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## Park Service and corporate advertising, a dangerous mix

By [Joe Davidson](#) | [Columnist](#) May 9, 2016



National Park Service car with commercial advertising. (Government Accountability Office)

National Park Service (NPS) rangers won't be decorated with corporate logos à la NASCAR drivers, but the agency's plan to allow advertising-like recognition of donors, including a beer maker, flirts with making national parks resemble ballparks.

The plan is outlined in "[Director's Order #21: Philanthropic Partnerships](#)," as my colleague [Lisa Rein also has reported](#), and is designed "to create positive philanthropic partnerships with the NPS and on its behalf."

Those partners are donors who boost the Park Service budget. But they often want more than a good feeling in return.

Although NPS expects the proposal, initially issued in 2006 and updated in March, to take effect by the end of this year, the impact is already evident. A [Government Accountability Office \(GAO\) report](#) published in December carries a photo of a Park Service car adorned with this Subaru advertising — "Built to take you to the place you've never been."

The Park Service is being taken to a dubious place.

"Large corporate donations exert a not-so-subtle gravitational pull on park managers increasingly dependent on these donors for their budgets," said Jeff Ruch, executive director of [Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility](#). "We are concerned that influence peddling will soon become a major

recreational activity in our national parks.”

GAO also is concerned.

A [2009 GAO report](#) lists several potential risks to NPS from these donor relationships, including:

- “Partner exerts undue influence over Park Service priorities”
- “Public confidence in the Park Service is compromised”
- “Parks and Park Service become commercialized.”

An indicator of the last risk, GAO said, is “Corporate donations made to parks or partners and tied to advertising.”

Already parks hoist banners with Budweiser beer and other corporate logos. Where will it stop? Can you imagine Disney presents Yellowstone?

While allowing corporations and other donors to get too deeply involved in any government service presents conflicts of interest, the Park Service apparently felt it was driven to this point because of inadequate government funding.

“DO21,” Park Service shorthand for the order, “is intended to empower NPS employees to take a more active role in the philanthropic process, but by no means requires it,” Park Service spokesman Jeffrey G. Olson said by email. “The realities of NPS funding or lack thereof mean that private dollars are going to be increasingly more important as we move forward and the expectations and responsibilities of the Park Service grow. DO21 simply recognizes this evolution.”

Does this evolution mean federal employees will become increasingly more involved with corporate pitchmen because Congress won’t adequately fund the parks?

Congressional appropriations for the Park Service fell 8 percent, adjusted for inflation, from fiscal years 2005 through 2014, according to GAO. Yet, “Fees, donations, and other funding sources ... increased 39 percent after adjusting for inflation.”

Cozy relationships pay off, but at a cost – the credibility of a federal agency and its employees.

“For me as a federal employee and a taxpayer, I think it is unethical ... to be advertising for a corporation,” said a Park Service superintendent who insisted on anonymity, fearing retaliation from superiors.

This employee said some NPS staffers are pressured to spend a significant amount of time fundraising and working with donors, who sometimes want special accommodations, such as access to park areas off-limits to the public.

“I was shocked when I read the director’s order,” the superintendent said.

Perhaps it should not be so shocking given the source.

The latest update on these donor partnerships comes less than three months after NPS Director Jonathan Jarvis was reprimanded. Michael Connor, the Interior Department’s undersecretary, said he would dismiss Jarvis from his role as manager of the Park Service’s ethics program after the director wrote a book with an ironic title: “Guidebook to American Values and Our National Parks.”

In February, the department’s [inspector general reported](#) the book was “published by Eastern National, a nonprofit that has cooperating agreements with NPS to operate stores and sell merchandise in numerous national parks.” Jarvis was not charged with receiving any money from the publication. Nonetheless, the inspector general’s report said Jarvis “approved Eastern National’s use of NPS’ ‘arrowhead’ logo on the book’s cover” and did not inform the department’s ethics office of his

activity.

After reviewing the findings, Connor, in a [memo to the inspector general's office](#), said the department has “come to the conclusion that Director Jarvis did violate Federal employee ethics standards.”

Now, with his order, the entire Park Service is adopting Jarvis’s ethical standard — such as it is.