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National Park Service plan's troubling origins

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Our national parks are said to be America's best idea. I have no quibble with that.

I've spent a lot of time in a lot of them, and keep going back. They are places of refuge and rejuvenation, exploration and exhilaration. You can lose yourself — in unique plants and animals, otherworldly geothermal features and spectacularly craggy peaks, astonishing rock formations and endless night skies. You can find yourself, too.

Now the Trump administration is considering a new proposal embedded deep in its DNA. It wants to privatize park campgrounds and generally further commercialize the parks. The ideas include food trucks, expanded Wi-Fi service and, yes, Amazon deliveries right to your campsite.

There are two alleged goals here. One is to attract younger people for whom the digital world is their umbilical chord. The other is to make a dent in the National Park Service's growing maintenance backlog, which has reached an obscene \$11.9 billion at its 419 sites.

But I've got issues.

Many national parks already strain from too many visitors. The parks system has received more than 300 million visits annually since 2015, up 16 percent over the last decade, with much higher spikes in places like Yellowstone, Zion, Arches, Acadia and Glacier. Traffic jams, on some roads and trails, are common. Some newer visitors are not as respectful of park rules and regulations.

As for Wi-Fi and food trucks, you don't visit national parks because they're like everywhere else. You go because they're different. You go because they're special. NPS has done a lot to accommodate all sorts of visitors. But you have to draw a line somewhere. Camping is a great teacher of resiliency. Amazon and food trucks are not.

The maintenance issue is real. But data suggests privatizing campgrounds won't help. Of the \$331.6 million repairs backlog in campgrounds, \$30.2 million is in facilities run by concessionaires, according to the independent nonprofit National Parks Traveler. Those concessionaires operate 81 of the system's 1,421 campgrounds. Do the math. The 5.7 percent of privately operated campgrounds have 9.1 percent of the deferred maintenance. That doesn't suggest private operators are better at keeping their facilities up to snuff.

But this all makes sense when you delve into the origins of the proposal. It came from the Interior Department's "Made in America" Outdoor Recreation Advisory Committee, which counts among its members — you knew this was coming — several who would benefit from privatizing the national parks. Derrick Crandall's National Park Hospitality Association includes as members many of the nation's largest concessionaires. Jeremy Jacobs Jr. is co-chief executive of Delaware North, which

holds contracts at Sequoia, Kings Canyon, Shenandoah, Grand Canyon and Yellowstone. Bruce Fears is an executive with Aramark, which runs various concessions in Yosemite, Denali, Crater Lake, Grand Canyon and Canyonlands. Another member's company makes electric bicycles, and wouldn't you know it, Interior Secretary David Bernhardt recently signed an order to allow previously banned electric bikes on trails in national parks and wildlife refuges. There's a concession for that, too.

The pattern is clear. Not only does this administration not care about conflicts of interest, it seems to prefer them when there's money to be made. Unsurprisingly, there has been fierce blowback to this proposal, and the committee was quietly disbanded last month. But if the administration really wants to help the system, it could start by withdrawing its own proposal to cut park service funding by nearly \$500 million. That would buy a whole lot of maintenance.

And it could encourage people, even young ones, to visit the parks just to experience things they can't find anywhere else.

Michael Dobie is a member of Newsday's editorial board.