

## NATIONAL PARKS:

### Watchdog bashes NPS for allowing Subaru drone in Shenandoah

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A watchdog group today criticized the National Park Service for temporarily exempting Subaru from its ban on drones and closing parts of Shenandoah National Park last fall so the Japanese carmaker -- a major supporter of the agency's centennial celebrations -- could film a commercial there.

"Closing public access to national park facilities to give corporate donors exclusive access is not part of America's best idea," said Jeff Ruch, the executive director of **Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER)**.

Subaru is one of six "premier partners" of the Find Your Park campaign, an effort to promote NPS in its centennial year led by the National Park Foundation, the agency's official fundraising partner. The company has donated more than \$3 million to the foundation since 2013.

Working with Matter Creative Agency and the National Geographic Society -- another centennial sponsor -- the carmaker proposed filming a promotion for the Find Your Park campaign that would involve the use of a drone camera, five vehicles, 15 cast and crew, and closures at up to 13 locations for up to 30 minutes at a time over the course of two days.

But flying drones in parks was banned two years ago due to safety and nuisance concerns ([Greenwire](#), June 20).

As a result, Subaru's team needed a special use permit to operate the drone. After reviewing its [proposal](#), Shenandoah Superintendent Jim Northup filed a permit request with the Park Service's associate director for visitor resources and protection on behalf of the carmaker on Oct. 19, 2015.

Northup's [request](#) argued that the drone flights "will not violate any [Federal Aviation Administration] regulations, cause injury or damage to any park resources, unreasonably interfere with normal park operations or present any clear and present danger to public health and safety.

Furthermore, Subaru's drone footage would "showcase many dramatic viewsheds that are an integral part of the visitor experience in Shenandoah," the superintendent said. "For these reasons, the park believes the filming activity is appropriate and compatible with the values and resources of the park."

At the same time, however, Northup acknowledged that the request was not without risks for Shenandoah.

"The permitting of commercial filming with a drone could be potentially controversial by seeming to set a precedent in the park," he wrote. "We feel that the centennial partnership relationship and the focus on the Find Your Park campaign warrant special consideration."

NPS [emails](#) obtained by PEER show that Northup's request went quickly through the approval process to accommodate Subaru's team, which was already in the park doing non-aerial filming.

The letter and other supporting materials were submitted by a concessions management specialist at Shenandoah on Oct. 19 at 8:34 a.m. Between then and the following morning, when Northeast Region Deputy Director Jonathan Meade signed off on the request, Shenandoah officials sent more than a half-dozen emails to permitting officials. Northup also called the regional office around 5 p.m. Oct. 19 to confirm that it would sign the request the following day.

The final [permit](#) was slightly more restrictive than Subaru had requested. For example, the company was only allowed to close the approved portions of Skyline Drive for 10 minutes at a time.

Still, PEER believes the prompt attention and policy waivers granted to the major donor could set a dangerous model for future NPS collaborations with corporations. The agency recently proposed to expand opportunities for accepting donations and honoring donors ([Greenwire](#), March 30).

"This episode illustrates how corporate donations can affect the way parks operate and for whose benefit," Ruch said. "This is not philanthropy; it is merchandising. These corporate tie-ins give new meaning to panhandling in the park."

NPS did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the permit or PEER's allegations.