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## **Opinion: Our national parks are in crisis. Trump's solution is absurd**

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It's easy to dismiss as absurd the [Trump administration's ideas](#) for plugging the chronic funding gap of our national parks. Can anyone really think it's a good idea to allow Amazon deliveries to your tent in Yosemite or food trucks to line up under the redwood trees at Sequoia National Park?

But the administration is right about one thing: U.S. national parks are in crisis. Collectively, they have [a maintenance backlog](#) of more than \$12 billion. Roads, trails, restrooms, visitor centers and other infrastructure are crumbling.

But privatizing and commercializing the campgrounds would not be the panacea that the Interior Department's Outdoor Advisory Committee would have us believe. Campgrounds are a tiny portion of the overall infrastructure backlog, and concessionaires in the parks hand over, on average, only about 5% of their revenues to the National Park Service.

Moreover, increased privatization would certainly undercut one of the major reasons why 300 million visitors come to the parks each year: to enjoy nature and get a respite from the commercial drumbeat that overwhelms daily life.

The real problem is that the parks have been chronically starved of funding. We conducted a comprehensive survey examining how U.S. residents view their national parks, and we found that Americans place a very high value on them — whether or not they actually visit them. The peer-reviewed economic survey of 700 U.S. taxpayers, conducted by mail and internet, also found that people would be willing to pay a significant amount of money to make sure the parks and their programs are kept intact. Some 81% of respondents said they would be willing to pay additional taxes for the next 10 years to avoid any cuts to the national parks.

The national parks provide great value to U.S. residents both as places to escape and as symbols of nature. On top of this, they produce value from their extensive educational programs, their positive impact on the climate through carbon sequestration, their contribution to our cultural and artistic life, and of course through tourism. The parks also help keep America's past alive, working with thousands of local jurisdictions around the country to protect historical sites — including Ellis Island and Gettysburg — and to bring the stories of these places to life.

The parks do all this on a shoestring. Congress allocates only \$3 billion a year to the national park system — an amount that has been flat since 2001 (in inflation-adjusted dollars) with the exception of a onetime boost in 2009 as part of the Obama stimulus package. Meanwhile, the number of annual visitors has increased by more than 50% since 1980, and now stands at 330 million visitors per year.

It's time for Congress to recognize the enormous value of the national parks — America's "best

investment,” as we subtitled our recent book on the park system. If the administration’s advisory committee wants to do the country a real service, it should focus its efforts on advocating for a realistic budget for the parks that will address their chronic funding shortage. It should also look at financing models that would help the Parks Service to fulfill its mission of protecting these places “forever.” These models could include endowments, 20-year bonds and two-year federal appropriations.

Philanthropy also plays an important role in funding the parks, but there are regulatory impediments to effective fundraising. For example, federal funds and donated funds cannot be intermingled into a single contract, unless the private dollars are transferred to the government, a step often resisted by the donor.

The Los Angeles region has a special reason to help protect national parks. Many iconic movies and TV dramas have shot some of their most memorable scenes in these places — including “Star Wars” (Death Valley), “Jurassic Park” (Redwoods), “Thelma and Louise” (Canyonlands), “Forrest Gump” (National Mall), “Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid” (Zion), “Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade” (Arches). For the film industry, park locations provide instantly recognizable images (such as the Statue of Liberty in “Planet of the Apes”), grand untouched scenery (as seen in “Dances With Wolves” at Badlands) or entirely different worlds (such as the “Star Wars” planet Tatooine, shot in Death Valley).

There are plenty of commercial campgrounds outside park boundaries for those looking for take-out barbecue and speedy Wi-Fi. But those who wish to camp in a more rustic setting should be able to do so in peace. The recommendations from Trump to “modernize” park campgrounds would bring rank commercialization of one of America’s most precious assets.

*Linda J. Bilmes, a professor at Harvard University, and John B. Loomis, a professor at Colorado State University, are co-authors of “Valuing U.S. National Parks and Programs: America’s Best Investment.”*