

Commissioners' report: Parks need more funds

*By Cory Hatch, Jackson Hole, Wyo.
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National parks need more funding, more research and better educational opportunities for visitors and communities, according to a commission that seeks to prepare the National Park Service for another 100 years.

Parks also need to look beyond their borders when it comes to protecting natural and cultural resources, said members of the National Parks Second Century Commission.

Commissioners made the recommendations to Interior Secretary Ken Salazar in a teleconference Thursday. The year-old commission, which was convened by the National Parks Conservation Association, consists of 28 members, including former Sens. Howard Baker, of Texas, and J. Bennett Johnston, of Louisiana, retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, and Edward O. Wilson, the curator of entomology at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology.

Johnston said he was encouraged by President Obama's selection of Salazar and Park Service Director nominee Jon Jarvis.

"We will have [an] outstanding team in the Interior and the Park Service," he said.

Johnston and Baker said a lack of adequate funding is perhaps the most pressing problem for national parks. The commission proposed that Congress increase the National Park Service budget by \$100 million until the Park Service centennial in 2016 and asked for full funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund and the Historic Preservation Fund. Further, the group said Obama should appoint a commission to raise funds before the centennial.

Commissioner Stephen Lockhart, chairman of the board of the Yosemite National Institutes, called national parks an "educational institution" that can help students learn about environmental stewardship, among other issues, and proposed that Congress enact legislation to make education a top priority for the parks.

Commissioners Rita Colwell, former director of the National Science Foundation, and Gretchen Long, former chairwoman of the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, both emphasized the role science plays in national parks and said parks should be managed not as individual entities but as part of larger ecosystems.

"I see the need to manage more broadly for ecosystem conservation," Colwell said. "The parks are not adequate alone to protect the wildlife and our natural and cultural heritage."

Long proposed a national conservation strategy that would allow parks to help manage public lands across jurisdictional lines.

Commissioner Tony Knowles, former governor of Alaska, said the federal government should use a portion of revenues from oil and gas drilling on public lands for the parks. He called inadequate funding "the graveyard of many great ideas."

Salazar praised the effort, saying he and Obama would carefully consider the recommendations, especially the request for more money. Salazar pointed out that national parks projects and roads received more than \$1 billion in American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds this year.

Salazar recalled a trip to several national parks with Obama in August.

"As we went around Yellowstone, he was excited about this commission and excited about the future of national parks," he said. "We are going to take these recommendations seriously. We will move forward with urgency as we figure out ways to implement as many of them as we can."