



**TESTIMONY *before the* NATIONAL PARK SERVICE ADVISORY BOARD  
Anchorage, Alaska | June 3, 2016**

My name is Sara Taylor, I am the Executive Director of the Citizens' Advisory Commission on Federal Areas. The Commission was established by the Alaska State Legislature following the passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980 to understand and monitor the implementation of that statute and other federal laws, and to advise the State on implementation issues of importance to Alaskans. Our 12 commissioners and staff provide a forum and a voice for Alaskans regarding the use and management of federal public lands. I am grateful to the Board for this opportunity to testify and speak to our experiences and concerns.

Humans were a thriving, vital part of the landscape in 1980 when 51 million acres of our state became part of the National Park System. Fifty-one million acres! If the National Park System lands in Alaska were a state, it would be the 14th largest state in the U.S. And while Alaska's national parks host numerous visitors each year who marvel humbly at our extraordinary natural resources and abundance of beauty, many Alaskans think of those same parks as some combination of home, office, grocery store, and source of renewal. They have known these lands intimately, from one year to perhaps ten thousand years.

The National Park System is intended to celebrate, cherish and conserve the American story, both natural and historical, and it often does so quite well. Unfortunately, the perceived "myth" of Alaska is the story we hear most, an idolatry that increasingly overlooks or obscures many distinctive histories, traditions and cultures that are being systematically disenfranchised and incrementally eradicated, not cherished or conserved. The unique Alaskan way of life, which Congress sought to protect when establishing Alaska's national parks, is part of the history of this land, part of the compelling and diverse American story, but Alaska's historical presence on the land is more often viewed with suspicion, sometimes contempt, and rarely in reverence. This is not hyperbolic fearmongering. The Commission has accumulated decades of evidence and observed little to no change in the narrative.

I respect that the National Park Service has a national (and even international) constituency, but this fact does not allow the Service to perpetuate the myth of Alaska in its planning, outreach and approach to land and resource management. Alaskans love our park lands, a love that comes through intimate familiarity and perspective. Our contribution to responsible and sustainable management is unrivaled. These are our roots, these are the lands and resources on which our lives depend and draw meaning. And yet, we are trying to survive a culture war that pits us as the enemy against an abstract ideological ethos that cannot rationally include us. We are frequently informed, not always explicitly but always effectively, that we do not belong here.

For every story about an Alaskan like Richard Proenneke of One Man's Wilderness and his great relationship with Lake Clark National Park, there are stories like A Land Gone Lonesome, Dan O'Neill's chronicle of how no accommodations could seemingly be made by the Service for the people who lived in what became the Yukon-Charley Rivers Preserve.

I can tell you that I receive calls every year from members of the public and commercial service providers who have issues with the National Park Service and want me to help them. Navigating the federal system is daunting in itself, but when you are a business trying to make a living, a resident that needs to cross park lands, or a parent wanting to pass on traditions and a connection to the land, making waves with the agency that makes these things possible, even over minor issues, is a significant undertaking and not without risk. The narrative is unwelcoming and infused into the decisions and policies that impact them. These people, some of whom have been operating in and living in or near parks long before they were parks, have fears of administrative retaliation and losing what is valuable and sacred to them. And as an Alaskan, and as an American, I am afraid of them losing those things, too. It is discouraging that people have those fears, and I have studied, heard of and personally witnessed a well-founded basis for many of those fears. It profoundly chills the relationship they have with the Service.

I want to be very clear that I do not mean to disparage the vast majority of Service employees in Alaska whose dedication to accommodating Alaskan concerns is inspiring. The Alaska Region has generously given its time to this commission for many years. For at least the last nine years since our re-establishment, which is all I can knowledgeably speak to, Service staff and leadership have come to our meetings, in locations across the state, well prepared with discussion points, plans and projects, and they listen carefully to comments and respond in detail to questions. Follow-ups are prompt and thorough. I have had transformative conversations with Service staff on matters ranging from great significance to little apparent consequence. I could not be more appreciative of these experiences.

But the Commission is not just a forum. We are an established, respected and willingly available resource, made up of legislators, biologists, hunters, miners, guides and trappers with a wealth of knowledge and perspective. Presentations and dialogue are welcome and useful, but not always productive. Rather than just presenting to us, *talk* to us. Let us know what the issues are and how we can help. Alaskans are innovative problem solvers, and the Commission would like nothing more than to promote and provide an informed conduit for that ingenuity. I, and others, welcome any opportunity to offer our insights to problems and issues and see the resulting benefit of our collaborative efforts. Too often we feel blind-sided, ignored, or, at worst, lied to, which begs the question of how legitimately interested the Service is in cultivating and employing the collective and diverse knowledge of Alaskans in the management of Alaska parks.

It is my fervent hope we can build on the relationships we have to find harmony and respect. I would like to see the Alaskan perspective translate into Service regulations, programs and policies that cherish and conserve our contribution to the American story. When we offer opposing viewpoints, we do so with calculated concern and the desire to reach consensus in support of the promises that were made to Alaskans when our national parks were expanded and established. I would like to call on this Board to help us, particularly at the institutional level, to remind decision makers that we belong here and that we know these lands better than anyone.

Thank you for this opportunity. The Commission has numerous recommendations regarding ways to improve relationships between Alaskans and the Service, insights developed through decades of experiences, which we would be happy to provide the Board at any time.