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## **RAISE PARK'S PROFILE WITH CONGRESS, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE**

**BYLINE:** FRED THOMPSON, SENATOR , THOMPSON FOUNDS SMOKY MOUNTAINS CONGRESSIONAL CAUCUS TO

**SECTION:** PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: MARCH 25, 1998 CONTACT: ALEX PRATT/ESTHER CAMPI 202-224-4944 THOMPSON FOUNDS SMOKY MOUNTAINS CONGRESSIONAL CAUCUS TO RAISE PARK'S PROFILE WITH CONGRESS, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Washington, DC -- U. S. Senator Fred Thompson (R-TN) today announced that he is founding the first-ever Great Smoky Mountains National Park Congressional Caucus to help the park receive the attention it needs from Congress and the National Park Service. "Tennessee and North Carolina are blessed to share one of the most beautiful natural resources in the world -- the Great Smoky Mountains National Park," Thompson said. "On a recent visit, I saw firsthand some of the exciting projects being undertaken, such as the new initiative to catalogue more than 100,000 species of plant, animal and fish species within the park. However, I also realized that there are a great many challenges facing the park today. "This caucus will allow Members representing the Smokies to coordinate our efforts and make sure that the park is a priority in Congress and within the National Park Service." The Great Smoky Mountains National Park is the most visited national park in the United States--with more than 10 million visitors each year. The increasing number of visitors has translated into greater infrastructure, maintenance and personnel needs. Because the park's budget has not kept pace with the growing needs, Smokies officials are starting to do more with less. In a March 25 letter Thompson invited House and Senate colleagues to join the Smokies Caucus, including: Senators Bill Frist (TN), Jesse Helms (NC), Lauch Faircloth (NC) and Congressmen John J. Duncan, Jr. (TN), William Jenkins (TN), Zach Wamp (TN), Charles Taylor (NC), and Cass Ballenger (NC). A copy of Thompson's letter is attached. March 25, 1998 Dear Colleague: Tennessee and North Carolina are blessed to share one of the most beautiful natural resources in the world -- the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, In 1997, the park attracted almost 10 million visitors and over 4 million vehicles, making it the most visited

national park in the United States. This national treasure is frequently referred to as the crown jewel of the park system. There are many exciting things happening in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park such as the new "**Discover Life in America**" inventory initiative. This project will bring together scientists, academia and volunteers from around the world to catalogue each of the park's estimated 100,000 plant, animal and fish species. It is the first project of its kind to be completed in a national park, and the benefits of such an initiative will be far-reaching. But as I learned on my recent visit, there are also many challenges facing the park today. The increasing number of visitors has brought greater infrastructure, maintenance and personnel needs. Unfortunately, the budget for the Great Smoky Mountains National Park has not kept pace with these growing needs. The Smokies receives twice as many visitors per year as the second most visited national park -- the Grand Canyon -- but receives the same level of appropriated funding as the Grand Canyon. In addition, the Grand Canyon is permitted to charge an entrance fee and to keep 80 percent of the money raised, which brings in an additional \$ 11 million for the park each year. Because the Great Smoky Mountains National Park is prohibited by deed from charging any entrance fee, Smokies officials are straining to do more with less. As members of Congress from the states the Great Smoky Mountains National Park calls home, we have a direct interest in, and responsibility for, protecting our national treasure. I believe that coordinating our efforts on behalf of the park would result in increased attention being paid to the issues affecting the Smokies within Congress and the National Park Service alike. Therefore, I would like to invite you to join we in founding the first-ever Great Smoky Mountains National Park Congressional Caucus. I will be contacting you within the next few days to try to schedule a time for the first organizational meeting of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park Congressional Caucus. Please do not hesitate to contact me or Pachel Jones of my staff (x4-4944) if you would like additional information. I hope you will join me in this important endeavor, and I look forward to hearing from you soon. Sincerely, Fred Thompson United States Senator