

Press Release

For Immediate Release

From: **Edmonds Institute (EI)**
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National Park Service Asks for Comment . . . and Public Interest Groups Let Them Have It



Groups Cry Foul over Commercial Bioprospecting in the National Parks

December 6, 2006. Five public interest groups today submitted official comments vehemently opposing National Park Service (NPS) plans to facilitate commercial bioprospecting in the nation's 400-plus national parks. The groups, representing diverse interests across the country, were officially responding to a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) in which NPS formally proposes benefit sharing deals with private corporations hoping to extract and develop natural resources from the national parks for private profit.

The five organizations, Edmonds Institute in Edmonds, Washington, Alliance for the Wild Rockies in Helena, Montana, the International Center for Technology Assessment in Washington, D.C., Wilderness Watch and the WildWest Institute in Missoula, Montana, call for a complete withdrawal and rewrite of the DEIS because it fails to meet the requirements of the court order that required it, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and the Wilderness Act. (The Wilderness Act prohibits commercial enterprises on the over 40 million acres of the National Park System that is federally designated Wilderness.)

In their comments, the groups ("The Five") point out that, "Commercial bioprospecting in general undermines the basic mission, purpose and spirit of the National Parks. While we strongly support scientific research in the parks, we believe there should be no research within the park system that is expressly commercial."

The Five allege a "pre-decisional bias" in favor of commercial bioprospecting by NPS,

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claiming there was no dispassionate scientific, environmental, or social analysis of the issue.

"Once you get over the profoundly sad fact that NPS has taken seven years to write hundreds of pages about impacts without hardly mentioning the environment, wildlife, or ecosystems, you realize that they just don't get the special nature of the Parks' mission," said Beth Burrows, director of the Edmonds Institute, one of the original plaintiffs in the court case that led to the DEIS.

"After reading this document, we have to ask the same question the court asked more than seven years ago when it ordered this environmental assessment: Where's the science?" declared Michael Garrity, executive director of Alliance for the Wild Rockies, another of the original plaintiffs.

"The DEIS is not the 'hard look' review ordered by the Court in this case...The Park Service has gone out of its way to avoid actually analyzing the environmental impacts of commercializing our nation's treasured natural preserves," stated Joseph Mendelson, legal director for the International Center for Technology Assessment, also one of the original plaintiffs.

In the DEIS, NPS outlines three alternative plans of action:

*Alternative A which calls for no action, thus allowing continued bioprospecting without so-called benefit-sharing agreements;

*Alternatives B, including the NPS preferred version, allowing commercial bioprospecting but requiring benefit-sharing agreements with potential limits on public disclosure of the agreement details;

*Alternative C which prohibits commercial bioprospecting, only allowing noncommercial or public interest research and development of national park resources.

The Five, while conditionally supporting Alternative C, argue for a Science in the Public Interest Alternative in which NPS researchers, working in collaboration with other federal agencies and universities, conduct research and make discoveries in the public interest, with all benefits - including details of the research - remaining in the public domain.

The controversy over bioprospecting and benefit sharing from research in the parks first came to light in 1997 as Yellowstone National Park was making plans to commemorate its 125th anniversary. By the time the Park Service announced that it had made an agreement with Diversa Corporation to give Diversa a non-exclusive right to "bioprospect" microorganisms in Yellowstone in exchange for a share in potential future earnings, public interest groups were already objecting.

In 1998, a lawsuit was filed and in 1999 Judge Royce Lamberth of the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, ruled in favor of the public interest groups on the NEPA claim, suspending the Diversa agreement and ordering an environmental assessment of the deal. Seven years later, NPS published a DEIS and the public interest groups that forced its publication, in consort with others, found the document woefully inadequate and objectionable. A copy of the Five's complete comments is available at <www.ParksNotforSale.org>.

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The deadline for public comment on the Benefits Sharing DEIS has been extended to late January, 2007.

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