

President Bush Discusses the National Parks Centennial Initiative

Harry F. Byrd, Sr. Visitor Center
Shenandoah National Park
Luray, Virginia

1:10 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Laura and I and the Secretary really appreciate the good folks here at Shenandoah National Park for their hospitality and their hard work in making this beautiful part of our country accessible to its citizens.

Today I had the honor of spending time talking to a group of concerned citizens about our National Park System. We've got about 80 million acres of our Park System, with millions and millions of visits a year by our citizens to take advantage of and participate in the special beauty of our parks -- all you got to do is look out here.

We spent time talking about our understanding that these parks are national treasures; that they are fantastic places in which to learn things, get exercise; that our parks are a way to teach our fellow citizens about the history of the country. After all, Laura and I live in the White House, which is managed by the National Park System. Our parks are important. And the people who work in the parks are important.

I asked Dirk Kempthorne to join my administration because I know that he is committed to the National Park System. He's a man from the West who has been able to enjoy the beauty of the parks in his own home state of Idaho.

One of the things we talked about is how we can make sure the commitment that we all think is necessary to our Park System is really honored in the appropriations requests that we make to Congress.

Our parks will have its 100th anniversary in 2016. And we felt like a vital goal for this country would be to prepare those parks, to guard the parks, to conserve the parks, to make the park relevant to the American people in honor of the 100th anniversary. And so Dirk and I and others in this administration have come up with what we call the National Parks Centennial Initiative. It's a bold program that calls upon the government to do its part, as well as our citizens to become invested in a campaign to really enhance the parks.

The funding starts with a billion-dollar request over the next 10 years that I'll send up to Congress. It's really to enhance the operating missions of our parks. I'm looking forward to working with both Republicans and Democrats to get this initiative passed. I think if any member of Congress were to ask a Park Service employee, or those who know a lot about the parks, our fellow citizens who give of their time to make sure our parks are vital, they will find out that this request is a really important request.

Secondly, we're issuing what's called the President's Challenge, and that is to -- we're asking the private sector to donate up to a billion dollars over the next 10 years to help this Park System be vital and strong, to celebrate the 100th anniversary of our Park System. And as they -- fellow citizens contribute, whether it be through foundation, corporation, or individually, the federal government will match those contributions. In other words, this is a collaboration of the federal government and individual programs.

I've asked Dirk, after today, to go around the country and to learn from our fellow citizens, to learn from the park rangers and learn from the foundations that care about our Park System how best

to spend this money, how best to honor the centennial that we'll be celebrating in 2016. In other words, we really do want individuals to feel that they own a piece of this strategy. After all, the parks do belong to the people.

We believe that we've got a fantastic chance to enhance habitats in the Park System. Laura, for example, really cares about the bird population of the country, and the Park System has a lot of habitat -- as do I, by the way, as much as you do. (Laughter.) But it's a chance to make sure our Park System enhances bird migratory patterns, for example.

We want to spend time making sure that we enhance educational opportunities in our Park System through new technologies. The iPod is hip amongst some of the younger citizens here in the country, people we want to encourage to come to the parks, so we need to make sure to apply that technology with educational opportunities, as somebody goes walking through our parks. We want to talk about -- and we will continue to talk about expanding park accessibility through a junior ranger program that Laura has been very much involved with.

We're going to hire 3,000 seasonal park rangers, and that's going to make the job of the folks who, for example, run the Shenandoah Park much easier, and more importantly, make the customer service -- in other words, the citizen service -- richer for somebody who comes and uses our parks.

We want to upgrade our facilities and historic buildings. We're going to add and -- ask people in their different Park Systems to become recruiters of volunteers so that more and more people get involved with this fantastic national resource of ours.

So, Mr. Secretary, I want to thank you very much for the hard work you've done leading up to the budget proposal we've made. I want to thank you in advance for the hard work you're going to do, to travel our country to get input from our fellow citizens. And I thank all the people in our country who care about our Park System for your direct involvement and your sincere concerns about making sure the Park System is modern and restored and rehabilitated.

I urge our fellow citizens to use the parks. I urge you to bring your families to the parks. I think you'll find that the people who work in our Park System are genuinely decent, kind people who want you to enjoy the great beauty of the National Park System.

Thank you very much. (Applause.)
END 1:17 P.M. EST