

STATEMENT OF TODD WILLENS, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR FISH AND WILDLIFE AND PARKS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE INTERNATIONAL OPERATIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS, DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS, CONCERNING THE EVERGLADES: PROTECTING NATURAL TREASURES THROUGH INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS.

SEPTEMBER 19, 2007

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to testify on the action taken by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee to remove Everglades National Park from its List of World Heritage in Danger and on the Department of the Interior's (Department's) role in that action.

The Department manages more than 3.1 million acres of conservation lands in South Florida, which is also home to more than 7 million people and a growing economy. Areas managed by the Department include Everglades and Biscayne National Parks, Big Cypress National Preserve and 16 national wildlife refuges, all of which protect habitat found nowhere else.

The UNESCO Committee, by removing the Everglades National Park from the List, has strongly affirmed the commitment and progress of the United States in conserving the Everglades ecosystem. Since 2002, the State of Florida has spent more than \$1.2 billion in conservation projects, and the United States has spent more than \$1 billion. Florida has also spent more than \$1.3 billion in land acquisition for future Everglades restoration projects. The size of this commitment by the United States and Florida is necessary context as we review today the significance of the Parks designation by foreign nations. I hope today's discussion will inspire the Congress to embrace President Bush's budget for the Everglades in fiscal year 2008. I would

appreciate having my testimony entered into the record. I am also submitting certain documents for the record, which are valuable in clarifying this issue.

The World Heritage Convention is one of the world's most important international agreements in the field of natural and cultural heritage preservation. Created largely through U.S. leadership and significantly inspired by the U.S. National Park concept, the Convention has become one of the most widely accepted conservation agreement in the world with more than 180 participating countries. The United States has 20 World Heritage Sites, 8 of which are cultural and 12 natural. There are more natural sites listed in the United States than from any other single country except Australia.

The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks of the Department of the Interior has been delegated responsibility on behalf of the Secretary of the Interior to coordinate, in cooperation with the State Department, United States participation in the World Heritage Convention. This Administration takes that responsibility very seriously.

The unanimous decision of the 21-member World Heritage Committee, the governing body of the Convention, to remove Everglades National Park from the Danger List of World Heritage Sites is the international community's way of recognizing the progress that has been made in addressing key issues that led to the listing of the park in 1993. The decision recognizes and applauds the unprecedented efforts and continuing commitment of South Florida's community, the State of Florida and the federal government to restore this world-class ecosystem. The text

of the World Heritage Committee's decision and a copy of the UNESCO press release announcing it are attached for your information.

At the recent convention of the parties, we received supportive comments on the proposal to remove the everglades from the list from India, Kenya, Lithuania, New Zealand, Israel, Canada, Madagascar, Chile, Benin and Spain during consideration of our petition. This reinforced the unanimous sentiment that other nations had spoken in private and that the committee later expressed in a unanimous vote.

Some have misinterpreted the criteria used by UNESCO's World Heritage Committee and the Administration's concurrence in removing the park from the List. The Committee's decision does not in any way signal a lessening of our commitment or an end to the Everglades restoration efforts.

It has also been alleged in the press that I "changed a National Park Service (NPS) report on the matter." This is simply not the case. (The subject report is being presented to you; it was submitted months earlier for the World Heritage Center's staff to use in preparing its report to the Committee on sites on the List in Danger. I could not change a report that had already been submitted with my concurrence months before the meeting.)

This Administration wholeheartedly supports the ongoing national initiative to comprehensively restore and preserve the River of Grass and its vital ecosystem. To date, the United States and State of Florida have spent about \$7.1 billion for projects designed to improve water quality, increase water supplies, recover threatened and endangered species, and restore natural habitat.

The Government Accountability Office reports that of the 222 separate Everglades restoration projects that it estimates will cost at least \$19.7 billion over the next decades, 43 have been completed, 107 are underway, and 26 are in design or planning phases. The remaining 46 projects, to be launched in coming years, will complete the current restoration plan.

The Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP), enacted by Congress in 2000, is the blueprint for this historic effort, considered by many to be the largest and most expensive environmental restoration program in the world. The CERP is a \$10.5 billion program of large-scale modifications to the water management infrastructure of south Florida, with a targeted completion date of 2038. CERP consists of over 60 individual project modifications to the regional water supply and flood control project to increase water supplies for the environment and other users. In addition, the Modified Water Deliveries Project to Everglades National Park is underway to restore more natural flows of water to Everglades National Park. To date, \$303 million has been appropriated for this project.

The South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force, representing federal, State, tribal and local stakeholders, coordinates projects and investments across all levels of government through its strategic plan and serves as a focal point for the ongoing collaboration that is necessary to undertake the largest watershed restoration program in the world. With its partners, the Department is improving water quality and restoring more natural flows of water to the Everglades, restoring habitat, and recovering endangered species, such as key deer, American crocodiles, and others.

This aggressive restoration strategy, record of accomplishment, and demonstration of continuing collaboration and commitment impressed the World Heritage Committee and persuaded its members to remove Everglades National Park from the Danger List of World Heritage sites. The committee had asked U.S. representatives on several previous occasions to develop benchmarks for this purpose. In 2006, the committee adopted evaluation standards that were crafted in cooperation with the NPS and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and that would facilitate consideration of removal of Everglades National Park from the List.

Everglades National Park had been on the Danger List since 1993, at the request of the United States, following the devastation wrought by Hurricane Andrew and the accumulation of previous threats that developed over many years. The designation calls attention to specific and imminent threats facing a site and seeks to generate action by the responsible government and world community. When the Committee is persuaded that actions to address the threats are being taken, it customarily removes the site from the List, while fully recognizing that additional measures to protect the site must still be taken. The Committee acted in a similar manner with respect to the Rio Platano Biosphere Reserve in Honduras which was also removed from the List though it too continues to face many problems including illegal logging within the boundaries of the site.

It is also useful to consider the Committee's action from a global perspective as that is the context in which the World Heritage Convention works. The vast majority of the other World Heritage sites included on the List are in the developing world, many in countries without effective government management systems, or where resources to address the problems facing

the sites are nonexistent and the Committee's resources to assist these sites are quite limited. As I stated, the principal purpose of the List is to call attention to such problems and mobilize international assistance for these sites. In view of that, while acknowledging the serious and long-term threats facing the Everglades, the Committee, nonetheless expressed its confidence in the ability of the U.S. to address these issues. There was no dissent from Committee members on this action.

By supporting the Committee's decision to remove the park from the List, this Administration was in no way suggesting that the Everglades is a fully recovered ecosystem. The challenges facing the park and the River of Grass took decades to create. They will take decades to overcome. We will continue to work with the State of Florida and the many stakeholders in South Florida to save this irreplaceable natural wonder.

While Everglades National Park has been removed from the List, it remains a World Heritage Site, which it has been since 1979, in company with other extraordinary places, such as the pyramids of Egypt, the wilds of East Africa's Serengeti, and the Great Barrier Reef of Australia. The United States will continue to provide annual conservation reports to the World Heritage Committee on our progress in restoring the Everglades. More specifically, the Committee directed the U.S. to report on progress with respect to the established benchmarks. The Committee will continue to evaluate progress in achieving these benchmarks; if progress is not being made or if the U.S. does not continue to focus on the long-term effort to restore the Everglades, consideration would then be given by the Committee to placing Everglades National Park back on the Danger List of World Heritage sites.

The Administration has a proud record of accomplishment regarding both UNESCO and the World Heritage Convention. Under the President's leadership, the United States has, after more than 20 years, once again become a full member of UNESCO. In 2005, the United States sought, and was elected to, a six-year term on the World Heritage Committee, a significant accomplishment for the U.S. in any UN body. (By gentlemen's agreement, Member States relinquish their Committee seats after four years so that participation is shared.) Over the last two years, we have been developing a new list of candidate sites in the U.S. which will be considered for future nomination to the World Heritage List. The new list, based on applications submitted by interested owners, replaces an outdated list originally developed 25 years ago. We anticipate beginning the nomination process by announcing our U.S. Tentative List in 2008. This announcement represents a significant re-engagement with an important aspect of the World Heritage program and would be the first new U.S. nomination submitted since 1994.

Supporting the Committee's decision regarding Everglades is entirely consistent with the Administration's overarching support for the World Heritage Program and for the restoration and preservation of the Everglades.

That concludes my statement. I would be happy to answer any questions that you or other members of the subcommittee may have.