

Statement of Derrick Crandall, Counselor, National Park Hospitality Association, Before the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, U.S. Senate, on Preparing the National Park Service for Its Centennial, December 8, 2015

Madame Chair and Distinguished Committee Members, the National Park Hospitality Association (NPHA) offers this testimony regarding legislation preparing the National Park Service for its Centennial in 2016. NPHA is both enthusiastic about and actively engaged in activities associated with the Centennial of the National Park Service. The role of this agency in protecting and supporting the enjoyment of the special legacy of America's more than 400 park units is important and appreciated by the public.

We applaud and share the interest of the Congress in using the Centennial as a time to assess and improve the tools available to protect, promote and manage our park units. We are proud of the role we played, in concert with the Bipartisan Policy Center and the National Parks Conservation Association, in hosting a Bridgebuilder session in March 2013 examining **Sustainable Supplementary Funding for America's National Parks**. We offered sixteen white papers for Congressional and agency consideration, from a new Penny for Parks increase in federal motorfuel taxes to provide better public access to the Great Outdoors to changes which would allow historic tax credits for investments in qualifying sites in parks. This Committee held a hearing on these ideas in July 2013.

Concessioners have served park visitors since the 1870's and today serve some 100 million park visitors annually in approximately 120 park units. Concessioners have a combined workforce of nearly 25,000 persons, mostly front-line, visitor contact jobs, and provide in excess of \$1.3 billion in goods and services to visitors annually. Concessioner franchise payments to NPS are more than \$100 million annually. Concessioner marketing and promotion efforts total more than \$20 million annually, and are coordinated with marketing and promotion efforts of states and gateway communities that equal that amount. Concessioners are leading efforts to promote the National Park System to all Americans to address a major problem: Visitation to parks has been flat over the past three decades, and has actually declined if you discount new units added to the system. Most importantly, concessioners are committed to meeting America's needs – needs for healthier lifestyles, for better and lifelong educational opportunities, for strong local and regional economies that can sustain and protect our parks and for connecting all Americans across differences in regions, ages, income and ethnicity.

We applaud efforts to enact meaningful NPS Centennial legislation. We support with enthusiasm provisions which invite and challenge organizational and individual donors – by leveraging the impact of their contributions. This is a proven strategy for parks and philanthropy in general. Our members were involved in an initial, successful Centennial Challenge effort mounted under then-Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne and help park visitors support park projects through the Guest Donation Program.

We further support the concept of an endowment for our parks, although we believe that the \$11.5 billion backlog in deferred maintenance is of such urgency that we cannot support diversion of fees and other current funding streams away from critical current operational needs.

Based upon our knowledge about visitation to America's national parks, we offer the following specific comments on S. 2257:

- 1) We recently reviewed the Discussion Draft prepared by the House Committee on Natural Resources addressing the Centennial of the National Park Service. We urge adoption by this Committee of that House document's purpose statement:

To prepare the National Park Service for its Centennial in 2016 and for a second century of promoting and protecting the natural, historic, and cultural resources of our National Parks for the enjoyment of present and future generations, and for other purposes.

- 2) We recommend a replacement in the funding stream proposed for the National Park Service Second Century Fund. The proposed 5% tax on lodging within national parks should not be adopted for several important reasons. First, it would alter the comparability provisions for the pricing of lodging in parks established under the 1998 concessions law. Second, the tax would be paid by a very small portion of all park visitors and would yield no responsive benefits to those paying the tax. Third, the tax could be a real deterrent to efforts to attract visitors to parks during shoulder seasons, undermining important streams of revenue to the agency from entrance fees and franchise fees that are key to operations and maintenance. Fourth, the addition of a new federal tax on state and county sales and tourism taxes, utility pass-through charges and more is likely to have a chilling effect on the guest donation program – again, an important source of support for park programs and projects today and an important opportunity for expansion as a funding strategy once needed revisions are made to NPS Directors Order 21. Fifth, the collection of this tax will impose a new administrative burden on concessioners.

Instead, we suggest that the Committee add a Centennial Park Entrance Fee Surcharge of \$1 on all existing entrance fees – whether for vehicles or per person. We believe that this would be a fair and appropriate means to raise revenues of at least \$10 million annually. We also believe that park visitors can be told about the surcharge in a way that will yield support, and perhaps interest in additional actions to support parks.

- 3) We enthusiastically support the continuation and expansion of the Centennial Challenge Program. Encouraging non-profits, corporations and individuals to contribute toward important national park programs and projects is a vital part of a long-term strategy for keeping America's parks relevant and well-functioning.

- 4) We support the proposal to authorize an appropriation of up to \$25 million annually for the National Park Foundation. We strongly support the Foundation's Centennial efforts, including leadership of the **Find Your Park Campaign**, to make our National Park System relevant, enjoyed and supported. We support continuing outreach efforts after the Centennial. We think appropriated general funding, and other sources including resource mitigation and penalty funds, can dramatically increase available park resources.
- 5) We urge the Committee to act outside of the current legislation to support creation of a **Centennial Penny for Parks** federal motorfuel excise tax surcharge. We are attaching our letter to the Chairman of the Committees on Finance and Environment and Public Works that further outlines this concept. The significant revenues associated with this program – an estimated \$1.5 billion annually -- would allow elimination of the large and growing backlog in transportation-related investment needs in national parks and other federally managed lands within a decade and could underwrite innovative ways to improve accessibility of all Americans to their Great Outdoors.
- 6) Our greatest concern involves TITLE VIII—National Park Service Visitor Services Management Program. We have previously advised the Committee and the agency that we believe the current Concessions Program of the agency needs major changes. This title not only fails to achieve any of these changes – changes in which the agency has publicly expressed interest – but threatens the core of more than a century of success in serving park visitors. In explaining this proposal, agency leaders have offered a vision of using management contracts as a replacement for the current concessions contracts. This vision is seriously flawed and is the antithesis of what the agency needs most today.

The National Park Service is, has been for several decades, and will continue to be for many years, a capital-strapped organization with a well-documented problem maintaining its infrastructure. A noteworthy exception has been the concessioner-operated buildings used for lodging, food service, retail and other visitor services. While serving a large portion of all park visitors, these structures are a minor part of the very large backlog of deferred maintenance. The reason is simple: these structures were largely built with private capital and have been maintained by concessioners with long-term commitment to the parks without use of appropriated general funds.

This pattern continues today. In Yellowstone National Park, as part of a new concessions contract, Xanterra is investing nearly \$200 million of its capital in major reconstruction and replacement of five lodges, an employee housing complex which has received LEED Platinum Certification and more. There is no taxpayer funding for these improvements, but these improvements will greatly benefit millions of visitors. There was no need to find an offset for this funding or to have this investment add to the Federal deficit. And the investment will be completely amortized over 40 years, through a straight line depreciation of Xanterra's investment. One additional and important note: Xanterra is

actively using conservation corps and returning veteran corps members in much of the Yellowstone project, leveraging its spending with programs that provide invaluable training and assistance to young Americans in need.

The new Yellowstone contract should be the pattern of all new NPS concessions contracts, but it is not. Until very recently, NPS has limited contracts to just ten years in length. And Yellowstone is a major exception to most concessions contracts which have sharply limited new investment by concessioners, despite authority provided by the 1998 Concessions Act. The agency needs to understand that ignoring use of the Leasehold Surrender Interest authority reduces the quality of visitor service and continues the pattern criticized by former U.S. Senator Coburn during a July 2013 hearing before this very Committee, when he noted that failure to continue regular maintenance and investment typically increases ultimate costs by a factor of five.

To better understand the challenge which would arise from the agency's advocacy of management contracts, consider the application of this idea to another successful public/private partnership model serving the nation's recreation needs on public lands: ski areas. Just like the Ahwahnee and El Tovar and other great park lodges, many of America's ski areas in national forests are world class. Ski areas rely upon 100% private investments made possible by permits of 40 years. Under the type of management contract outlined by NPS officials, taxpayer funds would be needed if Vail Resorts sought a new to build a new high speed detachable quad lift. And while using the ski area comparison, NPHA would like to applaud the leadership of this Committee in 2011, when it directed the Forest Service to facilitate additional means for the public to enjoy outdoor fun by expanding off-peak offerings at ski areas.

In addition to our concerns about the proposed use of management contracts, we believe that the National Park Service should be actively encouraged to increase and enhance visitor services. During the hearing referenced earlier before this Committee in July 2013, Senator John Barrasso asked the NPHA witness how concessioners could better serve park visitors. We responded with a listing of additional services that could be added quickly to make park experiences better, but which have each met resistance from NPS when proposed. Let me repeat that listing:

- ▶ **Astronomy classes and telescope rentals (including computer-aided scopes)**
- ▶ **Camera rentals, including all weather cameras and GPS-coded cameras**
- ▶ **Photography classes, including use of DSLR cameras and photo editing**
- ▶ **Seminars on using the outdoors for health**
- ▶ **Healthy and sustainable foods showcase weekends**
- ▶ **Wi-Fi service, with basic service free and more robust service on a fee basis**
- ▶ **Guided mountain bike tours on trails not normally allowing biking**
- ▶ **Rental tents, yurts and simple cabins erected in existing park campgrounds**
- ▶ **Backcountry fishing trips**
- ▶ **Special interpretation activities for kids**
- ▶ **Docu-dramas about park themes, history – like the Lost Colony production**

- ▶ **Zip lines**
- ▶ **Trail food services (like use of beverage carts on golf courses)**
- ▶ **Kayak rentals**
- ▶ **Fishing equipment rentals and lessons from mobile as well as stationary sites**
- ▶ **Electric bike rentals where regular bikes are rented**
- ▶ **Watchable wildlife tours**
- ▶ **Rental of glass-bottom, electric boats at certain units**
- ▶ **Airport pick-ups of visitors and luggage comparable to that offered by resorts**
- ▶ **Voluntourism programs**
- ▶ **Additional services to international visitors and group tours**

Our witness further noted that additions of these services would generate substantial new franchise fees to aid park operations. In fact, we have advised the National Park Service that new flexibility in concessioner operations could boost franchise fees by \$50 million annually within two years.

In March of 2015, the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform conducted a hearing on NPS concessions operations. Key testimony at that hearing included the following:

- 1) Historic Tours of America CEO Chris Belland noted that a delay of nearly two years in approving an increase in the passengers allowed on the Dry Tortugas National Park concessions ferry deprived some 10,000 visitors of an experience in the park, while causing hundreds of thousands of dollars in lost entrance fees and franchise fees by NPS.
- 2) Grand Teton Lodge Company and Flagg Ranch Company Vice President and General Manager Alex Klein called for key changes in concession operations, saying, “A system designed to reward those that provide excellence in concession operations would benefit both incumbent concessioners as well as the National Park Service. Rather than challenging ourselves to innovate every time a concession contract comes up, it would encourage constant innovation and excellence in the performance of a contract.” He also noted the failure of NPS to allow use of GAAP in assessing LSI valuation.
- 3) Terry MacRae, CEO of Hornblower Cruises, applauded agency efforts to encourage all Americans to visit parks. He noted, though, “Stagnant park visitation over the past two decades reflects more competing leisure choices today and reduced in-park visitor activity choices – potential visitors are choosing other destinations. There are fewer park campsites, fewer lodging rooms, fewer restaurant seats, fewer ranger-led walks, fewer tours and outings. Visitor services eliminated by NPS have not been offset by new outdoor activities and special events.”

In summary, we support a replacement for this title with a **Visitor Outreach and Experience Improvement Program**. The revised title would correct a pejorative orientation of the current title which reflects the unfortunate attitude that people are the enemy of our national parks and must be managed. We have had an Interior Secretary and several leading agency officials complain publicly that “visitors are loving our parks to death.” It is important to note that the National Park Service’s first

Director disagreed completely. He believed that the agency needed “to get people to use the parks before he could get legislation and appropriations.” More on this is found in the article from National Geographic entitled “How Good Old American Marketing Saved the National Parks” (March 2015).

For decades, national parks offered the leading example of use of private capital to support public agency efforts. Investments by concessioners since the early 1900’s have produced a remarkable set of treasured structures that are world-renowned. From Yosemite Valley to the Grand Canyon, from Grand Teton to Glacier, from Acadia to the Blue Ridge Parkway, lodges and restaurants and stores and marinas have been built with private capital – and are now some of the most prized elements of our National Register of Historic Places. We now see a similar pattern of public/private partnerships emerging in transportation and other programs. The National Park Service can and should build upon this wonderful tradition in its second century, guided and encouraged by new Congressional direction in the Centennial Act.

Specifically, we urge this new title to include direction to attract needed investment from concessioners to expand and improve visitor services in parks, including through modernization of lodges, campgrounds and marinas. Part of this modernization will depend upon legislative changes giving new flexibility to the agency, including authority to issue concessions contracts of up to 40 years – a provision that should permit eligibility for historic tax credits by concessioners and thus boost the attractiveness of significant investments that can permit existing and iconic structures to be functional and efficient and modernized to incorporate best practices in design. We also support repeal of a provision of the 1998 act interpreted by the agency to limit adding and testing new visitor services without instituting a new concession offering. Improved visitor experiences will also result from extension of operating hours and seasons and encouragement of the transfer of existing campgrounds to concessioner operations, which will offer more diverse overnight options, serve more visitors and generate new revenues for the agency.

We would also support experimentation with new models for public-private partnerships, especially for park units that now receive low visitation and/or have inadequate visitor services to accommodate greater visitation. We do support experimentation with leases and non-appropriated funding instrumentalities over the next decade, and support Congressional authority for up to ten pilot efforts which supplement, but do not compete with or replace, the agency’s current concessions contracts and authorities.

- 7) We ask the Congress to support revitalized NPS efforts to promote visitation of national parks, a core mission of the agency established under its 1916 organic act:

“The service thus established shall promote and regulate the use of the Federal areas known as national parks, monuments, and reservations ...”

Promotion efforts of the agency flourished during its initial 50 years of operations, including hosting the original U.S. Travel Bureau. In order to revitalize this core program, we urge the Congress to specifically authorize the use of up to 10% of the franchise fees paid by national park concessioners annually to support NPS outreach and marketing efforts in partnership with states, gateway communities and concessioners. We believe that outreach and promotion efforts will increase collection of park entrance and recreation fees sufficiently to underwrite both improvements in visitor experiences and specific efforts, including fee-free days, to successfully invite non-traditional park visitors. There are numerous examples of isolated and successful cooperative efforts now underway, including shared interpretive costs and outreach to international visitors through Federal Row at IPW, which could be made commonplace.

Most concessioner franchise fees are retained in the park generating those fees – 80% of all franchise fees are used locally. The remaining 20% are used at the discretion of the NPS Director. We urge incorporation in the Centennial Act of a new National Park Outreach and Promotion Fund and the following funding strategy:

"Up to 10% of the concessioner franchise fees collected by the agency each year may be used to support agency outreach and marketing programs designed to connect all Americans to their parks, and especially those portions of the American public under-represented among current park visitors. Nothing in this provision, however, shall authorize any change in the use of concessioner franchise fees retained by the park generating the fees. Outreach and marketing programs shall be undertaken in cooperation with state and regional DMOs and NPS concessioners, and shall require not less than 1:1 matching of federal funds."

- 8) We support increased use of conservation corps in national parks. Concessioners in Shenandoah National Park, Yellowstone National Park and other units are utilizing youth conservation corps to undertake construction, reconstruction and maintenance projects which replicate many of the successes of the Civilian Conservation Corps Program of the 1930's, including connecting urban youth to parks. Pilot projects have shown that use of conservation corps can also actually reduce project costs. Direction by the Congress in the Centennial Act would aid in expanding use of conservation corps in parks, working cooperatively with The Corps Network, the National Trust for Historic Preservation and concessioners, reducing the barrier of current Federal Acquisition Regulations (FAR) and more.

Madam Chairman and Members, we know you would agree that we need to get Americans back in touch with nature, engaged in physical activities and outdoor

recreation, and connected to the magnificent culture, heritage and landscapes that are celebrated by our National Park System. We need to reach out to youth to encourage them to share in the wonder and enjoyment of our national parks and discourage the increasingly sedentary lifestyles that are contributing to our health care crisis. We need to expand park visitation to encourage minorities, disadvantaged communities, new Americans and urban residents to see their national parks for themselves and to build a broader constituency for America's Great Outdoors. And, we need to find new and innovative ways to reinvest in the maintenance, restoration, and expansion of critical park infrastructure – much of which was built either by private investment when the national parks were first created, or in conjunction with the work of the Civilian Conservation Corps more than half a century ago.

The National Park Hospitality Association and the National Park concessioners want to help you, the National Park Service, and all Americans in achieving these objectives. As the 100th Anniversary of the National Park Service shines a light on America's Best Idea, we hope you will help us build on our longstanding partnership with the NPS to find new and innovative ways to improve the parks and create a new generation of Americans who share in the wonder of this amazing legacy.

We thank you for considering this testimony.

Derrick A. Crandall, Counselor
National Park Hospitality Association
1200 G Street, NW, Suite 650
Washington, DC 20005
202-682-9530
dcrandall@funoutdoors.com

Attachments

“How Good Old American Marketing Saved the National Parks”
Letter to Chairmen Hatch and Inhofe on Penny for Parks



December 4, 2015

The Honorable James Inhofe, Chairman
Committee on Environment and Public Works
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Orrin Hatch, Chairman
Committee on Finance
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairmen Inhofe and Hatch:

We are writing to urge your personal support in capitalizing on important opportunities and national needs regarding the transportation infrastructure of our nation's national parks and other legacy Great Outdoors areas. The National Park Service will celebrate its 100th anniversary in 2016 - a wonderful testimonial to bipartisan leadership to protect special natural and historic sites across our nation and to use these sites to tell some of our greatest stories. Our national parks and other public lands - including national forests and national wildlife refuges and more - attract more than a billion visits annually. But these special places are in trouble.

Nearly one-third of our nation is managed by federal agencies ranging from the National Park Service to the Forest Service, from the Bureau of Land Management to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. These lands are vital to the nation for many reasons and certainly for their importance to recreation and tourism. Recreation expenditures in this country total more than \$650 billion annually. To demonstrate the importance of federal lands, consider just three numbers:

- 1) national park **concessioners provide more than \$1.3 billion in lodging, food, transportation and other services to tens of millions of visitors to national parks** annually, employing 25,000 persons;
- 2) key sectors of the recreation community are especially reliant on these lands and waters. **More than 60% of all downhill skiing occurs at ski areas in national forests;** and
- 3) the national strategy to dramatically boost tourism to the USA, essential to achieving a better balance of trade, relies significantly on America's Great Outdoors, according to Brand USA, the Congressionally-chartered corporation charged with **growing inbound visitors from 60 million in 2011 to 100 million in 2021.**

The condition of infrastructure on federally-managed lands is bleak. Key forest roads essential to reaching campgrounds, river access points and trailheads are no longer safe for passenger cars. Our iconic National Park System, less than a year from its managing agency's Centennial, has a backlog of deferred maintenance of nearly \$12 billion in road, water system, dams and structures and has virtually no plans to expand its capability to serve our growing population. Other key agencies, including the Forest Service, also have backlogs of deferred maintenance totaling in the billions of dollars, and are actually closing roads and reducing public access.

Unlike virtually all other public roads in America, roads on America's public lands receive no support from the state motorfuel tax levied on gasoline sold at the retail level. For the estimated four million miles of interstates, primary and secondary routes, these state taxes fund 20% of road construction and reconstruction and nearly all maintenance and operations. Yet roads vital to Americans seeking to access campgrounds, trailheads, beaches and to reach rivers and lakes on federal lands depend upon appropriated federal dollars from the beleaguered domestic discretionary pot for operation and maintenance, contrasting with most public roads in the nation which qualify for 80% federal funding for construction and then use of state motorfuel revenues for operation and maintenance.

The solution is simple. The nation needs to add a **Penny for Parks** to its federal motorfuel tax rate for the next decade, a tax which would acknowledge the federal responsibility for accessing our nation's parks and other public lands. This funding would end the competition road operations and maintenance now pose to federal recreation and conservation programs in the annual appropriations process. Adopting this supplemental tax for a ten year period would allow continued and improved safe access by Americans to their public lands.

We believe that action on **Penny for Parks** in recognition of the National Park Service Centennial would enjoy broad support among the nation's recreation, tourism, conservation and transportation communities. We invite your leadership on this matter and commit to urging these communities to support your actions.

Sincerely,



Derrick A. Crandall
Counselor

How Good Old American Marketing Saved the National Parks

Getting people to the parks was the mission a century ago. Now it's putting visitors to work in the name of science.



A line of cars winds through Yellowstone National Park in 1966. To Stephen Mather, first director of the National Park Service, cars were “the open sesame” to get people into the parks. PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREW H. BROWN, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

By Rachel Hartigan Shea, National Geographic

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When President Ulysses S. Grant signed the bill creating Yellowstone in 1872, he established the first national park anywhere in the world. But 40 years later, the parks that exemplified “America’s best idea” were a mess.

“I am now trying to make an extensive study of the tremendous problems that have been coming before me,” admitted Stephen Mather, who was in charge of the parks as an assistant to the secretary of the Department of the Interior, at a meeting he called in March 1915 to address the parks’ troubles.

Although more than a dozen national parks had been designated by then, along with 30 national monuments, the areas functioned with little oversight. “They were orphans,” wrote Horace Albright, Mather’s assistant and key partner in the creation of the National Park Service. “They were split among three departments—War, Agriculture, and Interior. They were anybody’s business and therefore nobody’s business.”

Opportunists hungry for the parks’ natural resources took advantage. Poachers targeted the plentiful wildlife. Ranchers grazed sheep and cattle in mountain meadows. San Francisco boosters even convinced Congress to allow Yosemite’s Hetch Hetchy Valley to be flooded as a reservoir for the city’s residents.

Many of these problems weren’t new and national parks conferences had been held before, but the one in 1915, held on the Berkeley campus of the University of California, was different. “This meeting brought everybody together that had anything whatsoever to do with parks,” says Robert Sutton, chief historian of the National Park Service.

The national parks “were anybody’s business and therefore nobody’s business.” Horace Albright, second director of the National Park Service

The solutions were different too. Mather, who had made his fortune marketing Borax soap to the masses, saw the American public as the parks’ savior.

This week, Berkeley—in partnership with the National Park Service and the National Geographic Society—will host a conference on the parks on the 100th anniversary of Mather’s meeting. Influential thinkers like Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell and

biologist E. O. Wilson will speak, and the agenda will include how to enlist the masses in saving the parks. This time around, though, the existential threat is more environmental than political.

“True Playgrounds of the People”

Mather first came to Secretary of the Interior Franklin Lane’s attention when he sent a fiery letter complaining about the “miserable conditions” in the parks he had visited, including “rundown physical aspects ... and dirty unhealthy conditions of lodging, food, and sanitary facilities.”

Rather than taking offense, Lane recruited Mather to head up the Interior Department’s parks office. Albright, a young law student, became his assistant. They both pledged to stay one year.

The parks needed funding and a single agency to be in charge, but according to Albright, Mather felt he “had to get people to use the parks before he could get legislation and appropriations.”

Almost immediately, Mather hired a publicist—Robert Sterling Yard, the Sunday editor of the *New York Herald*—and paid him with his own money to start selling the parks to the American public. “The parks must be ... much better known than they are today,” said Mather, “if they are going to be the true playgrounds of the people that we want them to be.”

Within a month, Mather had summoned the park superintendents to the meeting in Berkeley. He also invited anyone else who had an interest in the parks, purposely including those whose interests were financial.

Railroads had staked their claims to the parks early on, eager to encourage Americans to “See America First” rather than spend vacation dollars in Europe. Now the automobile associations wanted in, lobbying for good roads to smooth the way for drivers. And all those tourists would need decent places to stay and eat.

One of the most influential ideas to come out of the meeting was from Mark Daniels, superintendent and landscape architect for the parks. Pointing out that already in

Yosemite Valley “there are times when there are five or six thousand people congregated at one time,” he proposed that each park should contain a village with modern amenities such as “a sanitary system, a water supply system, a telephone system, an electric light system, and a system of patrolling.”

“Mather thought the best way for parks to develop was to get people there,” says parks historian Sutton, “and he wanted to make it as easy as possible.”

The marketing worked. Between 1914 and 1915, the number of visitors to Yosemite alone more than doubled, from roughly 15,000 to 33,000.

The New National Park Service

It was a simple equation: More visitors equals more protection for the parks. Mather applied it later that year when he invited 15 influential men, including Gilbert H. Grosvenor, then editor of *National Geographic* magazine, to travel with him for two weeks through Sequoia National Park.

“Just think of the vast areas of our land that should be preserved for the future,” Mather told the saddlesore gentlemen at the end of the trip. “Unless we can protect the areas currently held with a separate government agency, we may lose them to selfish interests.”

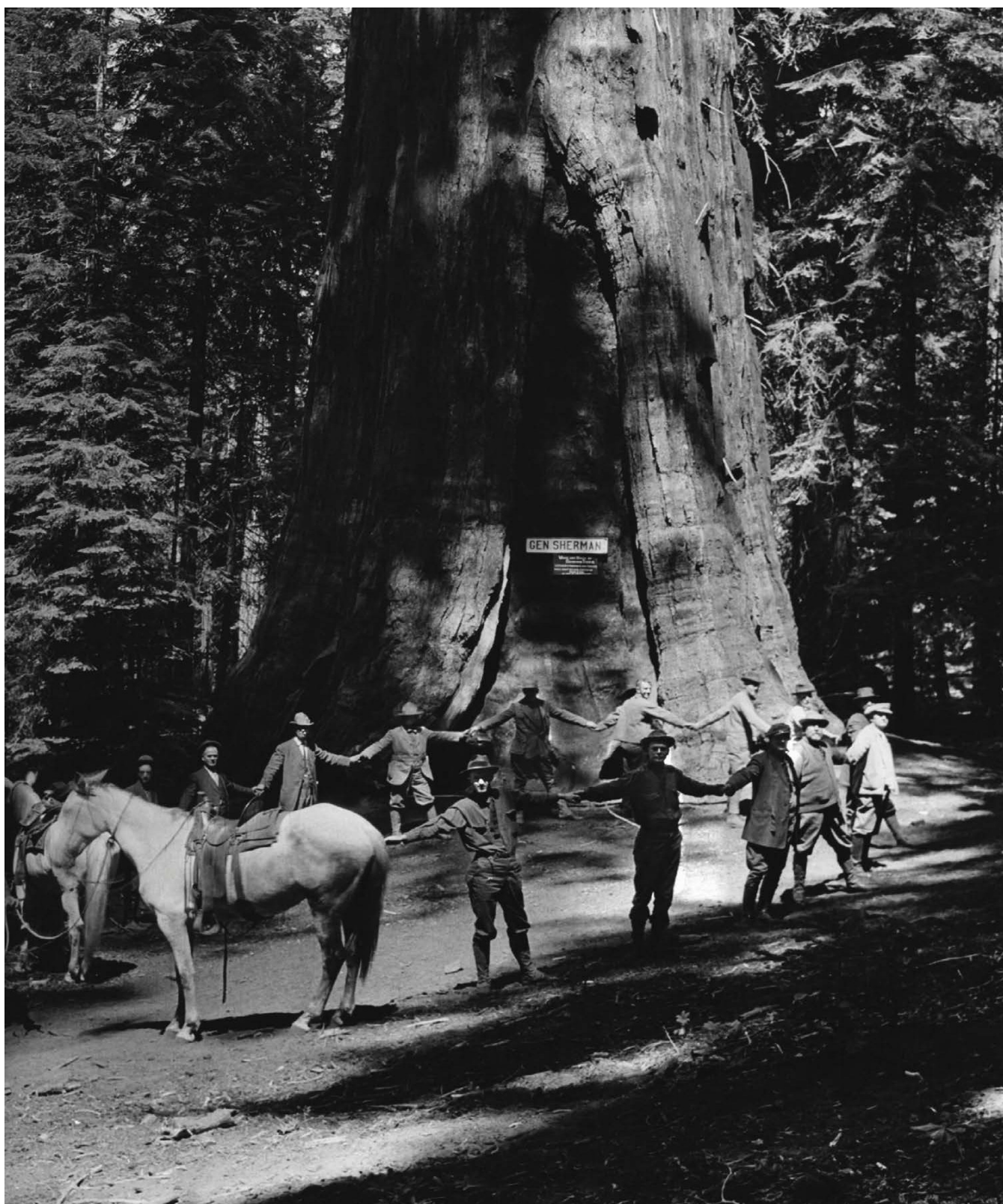
Grosvenor and the others did their part, the editor having pledged during a hike with Mather and Albright that the National Geographic Society would “march in step.” He produced a special issue of *National Geographic* on the national parks in April 1916

—“The Land of the Best”—which ended up on the desks of every congressman in the capital when it came time to vote on a bill to establish a National Park Service.

After many failed attempts over the years, this time the bill made it through Congress. President Woodrow Wilson signed the National Park Service Organic Act on August 25, 1916. Stephen Mather became the agency’s first director, with Albright as his deputy and later successor.

One hundred years later, the parks are no longer a mess, although they face problems that would daunt even Mather. Indeed, the National Park Service reported Monday that the

cost of deferred maintenance to park infrastructure reached \$11.49 billion in fiscal year 2014.



Men and horses show the circumference of the General Sherman, a giant sequoia. The photo was taken by Gilbert H. Grosvenor, then *National Geographic* magazine's editor in chief, during a camping trip through the Sierras organized by Mather in 1915 to persuade influential men to help the parks.

PHOTOGRAPH BY GILBERT H. GROSVENOR, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

At this week's centennial conference, which begins on Wednesday, scientists rather than tourists will be front and center, and the threats they address will include invasive species, pollution, and climate change. Secretary Jewell will be there with Janet Napolitano, president of the University of California, to tie the national parks together with America's other "best idea"—public education.

If the attendees at this conference are successful, park visitors will be convinced, through activities like [BioBlitzes](#), to become citizen scientists who help expand knowledge of these protected places and become stewards of them in their own right. People are still considered the national parks' best hope. In the coming century, however, they may be asked to do more than just take in the scenery.

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