

# First Native American parks director faces a ‘huge task’

By CHRIS AADLAND

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WASHINGTON — Record annual attendance numbers. Low morale among employees. Billions of dollars in maintenance needs.

Those are just some of the challenges Chuck Sams will have to tackle as director of the National Park Service after officially taking leadership in a swearing-in ceremony Thursday, Dec. 16.

Sams becomes the first Native American to hold the position and the most recent Indigenous person to hold a high-ranking position in the federal government since Joe Biden became president. His boss will be Deb Haaland, Laguna Pueblo, the Interior secretary and first Indigenous person to hold a cabinet-level position.

Sams' background and citizenship with the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation also means some are optimistic he'll work to improve how the agency and its hundreds of national parks, historic sites, monuments and recreation areas work with tribal nations and incorporate their history and culture.

"Everyone should have access to the outdoors no matter where they live, how much money they have, or what their background is," Haaland said in a press release announcing the swearing in. "Chuck Sams understands the importance of connecting people to nature, and I am thrilled to work with him as the Interior Department works to make our national park system accessible to all Americans."

Kat Brigham, chair of the CTUIR Board of Trustees, said Sams has a big challenge tackling the



National Park Service/Contributed Photo  
**Chuck Sams, the new director of the National Park Service and an enrolled member of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, shakes hands in this undated photo with U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland. Sams is the service's first permanent director in five years.**

needs of the park service but she is hopeful he also will prioritize improving the agency's work and coordination with tribal nations and Indigenous people.

"He's got a huge task," she said. "But I hope, eventually, that he'll be able to help us tell our story about our traditions and our culture within the national parks area."

Sams has a 25-year background in tribal administration and nonprofit natural resource and conservation management. That work has included facilitating land transfers and donations to the park service, in addition to working on park system lands with volunteers on conservation and invasive species management, among other related roles in public lands and conservation.

Sams will take over a park service that hasn't had a permanent director since 2017.

Before he was confirmed in late November, a Senate committee tasked with vet-

ting Sams questioned him about his priorities and how he would address some of the more pressing needs of the agency and the 85 million acres it manages.

Those priorities, he said, include tackling the agency's \$12 billion maintenance backlog. In 2020, Congress passed a \$6.5 billion bill that aimed to address that backlog after years of underinvestment.

But for David Lamfrom, one of the most immediate issues is the mood among park service employees. Lamfrom is the vice president of Regional Programs for the National Park Conservation Association and works on community-building and reaching more diverse constituents.

He'd like to see a more diverse park service workforce. But first, he said, the workplace culture and concerns about harassment and gender discrimination have to be addressed, which Sams has recognized as a priority.

"I think building back

that trust and morale within the agency is going to be a really top priority," Lamfrom said.

The morale concerns and other staffing issues come amid surging popularity for the park service, with many national parks — such as Zion and Glacier national parks — having experienced record attendance numbers in recent years.

"There's a lot of other issues that he's gonna have to deal with, like the fact is

that during the pandemic, America fell in love all over again with our national parks," Lamfrom said.

In addition to ensuring people can access the parks while making sure they're adequately protected in the face of heavy attendance, he said he'd like to see the agency engage with groups who aren't flocking to park service units and make them more welcoming for all.

"The demographics tell

us that that flocking is not consistent across all communities," Lamfrom added. "So there's attention and care that needs to be put into ensuring that communities who have felt disengaged from the parks, or have never felt engaged with the parks, can connect and feel welcome."

Regardless, he said, Sams is "absolutely up for this" and is taking over at an important and potentially "transformational" moment.

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