

CLIMATE CHANGE AND NATIONAL PARK WILDLIFE:

# Risk & Opportunity

The effects of climate change have been visible for years in our national parks. Glaciers are disappearing faster than scientists had predicted even a few years ago. Native trees and animals are losing ground because changing temperature and weather patterns are making the availability of food, water, and shelter less certain. Fish and wildlife are being driven from their national park homes by changes that are unfolding faster than the animals' ability to adapt.

Climate change is here and now, affecting the coral reefs in Florida at **Biscayne** National Park, lodgepole pines in **Rocky Mountain** National Park and animals that rely on snow in Yellowstone National Park. The danger signs are a clear call to action for the National Parks Conservation Association, a nonprofit citizens' organization that works to enhance and restore America's national parks for present and future generations.

What's happening in the parks is symptomatic of changes unfolding across the larger landscapes to which they are inseparably connected, the same landscapes that contain our communities. Changes that harm wildlife — depriving them of food, water, or shelter — will ultimately harm us. Given the iconic importance of parks, and that they protect core ecoregions of this country, working to safeguard parks and their wildlife from climate change should be a central strategy in safeguarding our nation from climate change.

Solutions are neither simple nor quick and easy. It will take decisive action on the part of our federal government and all of us to meet the challenge and keep our faith with future generations. To avoid the potentially catastrophic loss of animal and plant life, it is imperative that we wean ourselves from energy sources like coal and oil that are accelerating rising temperatures and causing unnatural climate change. And it is equally imperative that we pursue new strategies to preserve functioning ecosystems and the full diversity of life they support.

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National parks can play an important role in these strategies, preserving healthy ecosystems and their wildlife, in part by helping them to adapt to new climatic conditions. But some challenges must be addressed before the parks can fully step into this role. Right now, no national plan exists to manage wildlife throughout their habitat, which often is a patchwork of lands managed by multiple federal agencies, states, tribes, municipalities, and private landholders. Wildlife need corridors that enable them to migrate between protected lands as climate change renders their current homes inhospitable. We also need to work harder to reduce air and water pollution that compound climate change stresses on wildlife. All of these elements must be put in place as soon as possible to safeguard all living communities.

This is a unique moment in time to leverage the power of America's national parks for change. A confluence of events, including a new Ken Burns film series on the national parks, the release of the National Parks Second Century Commission's vision for the park system, the new leadership at the Department of the Interior and National Park Service who are making climate change a top priority, and the galvanizing focus of the coming Centennial of the National Park Service in 2016 can catalyze public support to safeguard our national parks from climate change.

We must act now to secure America's natural legacy before it is lost to our children and grandchildren. The National Park System can play a central role in restoring and preserving the healthy ecosystems necessary for wildlife — and indeed ourselves — to thrive.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tom C. Kiernan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending to the left.

Tom C. Kiernan, President, National Parks Conservation Association