoors. Salazar echoed the thought, suggesting that the administration would soon launch just such a crusade.

Focusing on actions and not words is

a good rule of thumb when trying to decide if Washington is serious about an issue, and there is encouraging news here. The park entrance fee waiver experiment was a tangible step in helping to stimulate demand for recreation, but the Obama administration also has directed almost \$1 billion in stimulus money for road rehabilitation, facilities maintenance, and restoration and protection projects across the country. According to Salazar, the money will “create jobs and preserve American history and heritage for future generations.” Additional funding to provide new and upgraded shuttle systems to reduce congestion in the parks is also in the works.

Beyond the immediate stimulus fund-

PHOTOS: NPS (LEAD); TAMI HEILEMANN, U.S. DEPT. OF INTERIOR

## Q&A WITH KEN SALAZAR

**MH:** Many Americans are concerned that today's youths spend little time in the outdoors. Does that concern you, and are you taking steps to connect young Americans with the outdoors?

**Salazar:** *More and more, Americans — and in particular, young people — are losing touch with the landscapes that give us a sense of place in the world that have long shaped the American experience. An average young person today spends six hours a day in front of a computer or TV and less than four minutes playing outdoors. From 1997 to 2003, there was a decline of 50 percent in the proportion of children age 9 to 10 who spent time in outdoor activities. Helping kids get outdoors has been a priority of mine for a long time, and I am proud of the progress we have made in the Obama administration on this agenda. I signed a Secretarial Order creating the Office of Youth in Natural Resources in the Department of the Interior, and President Obama has asked Congress to increase the budget of Interior's youth programs by \$70 million in (fiscal year) 2010, an increase of \$50 million over (fiscal year) 2009. The Office of Youth in Natural Resources headed by Bob Stanton, former director of the National Park Service, will coordinate present and future youth initiatives, the signature program of which will be a 21st Century Youth Conservation Corps.*

**MH:** You helped line up funds for parks from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act shortly after taking office. Will those investments make a difference to park visitors this summer?

**Salazar:** *We are already seeing the benefits of the president's economic recovery plan in national parks, wildlife refuges and public lands across the country. The \$3 billion that the Department of the Interior is investing through the Recovery Act is creating jobs while delivering lasting value for the American people. You can see the investments in parks across the country, from Hot Springs National Park in Arkansas, where we are rehabilitating 20 miles of trails, to Great Smoky Mountains National Park, where we are investing \$30 million to fix roads and improve the visitors' experience. The president's economic recovery plan represents the most significant investment in our national treasures in generations.*

**MH:** How can Americans get involved in aiding our parks and other public lands?

**Salazar:** *Volunteers have long been essential to keeping our parks and public lands in good condition, and to helping educate others about their value. Every year, more than 170,000 park volunteers help with everything from clearing trails and staffing information desks to counting species in a BioBlitz. You can find information about volunteering at*



*www.nps.gov/getinvolved. In addition, last summer President Obama and first lady Michelle Obama launched the "United We Serve" initiative in partnership with the Corporation for National and Community Service. United We Serve is a clearinghouse of volunteer opportunities. Americans who are interested in volunteering can use this tool to locate opportunities to*

*serve across the country. I would encourage your readers to go to [www.serve.gov](http://www.serve.gov) to look for opportunities to volunteer in their local communities.*

**MH:** You took an unusual step shortly after taking office — announcing a number of fee-free weekends in national parks. We know a part of your message was to reassure American families feeling economic pain that there were great and inexpensive places to go in the summer. But do you feel that there can and should be an ongoing effort to promote visits to parks and public lands and waters, especially during non-peak periods and to those areas that are lesser known and less visited?

**Salazar:** *Last year, with the fee-free weekends and with President Obama and his family visiting Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon, we were pleased to see a significant increase in visitation to our national parks. Particularly with the economic troubles we are experiencing, Americans seem to be choosing national parks as affordable vacation destinations. That is great to see. We have to continue to remind people of the outdoor opportunities that are near their homes, and work to expand access to all Americans.*

**MH:** The National Park Service will celebrate its 100th anniversary in 2016. Any special plans?

**Salazar:** *The 100th anniversary of the national park system is a terrific opportunity to look ahead to the next century for America's parks, wildlife refuges and public lands. ... We have restored the nation's commitment to wise investments in our parks and public lands after years of cuts and declining operational budgets. We have received counsel from the Congress, from the public and from blue-ribbon commissions on how we can use the centennial of the National Park Service to protect all of America's great places, including our parks, and we are looking at new ideas for how we can better protect our treasured landscapes. When I was the director of the Department of Natural Resources in Colorado, I helped create a program called Great Outdoors Colorado that has proven to be one of the most successful land conservation initiatives in the country. This is the type of long-term thinking that we should apply at the national level so that we can create a strong legacy of stewardship that we can pass along to future generations.*

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ing, Secretary Salazar has hinted at a "crusade for America's landscape" that would involve getting the government to spend billions of dollars that were authorized but never appropriated under the long-dormant federal Land and Water Conservation Fund. Fed by offshore oil revenues, the fund was created in the 1960s and was supposed to provide a major and steady source of funding for land acquisition and outdoor recreation.

"There has been no greater broken promise than what has been allowed to happen to the Land and Water Conservation Fund," said Salazar, noting that upward of \$22 billion could have been spent on outdoor projects had successive Congresses actually allocated what they authorized.

Whether Salazar will ultimately succeed is an open question. However, based on his record in Colorado — where he led successful efforts in the early 1990s to guarantee use of state lottery proceeds for outdoor projects — he seems to be up to the challenge.

The renewed emphasis on the great outdoors and the potential of more funds for recreation is music to the ears of Derrick Crandall, president of the American Recreation Coalition. "We are fortunate to have outdoor champions and experienced Washington insiders like Secretary Salazar and Secretary LaHood going to bat for outdoor recreation in the highest councils of government," he said.

What this will mean for RVers and the RV industry is unclear. But with more than 63 percent of those responding to a 2009 Recreation Vehicle Industry Association (RVIA) survey saying that RVing in a national park was a "favorite activity," it seems that the administration's efforts will find favor not only among the 8 million current RVers but also potential new RVers.

In fact, RVIA President Richard Coon was delighted to show Salazar and LaHood around a new Winnebago Via Class A motorhome parked at the front steps of the U.S. Department of Interior, three blocks from the White House — and to celebrate with them the first significant increase in park visits in years. Nudged, perhaps, by the first of the fee-free weekends, the National Park Service noted a 3 percent upswing in attendance through the end of July 2009 compared with a year earlier. ♦

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