

August 30, 2006

The Honorable Dirk Kempthorne
Secretary of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Kempthorne:

Outdoor recreation enriches the lives of virtually every American. Whether on urban trails or in distant wilderness, whether alone or in the company of family and friends, recreational experiences provide mental, physical and spiritual benefits. The national park system provides some 270 million of these experiences annually, people enjoying and benefiting from the vision of Americans who pioneered the conservation movement by establishing the world's first national park system.

The 1916 Organic Act of the National Park Service established a clear mission for the agency:

“to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.”

We believe that the National Park Service is not fulfilling this mission with regard to enjoyment of the parks. The creators of the National Park Service understood the value of visits to our parks and sought to encourage and provide infrastructure designed for memorable visits. We find this understanding and action lacking today.

Today, our national park system is providing fewer valuable experiences than it did 20 years ago. While the national park system has grown from 310 to 390 units over the last 20 years (up 25%), while the U.S. population has climbed from 243 million to 300 million (up 23%), and while our spending on parks has grown substantially (a 300% increase in the agency's operating budget), the number of visitations to the national park system has actually decreased from 287 million in 1987 to a projected 270 million visits in 2006 – a decline of 6%. And agency projections call for a further 1% decline in 2007. Fewer Americans are visiting and benefiting from our parks, and the failure to deliver these benefits to urban Americans, youth, senior citizens, the disabled and Americans of diverse ethnicity should be of particular concern to all of us.

Moreover, just 63 million of these 270 million visits – 23% – can be attributed to the 58 units designated as national parks. Our national recreation areas, national seashores and other types of units drew more than 75% of all visits to the national park system.

We believe that the lands and waters administered by the National Park Service have the capacity to provide enjoyment for millions of additional visitors taking part in appropriate activities, delivering experiences yielding needed mental, physical and spiritual benefits.

Letter to The Honorable Dirk Kempthorne
August 30, 2006
Page Two

We know there is demand. Recreation spending has increased dramatically over the past 20 years – the Bureau of Economic Analysis reports recreation spending increased by 386% from 1984 to 2004 (versus increases of 362% on health care and 154% on food!).

If the national park system can accommodate additional visitors without impairment, if these additional visits would provide measurable benefits to individuals and the nation, then what is constraining visits and what can be done to overcome these constraints?

We ask your help in answering these questions. We urge you to direct the National Park Service to work with diverse constituents to investigate and reverse the reasons for the decline in benefits to the American public being provided by its national park system. It is time for all who celebrate the legacy of our national parks to work together to ensure that the park system remains relevant to most Americans – a natural outgrowth of a return to the balanced intent of the Organic Act. We believe one key constraint on visits has been agency policies, attitudes and practices, where the value of enjoyment of the parks is consistently undervalued and the diversity of the national park system is obscured.

We ask your help. We invite you to help Americans who visit and know our parks prove that they are the best friends of the national park system.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

America Outdoors
American Association for Nude Recreation
American Council of Snowmobile Associations
American Horse Council
American Horse Publications
American Motorcyclist Association
American Quarter Horse Association

American Recreation Coalition
Americans for Responsible Recreational Access
American Saddlebred Horse Association
of Georgia
Appaloosa Horse Club
Arkansas Chapter of the Missouri Foxtrotters-
Trail Riders
Arkansas Horse Council, Inc.
Arkansas Trail Riders Association
Association of Marina Industries
Association of Wisconsin Snowmobile Clubs
Back Country Horsemen of America

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Christine Jourdain, Executive Director
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Peter Nonis, Senior Legislative Assistant
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Steve Taylor, Representative
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Brooke Fishel, Operations Manager
Bill Pfaff, President
Merlyn Huso, Chairman

Letter to The Honorable Dirk Kempthorne
August 30, 2006
Page Three

Back Country Horsemen of America, Buffalo River Chapter, Arkansas	Peggy Thompson, Representative
Back Country Horsemen of America, Front Range Chapter	Jim Chaney, Director
Back Country Horsemen of New Mexico, Lower Rio Grande Chapter	Pat Buls, Secretary
Back Country Horsemen of Washington Willapa Hills Chapter	Kate Adair, Director
Bay State Trail Riders Association, Inc.	Becky Kalagher, President
Beaver Valley Sno-Goers	Melissa M. Wolf-Tveito, Secretary
BlueRibbon Coalition	Greg Mumm, Executive Director
Boat Owners Association of the United States (BoatU.S.)	Ryck Lydecker, Assistant Vice President, Government Affairs
Colorado Snowmobile Association	Janelle Kukuk, President
Equestrian Trails, Inc.	Lynn Brown, National Trail Coordinator
Family Motor Coach Association	Don Eversmann, Executive Director
Florida RV Trade Association	Lance Wilson, Executive Director
Georgia Morgan Horse Club	Debbie Ferrell, President
Good Sam Club	Sue Bray, Executive Director
Gray Wolf Outfitters	Glenn Cantwell
Greater Houston Horse Council	Melodie Cleveland
Harrison Round Up Club	Peggy Thompson
Horse Council of Nevada	Bob Byer, President
Idaho Horse Council	Jim Evans, President
Illinois Association of Snowmobile Clubs	Steven A. Hefel, President
The Indiana Snowmobilers Association, Inc.	Len Neisler, President
International Snowmobile Manufacturers Association	Ed Klim, President
Kansas Horse Council	Lise Streit, Executive Director
Marine Retailers Association of America	Phil Keeter, President
Marine Trades Association of Maryland	Susan Zellers, Executive Director
Michigan Boating Industries Association	Van W. Snider, Jr., CAE, President
Michigan Snowmobile Association	William D. Manson, Executive Director
Montana Outfitters and Guides Association	Mac Minard, Executive Director
Motorcycle Industry Council	Duane Taylor, Government Relations Specialist
National Alliance of Gateway Communities	Aubrey King, President
National Association of RV Parks and Campgrounds	Linda Profaizer, President
National Forest Recreation Association	Marily Reese, Executive Director
National Marine Manufacturers Association	Monita W. Fontaine, Esq., Vice President, Government Relations
National Park Hospitality Association	Tod Hull, Washington Representative

Letter to The Honorable Dirk Kempthorne
August 30, 2006
Page Four

National Ski & Snowboard Retailers Association
National Tour Association
Nebraska State Snowmobile Association
New York State Horse Council
Northeast Snowmobile Club Association
Northern Colorado Back Country Horsemen
Ohio Horse Council
Oregon State Snowmobile Association
Paso Fino Horse Association
Pennsylvania State Snowmobile Association, Inc.
Personal Watercraft Industry Association
RAFT MAINE
Recreation Roundtable
Recreation Vehicle Dealers Association

Recreation Vehicle Industry Association
Rockingham Riding Club
Roundup Riders of the Rockies,
Heritage and Trails Foundation, Inc.
Show Me Missouri Back Country Horsemen
Siouxland Shady Brady Saddle Club
Snowmobile North Dakota
Southeast Tourism Policy Council
Specialty Equipment Market Association

Specialty Vehicle Institute of America

SUV Owners of America
Tennessee Horse Council
Tennessee Walking Horse
Breeders and Exhibitors Association
Tread Lightly!, Inc.
Utah Snowmobile Association
Vermont Association of Snow Travelers, Inc.
Washington Outfitters and Guides Association
Washington State Snowmobile Association
Western States Tourism Policy Council
Wyoming State Snowmobile Association

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