

FUND RAISING

Trends and Ideas

To Protect and to Preserve

A national parks charity steps up its efforts to broaden support

By Debra E. Blum

MILLIONS OF PEOPLE each year visit the Grand Canyon, Gettysburg's battlefields, the Statue of Liberty, and the 388 other sites that are part of America's National Park Service. They hike, camp, learn about history, sightsee, and pursue a wide range of other activities.

Now the National Park Foundation, which raises about \$30-million to \$40-million a year for the parks, wants visitors to do something else, too: Think hard about how they can contribute money to help the parks.

"Many people take the parks for granted, or don't even know that what they are enjoying—a beach or a battlefield—is a national park," says Vin Cipolla, chief executive of the National Park Foundation. "What we have to do to make a difference is spread the word about our parks and about the role all Americans can play in protecting and preserving them."

\$1-Billion Campaign Expected

To be that storyteller, the 40-year-old National Park Foundation, the National Park Service's Congressionally chartered charitable arm, is giving itself a sweeping makeover intended to elevate its profile and extend its influence.

The organization is reaching out like never before to individuals who might become donors, and planning its first-ever capital campaign, which will probably seek \$1-billion by the time the National Park Service celebrates its centennial in 2016. At the same time, it is forging a tighter relationship with the park service to better respond to the agency's needs and working more closely



JOHN BURCHAM/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC/GETTY IMAGES

with local groups that support individual parks to tie their efforts together under a national banner.

In doing so, the National Park Foundation hopes to better promote the idea of park philanthropy, which has had a remarkable, though spotty and sometimes criticized, history.

Despite plenty of examples of personal generosity that have helped expand and shape the national-park system over the years—such as Paul Mellon's gift in the 1950s to buy the land that would become the first national seashore, at Cape Hatteras, in North Carolina—philanthropic support of the parks has been uneven and largely a local affair.

Most park visitors are unaware that much of what they see in the parks—updated facilities and educational exhibits, for example—is the result of private donations that pay for programs and projects above and beyond what the National Park Service can afford. And even when potential donors do learn what their gifts could buy, some are wary about supporting a government agency, afraid their contributions would lead to offsetting reductions in federal appropriations, or end up covering basic park operations that ought to be the responsibility of the park service.

“People want to know their contributions are helping pay for a beautiful new trail, not to clean a bathroom,” says Curt Buchholtz, executive director of the Rocky Mountain Nature Association, a nonprofit group that last year raised more than \$1-million to benefit Rocky Mountain National Park, in Colorado, including money for a new amphitheater.

Fear of Commercialization

Striking a balance between what the parks need and what donors want to pay for can sometimes be tricky. And

worries have persisted that too much private money leaves open the potential for undue donor control over park spending or unchecked commercialization.

Officials at the National Park Foundation say it is their job to put together a compelling case for private support for the parks that allays such concerns, reassures donors, and raises both much-needed money and awareness.

Laura Bush, the first lady, who is honorary chairwoman of the park foundation, is doing her part this month to raise the parks’ visibility. She selected national parks as the theme for holiday decorations at the White House. The official Christmas tree is festooned with ornaments depicting the parks and related displays are on view for the policy makers, journalists, and others who attend White House holiday parties.

Much is going on behind the scenes, too. Key to the foundation’s remodeling efforts has been a deliberate attempt to change the mix of where private money comes from, shrinking the amount of corporate donations of products and services and increasing the amount of cash gifts it receives from individuals.

Until recently, the foundation was quietly raising contributions—mostly from companies and largely in the form of donated services and products, such as vehicles or building materials. That is quickly changing.

Over the last two years, the foundation has stepped up its direct-mail and planned-giving efforts; created giving societies to acknowledge gifts; started publishing a glossy quarterly magazine; and, last month, unveiled a revamped Web site.

In 2004 the foundation raised a total of \$35.7-million, \$24-million of it in noncash contributions. Last year, out of the \$37.5-million it collected in total, donated products and services accounted for only \$14-million, with the rest in cash. And this year’s estimates show that the amount of money contributed by individuals has nearly doubled since 2005, to \$10.7-million.

The changes not only indicate that the foundation is making inroads among American donors, but also mean the organization has more unrestricted cash to spend on what it and the park



Dennis Kleiman

Vin Cipolla, president of the National Park Foundation: “What we have to do to make a difference is spread the word about our parks.”

service deem most critical. The foundation had faced criticism in the past when it accepted gifts from corporations that appeared to be more about what the company wanted to give away than what the park service needed most.

Teaching Kids About Nature

The organization's biggest priorities these days are shaped directly by the park service's wishes, top among them that the foundation forge deeper connections between the national parks and children, especially in urban areas.

In response, the foundation this year created the First Bloom project, intended to get city kids outdoors, introduce them to nearby national parks, and teach them about nature. Participants will plant flowers native to the area in the parks and learn how to create and tend gardens in their own neighborhoods. The program, which will be run in conjunction with local chapters of the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, is scheduled to start operations in five cities next spring.

Central to the National Park Foundation's new plans, too, is seeking corporate support that raises money and awareness for the parks but does not affect how visitors interact with the parks. That is, donations would call attention to the parks and bring in cash, but the businesses would have no direct link—through donor-recognition signs or donated products, for example—with the parks themselves.

A gift this summer from the car-rental company Hertz illustrates such an arrangement. From June of this year until June 2008, the company will donate \$1 to the National Park Foundation each time a customer rents a fuel-efficient car, with a guaranteed minimum donation of \$1-million.

"It's a model that hits all the marks," says Jamie M. Paten, the foundation's vice president for communications and corporate relations. "We get a big cash donation and lots of exposure through Hertz's advertisements and marketing, the environment gets a plug because Hertz is pushing its green collection, and it all happens outside the parks."

Federal Aid

Even with all its recent changes, the foundation's biggest new undertaking by far will be its capital campaign.

Exactly how the campaign will look depends on the outcome of pending federal legislation that could provide up to \$1-billion in additional government aid.

Similar bills in both houses of Congress, each called the National Park Centennial Challenge Fund Act, call for the federal government to provide up to \$100-million annually over a decade to match cash donations from private sources for special park projects and programs.

If Congress passes the legislation, the National Park Foundation would design its capital campaign so it could be responsible for making sure that it along with other private groups raise the \$100-million in annual gifts needed to match the federal money. If it fails, the campaign would take on a different look, foundations officials say, although it is possible it will be just as ambitious.

"We'd be enormously disappointed if the match legislation didn't go through, but we would press on," says Roland W. Betts, treasurer of the foundation's board, who is in charge of planning the campaign. "This will be transformative no matter what. We are putting in place a machinery that will transcend the match, the campaign, and even the centennial, because there will be an infrastructure that will generate support for the parks for years and years to come."

Mr. Betts says the foundation is considering creating a separate "centennial office," perhaps as a subsidiary organization, with as many as 30 fund-raising staff members—doubling the size of the foundation. The fund raisers, he says, would seek foundation grants, corporate money, and major and planned gifts from individuals. But, he says, a good deal of energy and resources would be spent attracting smaller gifts, too.

"The park service tells us that at least 270 million people come through the parks each year," Mr. Betts says. "Even if the number were really only 100 million, that's 100 million people that already have a connection with the parks and that we want to reach out to help lay the groundwork for ongoing support."

Since few parks have a way to capture the names of visitors—the areas may have multiple entrances, for example—the foundation is toying with ways to find and communicate with park users. Mr. Betts says the foundation is considering how it might make a pitch to visitors who go to in-park concession stands, for example, or who visit the National Park Service Web site.

Bolstering Local Groups

The success of any national push by the foundation for more attention and money is heavily dependent on the cooperation of local fund-raising organizations, often called friends groups, like Friends of Acadia, which supports Acadia National Park, in Maine.

The National Park Service says at least 170 such groups exist around the country. Mr. Buchholtz, in Colorado, who is president of a national coalition of the groups, says that only about 52 of them are actively raising money, and that much of the money is generated by a handful of the biggest groups that support some of the best-known parks. The Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, the Yellowstone Park Foundation, and the Yosemite Fund, for example, together accounted for

more than one-fourth of the \$62-million that Mr. Buchholtz estimates was raised by all friends groups last year.

The National Park Foundation's challenge, then, is to sweep friends groups of all sizes together under a national umbrella without stepping on the toes of the organizations that are already thriving independently.

Officials at some friends groups have privately raised concerns that a buffed-up National Park Foundation might lure away donors who would otherwise give only to their local parks.

But, says Mr. Buchholtz, most friends groups recognize that they will be able to draw strength and support from a national effort that will enhance, not diminish, their own work. He says, for example, that with the help of the foundation, friends groups may be able to accept different kinds of planned gifts, such as gifts of property or trusts, that they might not have had the expertise to handle otherwise.

Mr. Cipolla stresses that the foundation's goal is "to dramatically increase park philanthropy all around...no matter where that money comes in."

Starting New Efforts

Indeed, advancing local efforts is even in the foundation's Congressional charter.

One of its jobs is to start local fund-raising groups where there are none. In the last five years, the foundation has

helped nine new groups get off the ground, including the South Florida National Parks Trust, which is scheduled to spin off as an independent group later this month.

Says Mr. Cipolla: "Donors will give to the parks they love, and they may also want the chance to give to other parks or to efforts at the parks and by the National Park Foundation on related issues, like conservation, education, health, and science."

Enid L. Beal, an avid hiker, biker, and sailor who lives in Cambridge, Mass., agrees that it is not an either-or prospect. She is a board member of the Island Alliance, which supports the Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area, and a regular contributor to other charities and environmental groups, like the Appalachian Mountain Club.

She learned about the National Park Foundation only a few years ago and has given at least \$5,000 to it each year since, in addition to her gifts to other groups. She is particularly interested in supporting the foundation's efforts to raise awareness of the connection between people and parks.

"It's a matter of someone having to educate you about what is needed," she says. "The parks are a perfect example of the benefits and responsibilities of citizenship. Everything isn't free, and people need to learn that the parks and all their enhancements—the educational programs and everything else—are there for us only because of us and our commitment."



Private philanthropy has been essential to the preservation, protection and improvement of America's national parks and will continue to be essential in securing their future. It was private citizens who first conceived of the idea of protected lands and through their contributions large and small have grown and nurtured our national park system for more than a century.

For the last four decades, the National Park Foundation—chartered by Congress as the only national charitable partner of America's national parks—has been the steward of that tradition, taking the lead to sustain and grow this legacy of private citizen support. Our mission is to strengthen the connection between the American people and their national parks.

Learn more at www.nationalparks.org