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Visitation to National Parks Is On the Upswing, Entrance-Fee-Free Weekends Partly to Blame

Posted July 25th, 2009 by [Kurt Repanshek](#)



Publicity around the waiving of entrance fees sent crowds to Mammoth Cave National Park, which, by the way, doesn't charge entrance fees. NPS photo.



There's a growing problem with national park visitation. In short, too many people are returning to the parks, creating problems for staffing and people management.

Through much of the 1990s and into the 2000s there was in some corners [a general anguish over park visitation](#), a fear that Americans were losing their infatuation with the grandeur and adventure found in Western parks, with the rich cultural and historical perspectives that can be found throughout the system, with the beach-front properties found at [Acadia](#), [Cape Cod](#), [Cape Hatteras](#), [Cape Lookout](#), and the many other national seashores, lakeshores, and coastal parks. That fear was evidenced, in part, through the [ill-advised](#)

[attempt](#) to rewrite the National Park Service's Management Policies back in 2006.

The upside of this decline, though, was that parks that previously were being "loved to death" were able to draw a collective sigh, if only for a figurative moment. Campgrounds that had been beaten into a fine dust and spider-webbed with social trails gained a small reprieve and were able to recover a bit. In some parks, entrance stations were shut down or simply left unstaffed.

Sadly, this year that trend seems to have been tossed out the window.

As we noted earlier this month, [Yellowstone National Park](#) visitation is [running at record levels](#). At [Glacier National Park](#), year-to-date visitation is [up a bullish 14 percent](#) over the first six months of 2008. [Arches National Park](#) saw an [8 percent boost](#) in June. If in June you visited [Great Smoky Mountains National Park](#), which, by the way, has no entrance fees any time of year, you contributed to an 11 percent bump in traffic.

At [Mammoth Cave National Park](#), while visitation for the first entrance-fee-free weekend in June was [up 28 percent](#), the most recent free weekend saw traffic up 61 percent over the same weekend a year ago! At [Rocky Mountain National Park](#), visitation on Father's Day Sunday was up 32 percent from the year before. At [Apostle Islands National Lakeshore](#), even though this year has dawned mostly cool and windy over the Lake Superior archipelago, visitation is still up 5.1 percent.

The interesting thing about the high traffic at Mammoth Cave -- More than 10,000 people toured the cave last weekend; on Saturday, cave staff recorded 5,733 people, on Sunday, 4,305 people toured the cave. -- is that the park doesn't have an entrance fee. But then, the offer of two free cave tours probably helped lure visitors, who had trouble parking, as the accompanying photo taken last weekend clearly shows.

"The free tours plus the uncommonly cool summer weather made it a great time to visit the park," said Superintendent Patrick Reed. "Our staff went above and beyond to make sure visitors were well served."

Now, regardless of whether you ascribe these jumps to declining gas prices, a weak economy that has people staying closer to home for their vacations, interest being generated by countless sneak previews of Ken Burns' documentary on the National Park System, or the entrance-fee-free weekends designated by Interior Secretary Ken

Salazar, the bottom line is that [visitation is straining the resources](#) of the National Park Service.

Gotcha, didn't I?

"Where the heck is Kurt, a professed park advocate, going with this?" you might be wondering. "How could he be lamenting an upswing in visitation?"

Read on, travelers.

So far, National Park Service officials in Washington haven't directly addressed (at least not publicly) the trends of the entrance-fee-free weekends, saying they're still collecting and analyzing data from across the system. Can that be true in this computerized age, where a swipe of your VISA card sends information in seconds around the world? How can't the Park Service be able to tell, more than four weeks after the fact, what visitation trends were on Father's Day weekend, the third weekend in June, when the agency previously had discussed tracking visitation on the free weekends? Ask that question again when you recall that the folks at Mammoth Cave churned out visitation numbers just days after the weekend, and when those at Rocky Mountain and even Apostle Islands could also relatively quickly give you percentages of the boost in turnout.

Let's give the folks at headquarter a mulligan and another week or two to crunch the numbers. In the meantime, let's assume the boost can be attributed, at least partly, to the waiving of entrance fees. If that's the case, has Interior Secretary Salazar backed the NPS into a corner? After all, by waiving entrance fees for three weekends this summer, didn't the secretary implicitly acknowledge that the fees had been keeping some Americans out of the parks, either because they couldn't afford them or because they didn't believe they should pay a fee on top of sending their tax dollars to Washington to help pay for the park system?

Will there now be pressure to eliminate entrance fees? Will U.S. Sen. Max Baucus, D-MT, and Rep. Mike Crapo, R-ID, who want to [rid U.S. Forest Service lands and U.S. Bureau of Land Management lands of the dreaded RAT](#) -- Recreation Access Tax -- fees, finally be convinced that they should wipe entrance fees off the Park Service books as well? We keep hearing about how important national parks are to the economies of gateway communities, and with numbers up during the free weekends, might the gateway communities pressure their congressional representatives to see entrance fees done away with permanently?

But if that happens, how will the Park Service respond? Having gone through some downsizing in recent years (remember "core ops"?), is

the Park Service nimble enough, staff-wise, to cope with visitation numbers on the scale of the 1980s, when the system's annual visitation peaked at 287.2 million in 1987?

Some think not.

"NPS staffing is currently insufficient to address the needs of public safety and the protection of wildlife, ecosystems and other natural and cultural resources," noted the American Hiking Society back in February when it lodged its opposition to a rule that could lead to greater mountain bike access in the national parks.

On top of the staffing woes are the backlog woes. Here's a take on that from the Second Century Commission, an august and esteemed body funded by the [National Parks Conservation Association](#) to assess the state of the National Park System and offer suggestions on how to bolster it in time for the National Park Service's centennial in 2016:

Most of the increase in the ONPS budget over the past 16 years has gone to costs over which the National Park Service has no control. More than half (52%) of the increase has been consumed by inflation and mandated cost-of-living pay increases. Well over a third (37%) has gone to the increased cost of maintaining facilities, increases in staff pay grades (reflecting the growing need for technical skills), increases in the costs the Service pays to other agencies for things like space rental and unemployment compensation, changes to the federal retirement system, and measures to protect the "icon" parks from terrorism. A relatively small amount (3%) has gone to startup costs for new units, mostly small historic sites. Almost all the remaining 8% has been used to fund the Natural Resource Challenge.

Park managers report that they still have a substantial operational funding gap. Requests in the NPS budget system from superintendents currently total \$775 million more in annual funds than are currently available to run the parks. In 2001 the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) utilized data collected through their help in developing business plans at certain individual parks to estimate that a \$600 million annual boost was needed to bring operations at all park units up to what managers considered to be an acceptable standard of service. The NPCA has recently adjusted this estimate to \$759 million as of FY 2008, having factored in the effects of inflation and the offset of appropriated increases.

Perhaps what needs to be done is institute even higher entrance fees. True, that won't be popular, but it will tamp down visitation to more manageable levels, and ease human pressures on resources, no?

"If carefully crafted to create the proper incentives, user fees would moderate overcrowding, prevent overdevelopment of parks, resolve conflicts between users, sustainably manage essential facilities, and promote ecosystem restoration," the Thoreau Institute [once crowed](#) in its magazine, a *Different Drummer*.

As a plus, higher entrance fees levied across the entire park system possibly could generate more funding for the parks, right? Uum, wait a minute. Some question that last point.

"An increase in fee rates brings the potential of decreasing visitation, especially by those in lower income brackets," notes a white paper produced for the [Second Century Commission](#).

Others have voiced similar fears.

"I agree that the National Park System is in need of additional funding, but raising fees for park visitors will only drive visitors away. Instead, the Department of the Interior should raise the money it needs to improve the park system by collecting the royalties that oil companies owe the United States," U.S. Rep. Peter DeFazio of Oregon [said in 2007](#).

And then there are the philosophical arguments, that public lands should be free and open to all-comers because, as Shane Miller wrote in an essay for the [George Wright Society](#) back in 1998, the benefits of recreation, conservation, and preservation benefit society in general.

Damn. So where does that leave us? Are our national parks about to become overrun by visitors?

Fortunately, the National Park System is large enough to accommodate all-comers. No doubt there will need to be tweaks and tinkering to better manage those flows -- more public transit in places such as the Yosemite Valley and the South Rim of the Grand Canyon, perhaps? -- and if this visitation trend continues no doubt more and more reservation systems set up for backcountry treks, front-country campgrounds, and even for interpretive programs.

But the beauty, wonder and incredible value -- educationally, historically, and recreationally -- of the national parks shouldn't be squandered. Throw open those doors, Mr. Secretary! Permanently do away with the entrance fees! Stare the Congress, which loves to create new units of the National Park System but doesn't always love to provide the necessary funding for their operation, directly in its collective eyes and dare 'em to blink!

And if they refuse to blink, shut down the parks and see where the chips fall. It wouldn't be the first time.

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Comments

[Jim Macdonald](#)

On July 25th, 2009

I don't really understand the visitation numbers in Greater Yellowstone. At the same time Yellowstone was showing record numbers and increases at all gates, including the South Entrance, Grand Teton was experiencing decline. Furthermore, despite record revenues, hotel reservations were down or steady, and overall spending in the region was down significantly - I saw an interview with a person from Delaware North saying spending was down in the park.

Now, the concessions totals could be explained by more people, spending less - perhaps, higher numbers of locals visiting the parks in part on free weekends. However, the disparity of Grand Teton to Yellowstone makes no sense at all to me, especially given the South Entrance totals.

The parks have seemed very crowded to me on the roads, not so much in backcountry. People are blogging more than ever about their travels. Yet, the raw number totals are puzzling to me, at least in this instance.

Jim Macdonald

[The Magic of Yellowstone](#)

[Yellowstone Newspaper](#)

[Jim's Eclectic World](#)

[reply](#)

Anonymous (not verified)

On July 25th, 2009

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Go get 'em, Kurt! Couldn't have said it any better myself.

[reply](#)

[Kurt Repanshek](#)

On July 25th, 2009

Jim,

I've heard anecdotally that passengers on river trips on the Snake in Grand Teton are down this summer.

As for tracking visitation, my guess is that it's not a pretty science at all. Are all entrance gates staffed 24/7? Do those at the stations count all heads in vehicles? How do parks without entrance fees -- such as Great Smoky and Mammoth Cave -- tally heads?

That's not necessarily a criticism of the NPS, but perhaps further evidence that all the concern over visitation is much ado about nothing. As many others have pointed out, visit Yellowstone, Yosemite, Mount Rainier, the Grand Canyon, or many, many other parks in the summer months and there certainly doesn't seem to be a lack of visitors.

Could all the time, effort and expense that goes into tallying and crunching those numbers be better spent? Perhaps.

[reply](#)

[Jim Burnett](#)

On July 25th, 2009

Could all the time, effort and expense that goes into tallying and crunching those numbers be better spent?

Probably so, but the "bean counters" in Congress, OMB, General Accounting Office and similar locations wouldn't stand for it :-)

[reply](#)

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