

SMART TRAVELER



National Parks Under Pressure

A shortage of money and fewer visitors have made it a tough decade for America's national parks. What's at stake and what needs to be done? By KAREN CATCHPOLE

Increased crime, closed facilities, canceled programs, crumbling structures. These are just a few of the ugly consequences insiders predict for some of America's most beautiful places after ten years of underfunding of the National Park Service and a steadily dwindling number of visitors. Park rangers, superintendents, and advocates fear that it's only a matter of time before visitors begin to notice the effects of behind-the-scenes cuts. ¶ No park is exempt—not even a star such as Yellowstone, which sprawls across Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho and is one

of the few parks where visitation has actually risen slightly over the past few years. One area of concern, Artist Point, is familiar to many visitors as a favorite spot to view dramatic Lower Falls. However, visitors are greeted with a parking

Though Death Valley National Park continues to enchant, chronic underfunding has led to problems in staffing and visitor services.

DAVID KEATON/CORBIS



The popular Yosemite National Park struggles to keep up with routine maintenance and now relies heavily on volunteers to augment services once provided by rangers and employees.

lot congested with RVs and buses, dilapidated roads and walkways, and not a single toilet. “It’s been decades since the area was reconstructed,” admits Al Nash, the park’s chief of public affairs. Despite the obvious need for improvements, there were no Park Service funds to cover the cost, so conditions continued to deteriorate while the park cobbled together funding from other sources.

The issues go well beyond too few bathrooms and too many potholes, notes Bill Wade, chairman of the executive committee of the National Park Service Retirees, a parks advocacy group. “With smaller staffs there are fewer patrols and an increased likelihood of poaching, delayed response to emergencies, and crime such as breaking into visitors’ cars at trailheads.” Wade also warns that budget pressures have meant cuts in interpretation and education within the parks.

In 1999, for example, Antietam National Battlefield requested funding to pay for new interpretive signs to replace the aging displays at stops along the 8.5-mile drive through the park. Because many people never enter the visitors center,

these signs are the primary way to learn about the site. Seven years later, Antietam finally received \$76,000 of the \$100,000 requested. With less funding than expected, park staff and volunteers had to do much of the work themselves.

But doing more with less won’t save the parklands in the long run. “Reduced funding for monitoring programs makes it difficult for parks to determine the effects of things like declining air quality and acid rain and the invasion of exotic species,” worries Wade. Take the tiny but tenacious balsam woolly adelgid. Inadvertently introduced from Europe, the fluid-feeding insect has infested nearly all of the Fraser fir trees in Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Tennessee and North Carolina—the most visited park in the country. The pest has killed 90 to 95 percent of the park’s firs and most hillsides now look as if they’re covered in naked gray toothpicks. “It’s a disaster,” says Dan Richards from Dayton, Ohio, who’s been visiting the park

since 1953. “Much of the environment above 5,000 feet has been obliterated.”

It may already be too late for some significant buildings. “When damage occurs, the historic integrity is diminished,” explains Wade. “And even if repairs are applied, the structure is less ‘historic’.” A 2006 survey by the Congressional Research Service estimated that maintenance and resource-protection project backlogs total between 4.5 and 9.7 billion dollars. At Antietam—which contains some of the park system’s most storied structures—there are currently more than 100 restoration projects of Civil War-era sites awaiting funding.

“Funding for the national parks has dipped some over the past decade,” admits Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne, who oversees the Park Service. Reasons include a lack of money due to rising military spending and the relatively low priority placed on the national parks by the Bush Administration.

The National Parks Conservation Association, an independent group, estimates an \$800 million annual funding shortfall. “Some visitor centers have closed, ranger-led tours and lectures have been reduced, and maintenance has been deferred,” says spokesman Tom Hill. Cuts run so deep that some fear even the \$122 million increase in the Park Service budget for 2008 may be too little too late. “At



some parks, we’re trying to find money to buy toilet paper for the restrooms,” says Park Service spokesman Jeff Olson.

Exacerbating the cash crunch is the fact that the overall number of visitors to the nation’s national parks has slowly but steadily declined over the past eight

years—from a high of 287 million in 1999 to 275 million in 2007.

Experts cite a mix of factors for the decline, including a lack of marketing, high gas prices, a decrease in foreign tourists, a declining interest in nature pursuits among younger generations, and

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MICHAEL MEFORD (UPPER), SHANNON FAGAN/CORBIS OUTLINE

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competition from “sexier” theme park and entertainment destinations.

The much ballyhooed Skywalk, in Arizona, for example, has attracted nearly 250,000 visitors since opening in March 2007, each paying \$60 to walk onto a glass catwalk jutting out 4,000 feet above the Colorado River in a non-parkland section of the Grand Canyon. While no one is suggesting that the national parks should get into the thrill-ride business, these types of commercial amusements compete for scarce vacation time and resources.

To stem the tide and build its brand with younger parkgoers, the Park Service is employing some high-tech tools. Last year Death Valley introduced “GPS Rangers.” For \$15, visitors can rent a device for their cars that delivers a video presentation whenever it nears an interesting site. And Great Smoky Mountains now offers narrated driving guides that can be downloaded onto cell phones, iPods, or laptops, and played as visitors drive through the park.

“There’s a lot of talk about the need for more innovative programs to educate youth,” says Steve Martin, superintendent of Grand Canyon. But he and others worry that if visitor numbers continue to fall, America’s national parks lose not only much-needed revenue, but thousands of opportunities to fulfill their mission to educate and preserve. And that may be the biggest loss of all.



Commercial attractions such as Skywalk may draw visitors away from the parks.