

<https://doctorow.medium.com/booz-allen-ticketmastered-americas-public-lands-8edf4c0dddec>

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Booz Allen ticketmastered America's public lands

An arms dealer makes millions on junk fees from National Parks visitors.

Ticketmaster's spectacular failure to competently sell tickets to Taylor Swift's first concert tour in five years has revived scrutiny of the ticketing/venue/promotion/management monopoly created by Ticketmaster's merger with Live Nation, especially the "junk fees" the company sucks out of fans' pockets:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YfPiqgLPro8>

What's a junk fee? It's all the crap that Ticketmaster tacks onto the cost of your ticket, like a "convenience fee" for using a credit card. Once all these fees are assessed, *78% of the price of some tickets* is just fees.

<https://www.vulture.com/2022/10/biden-is-coming-for-high-ticketing-fees.html>

Junk fees aren't limited to Ticketmaster, they're everywhere: "resort fees" at hotels, bag and seat-selection fees on airlines, \$35 fees for bounced checks, and on and on. Wherever a company has pricing power — because they're the only game in town, or because you're desperate — they rip you off with fees:

<https://www.yahoo.com/video/1-biden-welcomes-crackdown-junk-161329851.html>

Take cable TV. The cable operators have divided up the USA like the Pope dividing up the New World, carefully demarcating each company's exclusive territory and ensuring that cable companies never compete with one another. That's why cable is such a dumpster-fire of junk fees — Comcast just jacked up its nonsense "broadcast fee" to \$27/month:

<https://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2022/11/comcasts-sneaky-broadcast-tv-fee-hits-27-making-a-mockery-of-advertised-rates/>

OK, fine — turn off the TV and get out there and touch grass! America's system of national parks and public lands are the jewels in the country's crown, a remnant of those long-ago days when government could and did *do stuff* for the American public, an art that (to hear conservatives tell) is now lost to the ages along with the secrets of the pyramids.

Just navigate to Recreation.gov, which consolidates permitting and entry for 13 federal agencies and...

::sad trombone::

...pay your junk fees.

Want to pay your \$7 to hike the prized Coyote Buttes North at Arizona's Vermilion Cliffs National Monument? Sure, just pay a \$9 "lottery application fee." Even by junk fee standards, this is a *very* junky fee — it's not a fee for paying a fee, it's a fee for *the chance to pay a fee*.

Only 4–10% of lottery entrants get a permit (Coyote Buttes is a very fragile ecosystem and entrance is severely limited), which means that Recreation.gov's rake from this junk fee is about 1,000% of what it actually makes on hiking permits.

Well, at least that money is going to Coyote Buttes, right? Preserving the petroglyphs and the dinosaur tracks and whatnot?

Nope. The Bureau of Land Management gets the \$7 entry fee from the 64 daily hikers who are lucky enough to visit Coyote Buttes. The \$14,400 in lottery fees that the day's hopeful hikers pay to Recreation.gov for a shot at a permit all go to a giant military contractor: Booz Allen.

I know. What. The. Actual. Fuck. On his BIG newsletter, Matt Stoller explains how a beltway bandit like Booz Allen became the Ticketmaster of America's public lands. The deal started in 2017, when Booz got the contract to build Recreation.gov "at no cost to the federal government."

<https://mattstoller.substack.com/p/why-is-booz-allen-renting-us-back>

Booz Allen didn't promise to run a government website out of an abundance of patriotic zeal. Like all public private Partnership contractors, they wanted to figure out how to scoop up gigantic amounts of public money without any public accountability:

<https://pluralistic.net/2022/10/01/the-palantir-will-see-you-now/#public-private-partnership>

Booz Allen now gets to run America's public lands like its own corporate fiefdom. At the outset of its deal, it was able to set its own prices for fees unilaterally — that is, it could simply announce that, say, everyone who wanted to visit Mount Whitney would pay a \$6 fee (16,000 applicants, 5,300 of them successful, \$100,000 in junk fees for Booz).

But then Thomas Kotab, an "avid hiker," sued the BLM for the \$2 junk fee tacked on top of the reservation system for Red Rock Canyon. The Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (the law that allows federal agencies to charge for access to public lands) requires that agencies hold a notice-and-comment for each of these fees. The \$2 fee didn't go through this procedure.

Kotab won...sort of. The court upheld his challenge, requiring that Booz's public lands junk fees go through public notice. But Booz didn't refund the \$2 it had illegally collected from the people it ripped off to visit Red Rock Canyon — and it figured out how to neuter the notice and comment system.

Here's how that works: the federal agencies that Booz ticketmasters each have a Resource Advisory Council, which the agencies stack with their own cronies, who then rubber-stamp whatever the agency wants to do. RACs pretend to be accountable to the public, but boy is the pretense thin:

https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5442009.pdf

So now, when Booz wants to tack a junk fee onto a public space, it gets the relevant agency to do a notice-and-comment for the fee, and the RAC files comments saying that this is a great idea, and the agency throws away all the public comments that say otherwise, and voila, Booz gets another junk fee.

All of this is incredibly frustrating, not just another example of corporate looting of the public's purse — a huge barrier to our public lands. The idea that the military industrial complex has ticketmastered Teddy Roosevelt's public parks should shock our consciences.

But there's something we can do about this! The part of the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement

Act that authorizes agencies to assess fees runs out in Oct 2023, and when Congress renews it, they could add an amendment to block Booz's junk fees.

Or, as Stoller notes, "Biden, through his anti-junk fee initiative could simply assert through the White House Competition Council to the 13 different agencies that they end Booz Allen's practice of charging these kinds of fees."

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/blog/2022/10/26/the-presidents-initiative-on-junk-fees-and-related-pricing-practices/>

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