

April 24, 2024

The Honorable Deb Haaland, Secretary  
US Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20240

The Honorable Thomas Vilsack, Secretary  
US Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Ave, SW  
Washington, DC 20250

The Honorable Alejandro Mayorkas, Secretary  
US Department of Homeland Security  
2707 Martin Luther King Jr Ave, SE  
Washington, DC 20528

Charles F. “Chuck” Sams III, Director  
National Park Service  
1849 C Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20240

Tracy Stone-Manning, Director  
Bureau of Land Management  
1849 C Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20240

Randy Moore, Chief  
US Forest Service  
1400 Independence Ave, SW  
Washington, DC 20250

Ur M. Jaddou, Director  
US Citizenship and Immigration Services  
5900 Capital Gateway Drive  
Camp Springs, MD 20588

**RE: Proposal to Provide America the Beautiful National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Passes to New American Citizens at Naturalization Ceremonies as a “Welcome to America” Gift**

Dear Secretaries Haaland, Vilsack and Mayorkas; Directors Sams, Stone-Manning and Jaddou; and Chief Moore:

Underrepresented communities of color, including immigrant communities, encounter numerous barriers when attempting to access the best America has to offer: our National Parks and other Federal Recreational Lands.

Some challenges include:

**Distance** – National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands are often several hours away from urban areas, where people of color are largely concentrated. Communities of color are three times more likely to live without access to natural areas compared to white communities.<sup>1</sup>

**Cost** – Transportation, entry fees, lodging or camping fees, gear, food, and incidentals can add up to several thousand dollars for a seven-day trip to a National Park for a family of four.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jenny Rowland-Shea et.al. [The Nature Gap: Confronting Racial and Economic Disparities in the Destruction and Protection of Nature in America](#), Center for American Progress. July 21, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> According to average costs at varying destinations listed in such travel/trip planning search engines as [Tripadvisor.com](#), [BudgetYourTrip.com](#), [Expedia.com](#), and [ChampionTraveler.com](#).

**Intrapersonal and interpersonal constraints** – These can include the lack of familiarity with the National Park System, National Forests or Bureau of Land Management Lands, as well as camping, backpacking and other outdoor recreational activities; the lack of a sense of belonging in spaces traditionally perceived to be “white”, etc.<sup>3</sup> and

**Technology** – More and more National Parks, National Forests and BLM Lands are requiring recreationists to make reservations ahead of time, often in difficult-to-navigate, English-only websites or apps.

Recently, another barrier to access for underrepresented communities has emerged: a trend among National Parks to require **cashless payment of entry and other fees**.<sup>4</sup>

There are legitimate reasons for National Parks to go cashless, including safety/reduced theft risk; cost savings from not having to handle, count and transport cash for deposit; and the ubiquitousness of credit card and other forms of electronic payment options (e.g., digital wallets like Google Pay or Apple Pay); however, for low-income communities of color, including immigrant communities, establishing and maintaining credit to begin with can be difficult for a variety of factors.

According to sources as diverse as consumer financial services company [Bankrate](#);<sup>5</sup> nonprofit, nonpartisan California state news outlet [CalMatters](#), and its [California Divide Project](#), a collaboration among newsrooms that examines income inequality and economic survival in our nation’s most populous state;<sup>6</sup> nonpartisan think tank [Pew Research Center](#);<sup>7</sup> and grassroots environmental and social justice advocacy organization [GreenLatinos](#),<sup>8</sup> these factors include:

- Banking deserts, i.e., a lack of access to banking and other financial services—including credit and home loans—in certain areas because of the legacy of redlining, and, in the case of Native American communities, because of forced migration from ancestral lands;
- Traditional exclusionary lending practices, with higher interest rates charged to non-white unbanked or underbanked credit applicants;
- Wide wealth and debt gaps between whites and nonwhites at all socioeconomic levels;
- With regard to immigrants in particular, difficulty in building credit due to the lack of an established credit history in the United States.

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<sup>3</sup> Xiao Xiao, KangJae Jerry Lee & Lincoln R. Larson (2021): [Who visits U.S. national parks \(and who doesn’t\)? A national study of perceived constraints and vacation preferences across diverse populations](#), Journal of Leisure Research, DOI: 10.1080/00222216.2021.1899776.

<sup>4</sup> Eve Chen, [Rocky Mountain, Death Valley: What to know as more national parks go cashless](#), USA Today, May 25, 2023, Travel.

<sup>5</sup> Kendall Little and Christopher Murray, [Credit card statistics by race and ethnicity](#), Bankrate.com, June 7, 2023, Credit Cards.

<sup>6</sup> Jackie Botts, [Many low-income Californians don’t use credit cards. Should stores be required to accept cash?](#) CalMatters.org, February 13, 2020 (updated February 27, 2020), California Divide.

<sup>7</sup> Rakesh Kochhar and Mohamad Moslimani, [Wealth Surged in the Pandemic, but Debt Endures for Poorer Black and Hispanic Families: Overall, 1 in 4 Black households and 1 in 7 Hispanic households in the U.S. either had no wealth or were in debt in 2021](#), PewResearch.org, December 4, 2023, Income, Wealth & Poverty.

<sup>8</sup> [Latino Climate Justice Framework](#), a framework for addressing the disproportionate effects of the climate crisis on the Latino and other underrepresented communities, GreenLatinos.org, October 2022, Providing Equitable Access and Representation.

For low-income, underrepresented communities, including immigrant communities, therefore, barriers to credit also create barriers to access to National Parks when cashless entry is required, and to other Federal Recreational Lands when online reservations relying on the payment of upfront fees via credit card are required.

### A Proposed Solution

The U.S. Department of Interior (DOI) and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), which manage National Parks and other Federal Recreational Lands, cannot be expected to solve the credit or financial woes of underrepresented communities of color in the U.S. But they can take a creative step towards ensuring, at least for newly-sworn-in Naturalized American Citizens, greater accessibility to our National Parks and other Federal Recreational Lands regardless of their access to a credit or debit card.

Imagine **providing an America the Beautiful Pass as a “Welcome to America” gift to each newly naturalized citizen at swearing-in ceremonies.** Such a gesture, besides conveying our Statue of Liberty’s welcoming spirit to our brand-new fellow Americans, would remove the cashless entry fee barrier to access, and incentivize them to visit our beautiful National Parks and other Federal Recreational Lands.

Empowering our new fellow Americans to enjoy the very best our nation has to offer, our perpetually protected, expansive and scenic public lands and waters, would:

- Make them feel most welcome and nurtured by their newly adopted homeland;
- Encourage their appreciation for America’s National Park System and conservation efforts in our National Forests and BLM Lands;
- Foment patriotism and pride;
- Add to naturalized citizens’ already rich tapestry of lived experiences, which strengthens our collective American experience as a whole;
- Have a positive spillover influence on their accompanying travelers, whom they would go on to introduce to our National Parks, National Forests and Bureau of Land Management (BLM)-administered lands, thereby creating future recreationists; and
- Help foster new allies in environmental conservation for the sake of future generations of Americans—regardless of their country of origin.

According to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), the United States welcomed 878,500 new citizens in fiscal year 2023.<sup>9</sup> While many of these new citizens would pay at most \$80 for a one-year America the Beautiful Pass, seniors 62 or older would pay \$20 for a one-year pass, or \$80 for a lifetime pass. Current or former members of the military (depending on their veteran status) and those permanently disabled could receive free annual or lifetime passes.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, DOI/USDA/USCIS’s investment in providing America the Beautiful passes as a “Welcome to America” gift for new citizens would simply be in the form of waived pass fees, which are already being waived or largely discounted for many. Such a gift would feel like a reward to new citizens and create an enormous amount of goodwill for people who are currently paying up to \$760 for their N-400 Application for Naturalization.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> [USCIS.gov > Citizenship Resource Center > Naturalization-Related Data and Statistics > Naturalization Statistics](https://uscis.gov/citizen/citizen-education/naturalization-related-data-and-statistics/naturalization-statistics)

<sup>10</sup> [NPS.gov > Plan Your Visit > Passes](https://nps.gov/plan-your-visit/passes)

<sup>11</sup> [USCIS.gov > Forms > N-400, Application for Naturalization](https://uscis.gov/forms/n-400-application-for-naturalization)

Finally, we ask **agencies to cooperate to host swearing-in ceremonies on public land recreation sites**. DOI, USDA & USCIS could help cement in everyone's minds, beginning with those of immigrants being sworn in as new citizens, the Departments' commitment to our nation's greatest assets: its people and its lands. Furthermore, this proposal can provide improved access to swearing-in ceremonies for rural residents throughout the nation. In the Eastern Sierra Nevada region of California, where Friends of the Inyo, this letter's co-authoring organization, is based, there are plenty of stunning public lands that provide awe-inspiring settings for swearing-in ceremonies, including:

- Yosemite National Park (NPS)
- Death Valley National Park (NPS)
- Manzanar National Historic Site—a WWII relocation center for Japanese Americans (NPS)
- Devils Postpile National Monument (NPS)
- Ansel Adams Wilderness (USFS - Stretching across the Inyo & Sierra National Forests)
- John Muir Wilderness (USFS - Stretching across the Inyo & Sierra National Forests)
- Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest, home to the oldest living trees in the world (USFS - Inyo National Forest)
- Alabama Hills National Scenic Area (BLM)
- Fossil Falls (BLM)
- Inyo Mountains Wilderness (BLM)

And that is just in Eastern California. Imagine the national pride that hosting more swearing-in ceremonies in National Parks and Federal Recreation Lands throughout our nation would instill!

The undersigned 68 community-based organizations encourage a collaborative interagency agreement between DOI, USDA and USCIS, or the application of Justice40 dollars, to make this proposal a reality.

We hope you will consider the priceless, intangible value of this proposal, and respectfully ask for your kind consideration.

Sincerely,

**Friends of the Inyo**, a regional environmental conservation nonprofit serving California's Eastern Sierra Nevada region ([FriendsOfTheInyo.org](http://FriendsOfTheInyo.org))

**GreenLatinos**, a nationwide grassroots environmental and social justice advocacy nonprofit ([GreenLatinos.org](http://GreenLatinos.org))

Alaska Wilderness League  
Amargosa Conservancy  
American Rivers  
Americas for Conservation + the Arts  
Birds of Prey NCA Partnership  
Build A Better Planet  
Center for Biological Diversity  
Climate Change and Environmental Alliance  
Climate Communications Coalition  
COFEM - Council of Mexican Federations  
Comunidades Unidas  
Conserve Southwest Utah

Conservation Lands Foundation  
Creation Justice Ministries  
DamDol Enterprises  
Dream Big Nevada  
Earth Law Center  
Earthjustice  
Endangered Species Coalition  
Farmworkers Institute of Education & Leadership Development (FIELD)  
Friends of Plumas Wilderness  
Friends of the Earth US  
Friends of the Mariana Trench  
Friends of the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks  
Get Outdoors Nevada  
Great Basin Resource Watch  
Great Old Broads for Wilderness  
HEAL Utah  
INYO350  
Latino Network  
Latino Outdoors  
Latinos Aventureros en las Carolinas  
Latinos in Heritage Conservation  
League of Conservation Voters  
Los Padres ForestWatch  
Love 4 Nature, Inc  
Mono Lake Committee  
Morro Coast Audubon Society  
MountainTrue  
Nature for All  
New Mexico Wildlife Federation  
North American Climate, Conservation and Environment (NACCE)  
Nuestra Tierra  
Oregon Wild  
Outdoorist Oath  
Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary's Center for Climate Justice and Faith  
Patagonia  
PODER  
Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada  
Protegete  
Resource Renewal Institute  
Salted Roots  
San Gabriel Valley Conservation Corps  
Services, Immigrant Rights and Education Network  
Shift Our Ways Collective  
Sierra Nevada Alliance  
Together for Brothers (T4B)  
Trail Access Project  
Tuolumne River Trust  
Voces Unidas RGV

Voices of the Land  
Wall of Women  
Walking Water  
Watts Branch Watershed Alliance  
Winter Wildlands Alliance  
Western Slope Conservation Center