

Testimony Before the Joint Subcommittees of  
Fisheries, Wildlife and Oceans and  
National Parks, Forests and Public Lands of the  
Natural Resources Committee  
U.S. House of Representatives  
May 24, 2007

My name is Dale Penny, President of the Student Conservation Association (SCA).

Thank you for inviting Jeremy Byler, a student member of SCA, and me here today to speak about SCA's efforts to get kids outdoors. Nothing could be closer to those of us who work with the Student Conservation Association. SCA's mission, for the past half century, has been to connect young people to our natural world through meaningful hands-on service and create the next generation of conservation leaders.

SCA was started in 1957 by Elizabeth Cushman Titus Putnam who saw the need to engage young people in helping preserve National Parks. Since then, nearly 50,000 high school and college students have volunteered through SCA to provide over 26 million hours of conservation service in America's parks, forests and public lands. SCA student volunteers have served from the back country of Alaska to the urban centers of America's great cities in all 50 states.

The results of these efforts has not only been an enormous benefit to our environment and land management agencies, but it has also attracted thousands of young people to form a lifelong connection with the natural world and for many of them to become rangers, scientists, environmental educators and resource managers within all the bureaus of the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture. In fact, the National Park Service has informally estimated that over 15 percent of its current employees were Student Conservation Association volunteers.

Key to SCA's success over these 50 years has been that we have operated as a genuine Partnering organization with the public land management agencies through a Cooperative Agreement. SCA and each agency share a commitment and work together to accomplish a critical public purpose: to preserve this nation's natural and historical heritage while attracting and preparing the next generation of conservation stewards.

I will note that a number of members of the Natural Resources Committee have experience with SCA. Representative Jay Inslee's parents led SCA crews on Mount Rainier when he was young, and Representatives Jim Costa, Ron Kind and Henry Brown have each had SCA interns in their Congressional offices to learn about resource management policy before completing their internship in a National Park where they learned about the practical application of those policies. I believe these Representatives can readily attest to the value of developing a love of nature and a conservation ethic at a young age.

Today the need to engage young people with nature is more acute than ever for all the reasons that have been outlined and for which these committees are meeting. Therefore, I will not take the committee's time elaborating. I will, however, add that as this nation becomes more diverse and more urban, it is essential that our federal agencies reach out in new ways to embrace new populations and make the experience on public lands more relevant to diverse backgrounds, and that they become more representative of the changing face of our nation.

Here is what I have learned about youth and nature through SCA:

First, most young children find real joy in nature when introduced in a fun way and when they see role models, especially high school and college students, enjoying the outdoors.

Second, children connect with and learn more from nature when they are engaged in hands-on activities to protect the land rather than simply being in the outdoors. This can always be done in age-appropriate and fun ways.

Third, teens and young adults are a valuable asset to land managers by getting actual work done while serving as examples for younger children.

Fourth, non-profit organizations that focus on youth and conservation provide essential complementary capabilities for federal agencies when they are embraced as full partners.

Finally, when young people are actively engaged in giving back to the land they leave the environment healthier, realize more of their personal potential and develop the ethics and commitment to become engaged citizens, proponents for protecting our public lands and conservation voters.

Therefore, we have three specific recommendations for these committees in order to overcome administrative barriers and enhance the value of non-profit partners working with federal agencies:

I. Explicitly authorize the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture to enter into Cooperative Agreements with non-profits that engage young people in volunteer conservation service-learning experiences on our public lands, especially those national and local not-profits that actively reach out to diverse populations. Cooperative agreements are the appropriate legal instrument to memorialize the respective roles of the federal land management agency and non-profit partners in accomplishing this public purpose.

II. Encourage the bureaus to develop more programs, in partnership with non-profits, in which high school and college-aged young people serve as role models for outreach and education of young children, such as the Junior Ranger program administered by the National Park Service.

III. With appropriate youth serving non-profits, such as SCA, open the door for our young people to qualify for entry level jobs within the Interior and Agriculture departments.

These actions would enable us to be a more effective partner with the land management agencies and attract a more diverse new generation of young conservation professionals

who will, in turn, engender a love for the outdoors with many more children through environmental education, outdoor adventure and hands-on experience in nature.

Thank you.