By Michael Bennet and John Bridgeland

3 photos: Yellowstone: Our first national park

Yellowstone: Our first national park – Old Faithful Geyser may be the most-famous "resident" of Yellowstone Park, but park ranger Dan Hottle says there is much more to see at the 2.2 million-acre park.

Story highlights

An entire generation of Americans has disconnected from the outdoors and is less active, writers say

There's a growing, multibillion-dollar backlog of maintenance work piling up, they write

Editor's Note: Sen. Michael Bennet, D-Colorado, is a former superintendent of Denver Public Schools. John Bridgeland is co-chairman of the Franklin Project at The Aspen Institute and former director of the White House Domestic Policy Council under President George W. Bush. The views expressed are their own.
resources are among the nation’s most pressing challenges.

On the surface, they may seem like a disconnected set of issues. But together with Sen. John McCain, Gen. Stanley McChrystal and The Corps Network, we’ve broken through the silos and developed a bipartisan plan that addresses them all at once: the 21st Century Conservation Service Corps Act, which Sens. Michael Bennet and John McCain introduced recently in the Senate.

The 21CSC is already engaging young people and recent veterans in every state through paid national service. Corps members are repairing and expanding America’s public recreation infrastructure, protecting communities from wildfire, and conserving invaluable natural resources. Our bill would enhance the program and make it permanent.

The effort addresses a triple threat.

In today's economy, veterans and younger workers are facing unemployment rates that are more than double the national average. New workers, who lack access to entry-level positions and the skills and experience that come with them, are falling behind. For veterans, finding a stable job is critical to their transition back into civilian life.

In an era of tablets, apps and streaming video, an entire generation of Americans has disconnected from the outdoors and is less active. This more sedentary lifestyle increases the risk of physical and mental health issues like obesity, diabetes and attention deficit disorder.

And finally, the infrastructure that supports our ability to access our nation’s magnificent public lands and waters is in terrible condition. There’s a growing, multibillion-dollar backlog of maintenance work piling up. Our parks' trails are eroding, their roads and bridges are crumbling, and cabins, camping and picnic areas are deteriorating toward unsafe conditions. Meanwhile, our public land and water managers simply can’t keep up with the need to thin forests to protect communities from wildfire. Nor do they have the capacity to adequately remove invasive plants to conserve precious water resources.

The 21CSC builds on the legacy of the Civilian Conservation Corps, which was established in the 1930s and is heralded as one of the most successful and popular efforts to put people to work and restore our lands and waters. It was the largest experiment in civilian national service in U.S. history, with 3 million young unemployed men serving over a decade to save our resources and themselves from festering in the streets.

Our bill would increase the strength of the private, nonprofit and state Conservation Corps and save taxpayers money on conservation projects that federal agencies cannot complete. Indeed, the National Park Service found that engaging the corps in trail maintenance projects provides more than a 50% cost savings.

For example, in 2014 in Colorado, through partnerships with groups like Conservation Legacy, corps members worked on a wide range of projects that included installing energy-saving lightbulbs for low-income residents, planting more than 9,000 trees, maintaining 170 miles of trails, and reducing fuel loads on more than 100 acres of forest to prevent forest fires. They did all this without any new federal spending.

This program is a commonsense, cost-effective way to tackle the backlog of conservation projects, involve young people and veterans in public service, and provide invaluable experiences, education and job training.

In fact, evaluations conducted by Texas A&M, Brigham Young and North Carolina State Universities found that youth who participated in the corps showed significant gains in communication skills, leadership, civic engagement and life skills like teamwork and grit: the very skills employers tell us they are seeking in their workforce.

As Jorge Lomas of Mile High Youth Corps in Denver said: "My experience at Mile High Youth Corps has opened up new job opportunities in the field of environmental conservation, many of which I did not know existed until now, like wildland firefighting. I want to explore new places and experiences, and now have the
confidence that I can be successful wherever I go."

The 21CSC Act is a bipartisan initiative with support from the four most recent secretaries of the interior, two Republicans and two Democrats. It offers a pathway to solve some of our most important challenges by engaging and supporting young people and veterans to strengthen our nation's public lands and waters. Congress should pass the act and the President should sign it into law so more of our youth, veterans and public resources can all benefit as they serve their country.

Join us on Facebook.com/CNNOpinion.
Read CNNOpinion's Flipboard magazine.

Mark Kelly: Obama is right to act on guns

Taiwan election: Voters turn their backs on closer ties with China

Swedish doctor charged with drugging, kidnapping, raping woman

British lawmakers to debate banning Donald Trump from UK for ‘hate speech'