



Highlights of [GAO-09-386](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands, Committee on Natural Resources, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The National Park Service (Park Service) in the Department of the Interior (Interior) annually receives hundreds of millions of dollars in donated funds, goods, and services to support its 391 parks and other sites. But concerns have been raised about potential accompanying risks, such as undue donor influence, new long-term maintenance costs, or commercialization of parks. To address these concerns, the Park Service has developed and refined policies for managing donations, but questions remain about the agency's ability to do so effectively.

GAO was asked to examine (1) how donations and related partnerships have supported the Park Service, (2) the policies and processes the agency uses to manage donations and how well they are working, and (3) what the agency could do to enhance its management of donations and related partnerships. GAO reviewed applicable legal and policy documents, interviewed Interior and Park Service officials and partner organizations, and visited selected national parks.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending a number of actions to strengthen the Park Service's management of donations and related partnerships, including tailoring agency policies to match the level of risk and developing a strategic vision for the role of philanthropy in parks. Interior generally concurred with the recommendations, except for the one on developing a strategic vision, which GAO clarified.

View [GAO-09-386](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Robin M. Nazzaror at (202) 512-3841 or nazzaror@gao.gov.

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Donations and Related Partnerships Benefit Parks, but Management Refinements Could Better Target Risks and Enhance Accountability

What GAO Found

Donations from individuals, nonprofit organizations, corporations, and others have provided significant support to park projects and programs, and related partnerships have amplified the value of those donations with countless other benefits. The collective value of these donations is substantial—including over \$500 million since 1986 at a single park and over \$100 million for six recent construction projects, for example—but their total worth is difficult to quantify, in part because of the numerous and often indirect ways in which parks receive donations. Donations support park programs and projects, such as interpretation and education, new construction, repair of facilities, and cultural resource management and protection. Park partners also provide other benefits that go beyond dollar values or a simple tally of projects. These benefits include enabling projects and programs that would not otherwise have been possible, accomplishing projects more quickly, and expanding parks' connections with their communities.

The Park Service's donations and fund-raising policy includes directives in key areas to protect the agency against risks, but their effectiveness is diminished because parks do not always follow these program requirements, and the agency has no systematic process to monitor conformance. Agency officials acknowledged some cases of nonconformance but believed they were justified because they involved parks and partners with long track records of success and therefore did not pose significant risks to the agency. While reasonable, this justification indicates that the policy's requirements (and the resource investment needed to meet them) are not always commensurate with the level of risk to the agency. The Park Service has made improvements to its partnership construction process to address past accountability concerns, but remaining gaps leave the agency exposed to risks in some situations, such as when operations and maintenance costs increase for new construction.

To enhance management of donations and related partnerships, GAO believes the Park Service could take a more strategic approach, further refine its information on donations, and increase employees' knowledge and skills for working with nonprofit and philanthropic partners. The agency could benefit from a long-range vision of the desired role of donations and related partnerships, but despite growing indications of the need for one, the Park Service has neither a strategic vision nor a plan for how to achieve it. Also, by enhancing its information on donations, which is currently limited, the agency could better support such a strategic approach. For various reasons, agencywide information on donations from some of its partners is incomplete, out of date, and based on inconsistent determinations of support. Finally, by improving its employees' skills in understanding the culture, policies, and constraints of nonprofit and philanthropic partners, the agency could better manage the risks that accompany donations. Park Service employees and partners say they face challenges and are not sufficiently skilled in this area, although they believe the skills are critical.