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# Parks and Recreation in the United States

*The National Park System*

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# **Parks and Recreation in the United States: The National Park System**

Margaret Walls\*

## **Introduction**

The National Park Service, a bureau within the U.S. Department of the Interior, is responsible for managing 391 sites—including national monuments, national recreation areas, national rivers, national parks, various types of historic sites, and other categories of protected lands—that cover 84 million acres. Some of the sites, such as Yellowstone National Park and the Grand Canyon, are viewed as iconic symbols of America. But the National Park Service also manages a number of small historical sites, military parks, scenic parkways, the National Mall in Washington, DC, and a variety of other protected locations. In this backgrounder, we provide a brief history of the Park Service, show trends in land acreage managed by the bureau and visitation at National Park Service sites over time, show funding trends, and present the challenges and issues facing the Park Service today.

## **History**

National parks were created before there was a National Park Service. President Ulysses S. Grant first set aside land for a “public park” in 1872 with the founding of Yellowstone. Yosemite, General Grant (now part of Kings Canyon), and Sequoia National Parks in California were created in 1890, and nine years later Mount Rainier National Park was set aside in Washington.

With passage of the Antiquities Act in 1906, the President was granted authority to declare historic landmarks, historic and prehistoric structures, and sites of scientific interest as national monuments. Although originally viewed as a means of preserving small sites and antiquities, national monument status was also accorded to natural geologic features such as the Devil’s Tower in Wyoming and Arizona’s Petrified Forest as well as larger areas of land such as the Katmai National Monument (now a national park and preserve) in Alaska and part of the Grand Canyon. Gradually, several sites were added to both the collection of national monuments,

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which was managed by the Department of War and the U.S. Forest Service, and to the list of national parks, for which the Department of the Interior had responsibility. As the number of public sites grew, it became apparent that leadership and organization were needed. In August 1916, President Woodrow Wilson signed a bill creating the National Park Service as a separate bureau in the Department of the Interior. Most of the national monuments were turned over to the Park Service by President Roosevelt in 1933.<sup>1</sup>

In the 1916 legislation, the National Park Service's mission was established and continues to this day: to preserve unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the national park system for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of the current and future generations.<sup>2</sup>

### **National Park Service Lands Today**

Several designations of protected lands are managed by the National Park Service today. Table 1 lists the different types of units and provides a brief description of each.

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<sup>1</sup> Some National Monuments are managed by the Bureau of Land Management, which is also within the Department of the Interior. For more about the history of the National Park Service, see U.S. Department of the Interior (1940).

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.nps.gov/aboutus/mission.htm>.

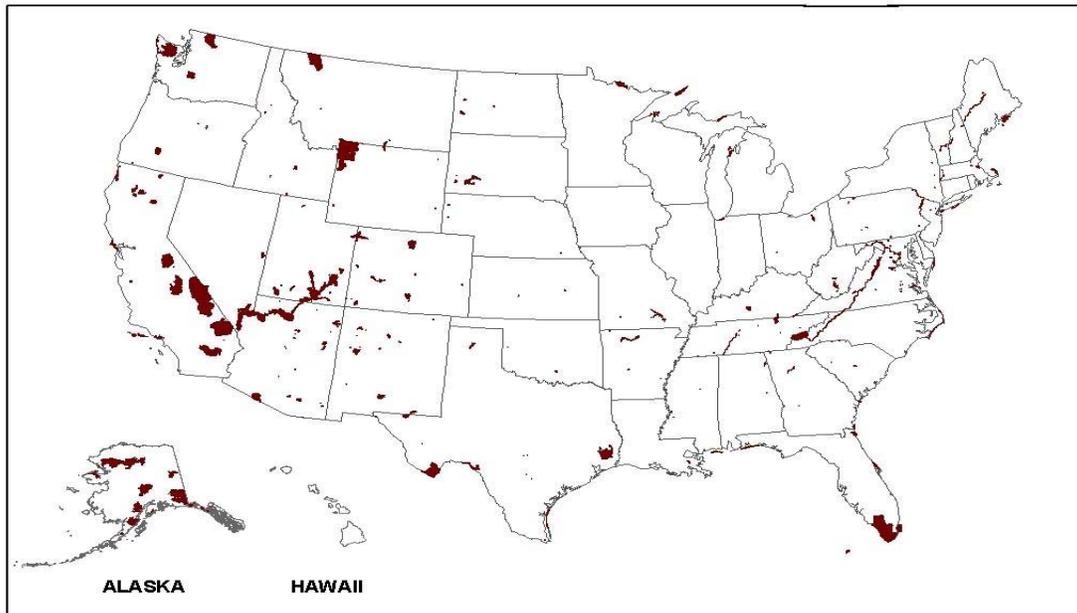
**Table 1. National Park Service Units<sup>a</sup>**

<i>Type of Unit</i>	<i>Description</i>
National Battlefield	An area associated with U.S. military history; there are 24 sites in this category. <sup>b</sup>
National Heritage Area	A place that has special natural, cultural, historic, and recreational elements.
National Historic Site	A place that contains a single historical feature directly associated with a person or family of historical significance.
National Historical Park	Similar to a national historic site but extends beyond a single building or property.
National Lakeshore	A park devoted to preserving natural resources and providing water-based recreation; there are four, all along the Great Lakes.
National Memorial	A memorial commemorating an historic person or episode; there are 28.
National Monument	This designation covers a wide range of areas. The 1906 Antiquities Act allows the President to declare landmarks, structures, and other objects of historic or scientific interest as national monuments. There are a total of 74 national monuments.
National Park	A large natural place having a wide variety of features, with hunting, mining, and other activities that “consume” park resources prohibited; currently, there are 58 national parks.
National Parkway	A scenic roadway and the protected lands next to the roadway.
National Preserve	An area similar to a national park but that allows hunting, trapping, mining, or oil and gas exploration and extraction; many areas in Alaska are national preserves.
National Recreation Area	An area usually centered on a large reservoir created by a federally built dam; there are currently 18.
National Reserve	Similar to national preserve but can be managed by a state or local authority.
National River	A free-flowing stream or river and the preserved land along it; includes the Wild and Scenic River designation. There are 15 rivers in this category.
National Seashore	A protected area along the Atlantic, Pacific, or Gulf Coast; there are 10 national seashores.
National Trail	A long-distance footpath authorized under the National Trails System Act of 1968 and designated as a national historic trail or a national scenic trail.
<sup>a</sup> Other designations not included in the table are International Historic Sites, Affiliated Areas, and some other sites that include unique names (including the White House and the National Mall in Washington, DC).	
<sup>b</sup> The names of units in this designation include national battlefields, national battlefield parks, national battlefield sites, and national military parks.	

The Park Service currently oversees 60 national parks ranging in size from the Old Stone House, covering less than an acre of land in Washington, DC’s Rock Creek Park to Wrangell–St. Elias National Park and Preserve in Alaska, the largest national park at over 13 million acres. Death Valley, the largest national park in the continental United States, is 3.3 million acres. Figure 1 shows a map of all Park Service lands in the United States. Every state except Delaware

has a site, but 89 percent of the Park Service acreage lies in the 13 western states; nearly 67 percent of the acreage is in Alaska alone.

**Figure 1. Lands Managed by the National Park Service**



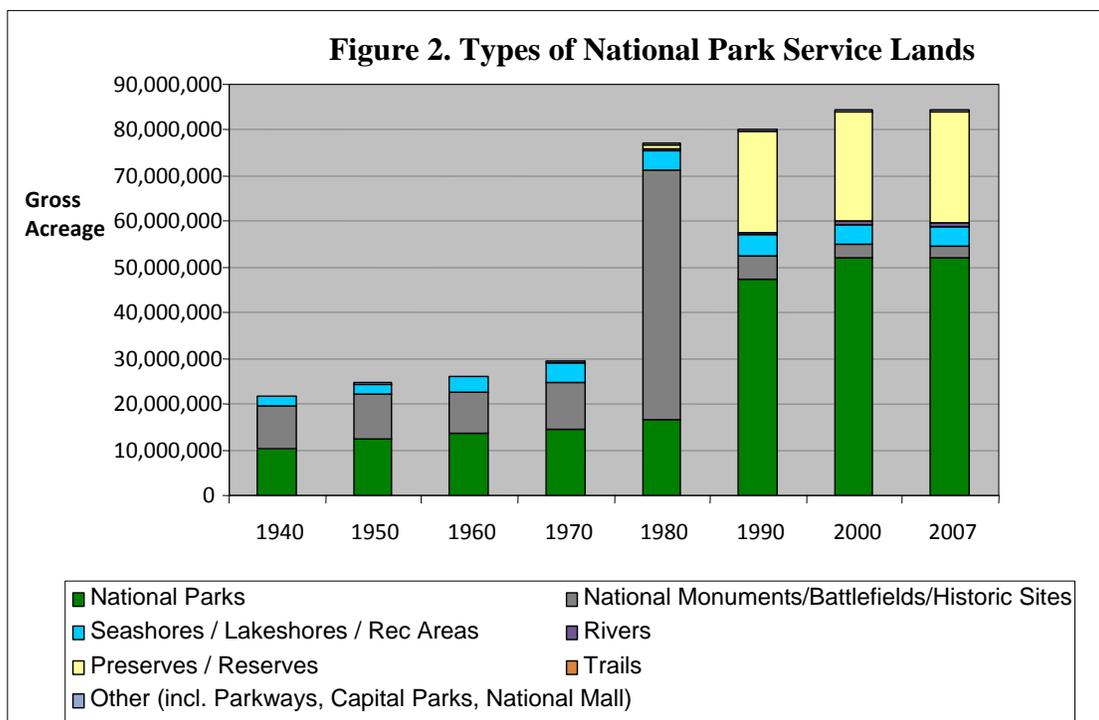
Note: Map created with ArcGIS using the Protected Areas Database (PAD), version 4. This dataset was created by the Conservation Biology Institute (CBI) and the World Wildlife Fund and was provided to us by CBI. For a description, see <http://www.consbio.org/what-we-do/protected-areas-database-pad-version-4/?searchterm=pad>.

Figure 2 provides a snapshot of the growth in acreage managed by the Park Service since 1940 by type of unit. The bulk of the acreage falls into the national park category, the green bars on the graph, with national preserves/reserves (yellow) and national monuments (gray) making up most of the remaining acreage.<sup>3</sup> The figure highlights the enormous growth in acreage in the 1970s. The increase in national monument acreage came mostly in 1978 when President Carter declared large areas of land in Alaska to be national monuments. Much of this land was converted in the early 1980s to national preserves and national parks. Many new lands added to

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<sup>3</sup> We have included National Military Parks and various historic sites and parks in this category, but National Monuments comprise most of the acreage.

the Park Service inventory since the 1980s have come in the national preserve category, with much of the acreage designated in Alaska. Total acreage has remained relatively constant since 2000.

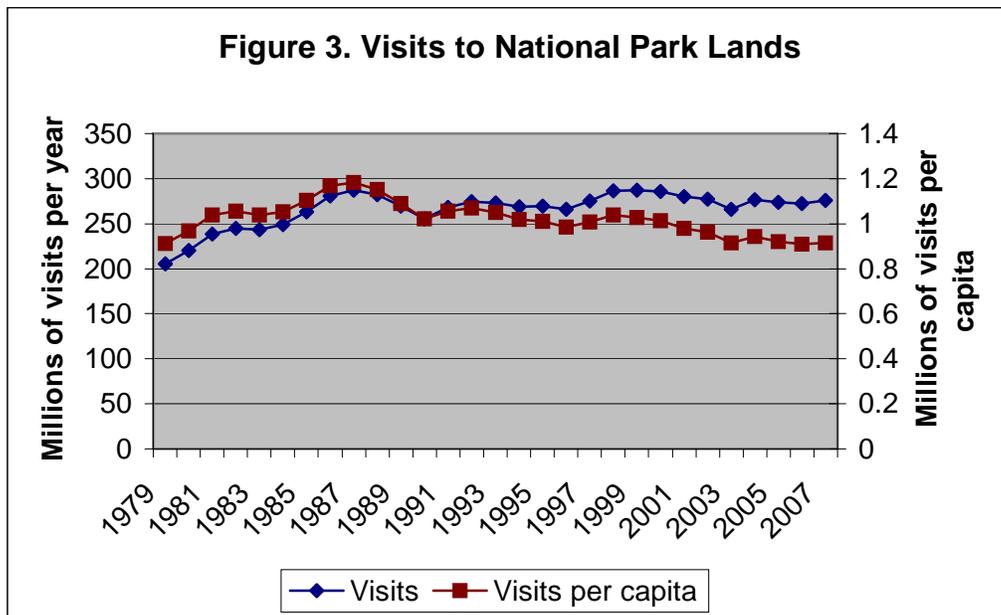


### Visitation

Figure 3 shows visitation trends to national parks and other sites managed by the National Park Service from 1979 through 2007. Both total visits and visits per capita are shown on the graph. Total visitation has remained roughly constant. The highest recorded number was in 1987, with slightly more than 287 million visits. Although there were slight increases and decreases after that, twenty years later the number was very similar—276 million total visits in 2007. Because of rising U.S. population, the number of visits has fallen slightly on a per capita basis. Again, the high was in 1987, but visits per capita declined nearly every year after that. Per capita visitation in 2007 was 23 percent lower than in the peak year of 1987. The numbers for 2007 indicate that the average American makes less than one visit per year to a national park.

The Great Smoky Mountains National Park had the most visits of all parks in 2007. At 9.4 million, it had more than twice as many visitors as the Grand Canyon, the second most

visited park. Yosemite, Yellowstone, and Olympic National Parks rounded out the top five. Including all units of the National Park System and not just national parks, Great Smoky Mountains ranks third behind the Blue Ridge Parkway in North Carolina and Virginia and the Golden Gate National Recreation Area in California.



Of the 18 national recreation areas managed by the National Park Service, four are on the list of top 10 most-visited units.<sup>4</sup> Most national recreation areas are near a major body of water; several are near lakes created by federal dams, thus they are a recreational draw. Three of the four parkways managed by the National Park Service are also on the list of top 10 most-visited units. In fact, 37 percent of visits to the top 10 are attributed to the three parkways on the list. Measuring true recreational visits on parkways is difficult. Though they were created to provide scenic motoring and have protected land around them, some have become major travel routes. The George Washington National Parkway in Virginia, for example, is a significant commuter route to Washington, DC. Even measuring visitation at some national parks can be characterized

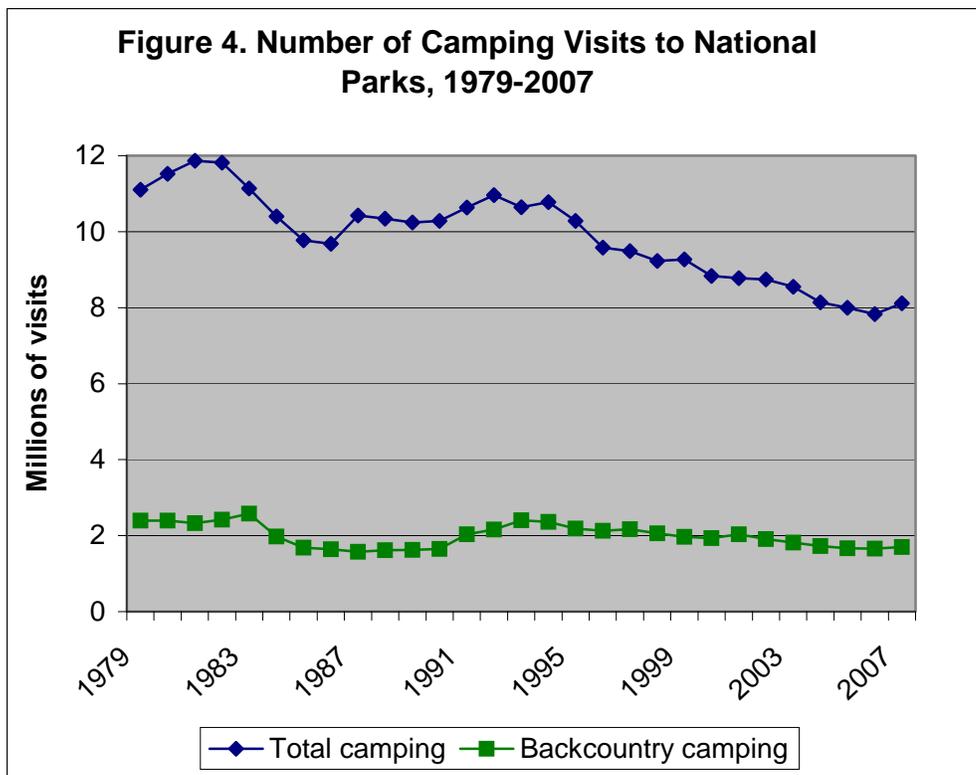
<sup>4</sup> The most visited sites list is kept on the website of the National Parks Conservation Association. See <http://www.npca.org/parks/visitation.html>.

by high uncertainty. Great Smoky Mountains, for example, charges no entrance fee. Some parks have entrance fees at some locations in the parks but not at others.

The National Park Service also keeps statistics on overnight visits, including lodging, tent camping, recreational vehicle camping, and backcountry camping. The number of campers in the national parks has dropped steadily since 1979 on both a total basis and even more sharply on a per capita basis as the U.S. population has risen. Figure 4 shows the trend for both total camping and for backcountry camping. The number of campers in the national parks in 2007 was 27 percent below the 1979 level; the number of backcountry campers was 29 percent below the 1979 level.

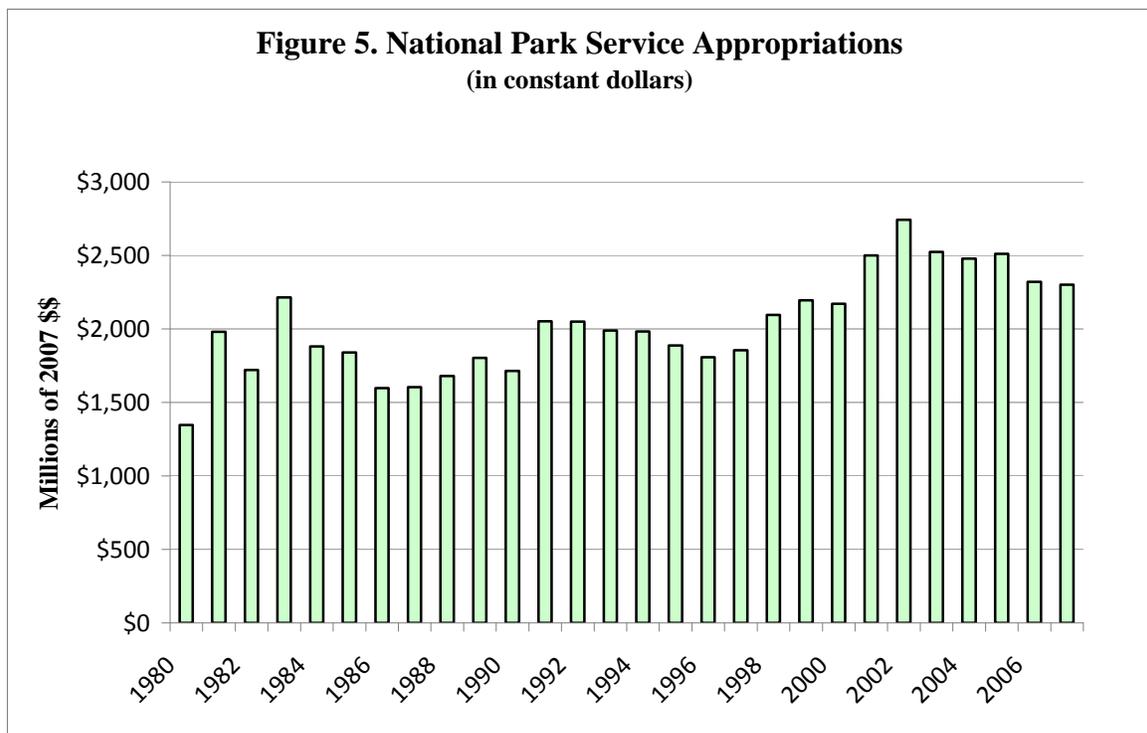
**Funding**

Annual funding for the National Park Service is shown in Figure 5 below. In inflation-adjusted terms, yearly appropriations have fluctuated somewhat over time. They fell over the mid- to late 1980s, then remained relatively constant during the early 1990s. Between 1996 and 2002, funding rose by an average of 8.6 percent per year, in real terms, but it has been on a small but steady decline since. Fiscal 2007 appropriations were 9 percent below the level for 2002.



Two other agencies within the Department of the Interior that have recreation-related activities, the Bureau of Land Management and the Fish and Wildlife Service, show similar funding patterns over time, although the drop in funding since 2002 is much sharper for the Bureau of Land Management than for either the National Park Service or the Fish and Wildlife Service.

In recent years, park advocates and others have written of the problems in the National Park Service with deferred maintenance, drops in the number of employees, and deteriorating conditions in many parks. A report sponsored by the National Parks Conservation Association, for example, argued that national parks in the 2000s operate with approximately two-thirds of the revenue that they need—a shortfall of \$600 million per year (Feitlinger, Keller, and Lesky 2004). The most noticeable result of that shortfall, the authors argue, is an inadequate number of park rangers and other staff and insufficient training for those employees. The number of interpreters working at national park sites, for example, has dropped significantly. The study also pointed out the problems maintaining cultural and historic resources. According to the authors, two-thirds of the parks in the National Park System are cultural and historic sites, but those sites are operating with far fewer resources than they need to adequately do the job of preserving those resources. Funding and personnel to deal with invasive species and protect natural resources was another identified problem.



Park “friends” groups and volunteers have become increasingly important in providing some of the services and financial resources that parks need. According to Feitlinger, Keller, and Lesky (2004), 125,000 volunteers donated 4.5 million hours of labor to the national parks in 2002. Those authors claim that, since 1990, the number of volunteers in the parks has increased approximately 5 percent per year. Most of the parks have local “friends” groups that operate on their behalf. The National Park Service as a whole receives funds from the National Park Foundation, a private nonprofit philanthropy created in 1967 with support from Lady Bird Johnson and an initial \$1 million grant from Laurance Rockefeller. The Foundation raises money from corporations, foundations, and individuals for programs, renovations, and capital projects within the parks. In 2005, more than \$29 million in cash and in-kind support were provided to the parks with over 200 grants (National Park Foundation 2005). The National Parks Conservation Association is a nonprofit organization that reports on the state of individual parks and funding needs and advocates on behalf of the national parks (National Parks Conservation Association 2008).

### **The National Park Service in the 21st Century**

A report by the National Park System Advisory Board (2001) has recommended strategic changes in direction for the National Park Service. Its seven recommendations included increased focus on the educational component of parks, more study of history and the link that parks have with the past, emphasis on preservation of biodiversity in parks, and “collaboration among park and recreation systems at every level—federal, regional, state, local—in order to build an outdoor recreation network accessible to all Americans” (National Park System Advisory Board 2001).<sup>5</sup>

As the Park Service approaches its 100th anniversary in 2016, several efforts are underway to increase funding and improve the quality of the national park experience for visitors in the second century. The “Centennial Challenge” is an effort introduced by President George W. Bush in 2006 to increase both federal funding for the Park Service and leverage those funds with private philanthropy. The program is a ten-year effort that will target specific projects in the parks. A total of 110 projects were approved in 2008 with funding of approximately \$51 million, with roughly half from the government and half from private donations. The projects range

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<sup>5</sup> The National Park System Advisory Board was created in 1935 and advises the Director of the National Park Service and the Secretary of the Interior on matters relating to the Park Service. It has 12 members who are U.S. citizens with interest and expertise in matters related to the national parks.

widely from development of education-based and youth-oriented programs to construction of trails and renovation of buildings. About half of the money in 2008 is to go toward construction projects.<sup>6</sup>

The Second Century Commission, an independent, bipartisan commission led by two former U.S. Senators, has also recently been established by the National Parks Conservation Association to study the state of the current park system and to chart a course for the future. The Second Century Commission will meet at five national parks over 2008 and 2009 and will produce a report with recommendations for the National Park Service in the fall of 2009.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For more information about the program and a list of projects funded in 2008, see <http://www.nps.gov/2016/>.

<sup>7</sup> Only limited public information about the Commission and its plans and activities is available as of December 2008. See <http://www.visionfortheparks.org/>.

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