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WASHINGTON — With the goal of better preserving and enhancing the natural and cultural heritage of the nation's public lands and waters, five U.S. government agencies today joined the National Geographic Society in a ceremony at Society headquarters unveiling a ground-breaking framework to formally adopt the principles of geotourism.

The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) is a first step to promote geotourism as a collaborative approach among governmental agencies and private partners. Pioneered by National Geographic since 2002, geotourism refers to tourism that helps sustain or enhance the geographical character of a place — its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage and well-being of its residents.

Signatories to the MOU included senior leaders of National Geographic, the U.S. Department of the Interior, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and their agencies, including Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Forest Service. It is anticipated there will be additional partners, both public and private. The officials agree in the MOU that geotourism is beneficial to national parks, national forests, national wildlife refuges and BLM lands, as well as Indian lands and private and local attractions.

"This agreement will enhance both the environment and the local economies, better preserving America's diverse recreational and scenic assets — a source of immense national pride," said Dirk Kempthorne, Secretary of the Interior, who signed the agreement. "Geotourism showcases what is authentic and unique and defines us. It is the right concept to protect our public lands for future generations."

"Tourism in recent decades has exploded to become one of the most pervasive industries on Earth. By this collaborative, sensitive approach to tourism, the destructive pitfalls of mass tourism can be avoided in our country's great outdoors," said John Fahey, National Geographic president and CEO. "Today's signing is a tremendous step forward for geotourism and sustainable tourism in the United States."

"Working together under this MOU will build upon our collective strength. It builds upon many of our existing initiatives and will further our working more effectively across boundaries and jurisdictions," said Mark Rey, undersecretary for natural resources and the environment of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, who also signed the MOU. "The framework will focus on what is distinctive and unique about our great American public lands."

In addition to Kempthorne, Fahey and Rey, officials at today's event included Paul Hoffman, deputy assistant secretary, U.S. Department of the Interior; Mary Bomar, director, National Park Service; Jerold Gidner, director, Bureau of Indian Affairs; Henri Bisson, deputy director, Bureau of Land Management; Kenneth Stansell, deputy director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; and Sally Collins, associate chief, U.S. Forest Service.

This new collaboration builds upon existing National Geographic, Department of Interior agencies' and

U.S. Forest Service pilot projects that enhance opportunities for communities, tribes and regions to benefit from sustainable tourism. The first prototype project was a geotourism effort that straddles the border of Arizona and Sonora, Mexico, serving as a catalyst to help encourage citizens, communities and tribes to become actively involved in the stewardship and conservation of the public land and water. Subsequently, the state of Arizona has declared itself “geotourism dependent,” after assessing the enhanced quality of life and economic benefits derived.

The MOU establishes an official Geotourism Working Group among the signatories, committed to promoting sustainable tourism practices and local stewardship, often called destination stewardship. Partnerships with local organizations, tribes and communities will be developed.

In 2003 the National Geographic’s Center for Sustainable Destinations (CSD) established a new approach to tourism by combining its expertise with the design capabilities of National Geographic Maps and the knowledge of local people to facilitate wise stewardship of cultural and natural resources worldwide.

With direction from National Geographic, Geotourism Charters have been signed in Norway, Romania, Honduras, the Cook Islands and the states of Arizona (U.S.) and Sonora, Mexico.

CSD partnered with the Appalachian Regional Commission and the people of Appalachia to create the first Geotourism Map Guide, published in 2005. Geotourism Map Guides also have been published for Vermont’s Northeast Kingdom, the Sonoran Desert region of Arizona and Mexico, Baja California and the Crown of the Continent. Currently, CSD is working with Peruvian authorities and the World Bank on a Geotourism MapGuide and Stewardship Council Project for the Vilcanota-Sacred Valley of the Inca; similar projects are underway for the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, Northern California Coast and the nation of Guatemala. For more information on geotourism, visit www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/sustainable and www.doi.gov.