



13. **PARKS: Interior to engage universities, private sector in ecosystem-scale protection -- Jarvis** (11/05/2009)

Eryn Gable, special to E&E

The Interior Department has initiated a "landscape conservation cooperative" program aimed at preserving important large and diffuse wildlife habitat areas, including migration corridors in important ecosystems, National Park Service Director Jon Jarvis said yesterday.

Speaking to a symposium in Knoxville, Tenn., on the future of the national parks, Jarvis said the initiative -- which draws support from the Park Service, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and state and private entities -- will use financial incentives to encourage conservation of important wildlife areas.

Funding for eight such cooperative efforts, to be headquartered primarily at universities, is included in the fiscal 2010 budget, and Interior has plans to create a total of 17 such entities nationwide.

As part of the effort, the U.S. Geological Survey will map all protected lands, including wildlife refuges, national parks and other public lands, that form a patchwork of essential wildlife habitat. The goal is to "begin to assess where those connections are really necessary for long-term ecological integrity," Jarvis said.

In a related effort, the Interior Department plans to set up regional climate change response centers that will help identify key ecosystem changes and provide scientific information to management agencies with the goal of better protecting climate-sensitive ecosystems, Jarvis added.

"If there's any sort of silver lining to the issue of climate change, it is forcing us to manage at a global or ecosystem scale," Jarvis said.

Jarvis' comments came during a conference co-hosted by the University of Tennessee's Howard Baker Institute for Public Policy and the National Parks Conservation Association that brought together about 100 experts to review the findings of the National Parks Second Century Commission and begin looking at ways to implement its recommendations.

The commission released a report in September that, among other things, concluded the Park Service is underfunded, understaffed and lacking in essential research capabilities to deal with emerging threats such as climate change ([Land Letter](#), Sept. 24).

Those themes were hit upon again at this week's two-day meeting as speakers highlighted the difficult challenges facing the Obama administration as it struggles to overcome a chronic maintenance backlog and emerging new threats to park resources.

Commission member Linda Bilmes, a professor at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, noted, for example, that the Park Service's budget has grown at a compounded annual rate of 1.4 percent for operational funding over the last decade, while the funding for capital construction, land acquisition and road construction shrunk by 4 percent over the same period.

"The consequences of this are an operations shortfall, which has been growing, underinvestment in land acquisition, an enormous maintenance backlog and a sort of impact on morale," Bilmes said.

Several other participants noted that the Park Service must do a better job of communicating the importance of its mission to the American public and engaging more people in that mission.

"What's missing is that fundamental recognition that this is the asset base -- the natural world is what everything else depends on," said commission member Sylvia Earle, former chief scientist for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. "If we don't have a sound environment, there is no economy, there is no health, there's no life."

The Obama administration has already taken some steps to improve the status of the nation's parks, including appointing University of Idaho professor Gary Machlis to the newly created position of science adviser to the NPS director. As part of his job, Machlis will be responsible for ensuring that the agency uses the best available science to address the challenges it faces and for providing advice and scientific information to federal employees, Congress, stakeholders, park visitors and the general public ([Land Letter](#), Oct. 15).

The administration has also sought to boost funding for national parks, requesting nearly \$2.7 billion for the park system for fiscal 2010, an increase of more than \$170 million over the 2009 appropriation and more than \$300 million more than the agency received in 2008. Additionally, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar announced in April that NPS would receive \$750 million in stimulus funds to help address the agency's \$9 billion maintenance backlog.

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