

GUEST ESSAY

Give the People What They Clearly Need: More National Parks

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By Kyle Paoletta

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Nothing epitomizes the natural splendor of America quite like a national park. The designation evokes images of quiet groves of towering sequoias deep in the Sierra Nevadas, sweeping views of sun-drenched rock formations in the Southwest or waves crashing against granite cliffs in coastal Maine.

Recently, though, national parks have become synonymous not with bucolic retreat but rather a decidedly less appealing phenomenon: crowds.

More than 327 million people visited the public lands managed by the National Park Service in 2019, and, after a brief, pandemic-prompted respite, the system is again straining to accommodate the hordes of Americans yearning for a little fresh air after more than a year spent mostly indoors. Parks across the country are setting records for visits while landmarks like Old Faithful and Utah's Delicate Arch have been swamped by picture-snapping vacationers.

Going to a national park in 2021 doesn't mean losing yourself in nature. It means inching along behind a long line of minivans and R.V.s on the way to an already full parking lot.

Since last August, "Every month except one has been record-setting," said Chip Jenkins, the superintendent of Grand Teton National Park. More than three million people visited the park in 2019, and Mr. Jenkins estimates that total will reach four million this year.

Yellowstone, whose history as a national park predates the Park Service itself, registered its first month with over a million visitors in July. Its superintendent, Cameron Sholly, is grappling with the impact all those new guests are having on the park's infrastructure.

"You put a million more people a year in Yellowstone — what does that mean when you're emptying 2,000 garbage cans five times a day instead of three?" he said. "What does a million more people flushing toilets five times a day do to wastewater?"

So far, federal action on the matter has largely been restricted to last year's Great American Outdoors Act, which directed money to the National Park Service's estimated \$12 billion repair backlog, as well as President Biden's recently proposed budget, which would increase the number of full-time Park Service employees considerably for the first time in two decades. Little, however, is being done to resolve the core issue: There are too many people concentrated in too few places.

The best way to rebalance the scale? We need more national parks.

After all, it's not like the United States has any shortage of sublime landscapes. I grew up in New Mexico, so it's long been obvious to me that the current assortment of national parks represents a frustratingly narrow cross-section of the nation's beauty.

While the Grand Canyon and Yosemite's Half Dome are undeniably magnificent, so too are lesser-known landmarks like the Valles Caldera, a dormant volcano in northern New Mexico whose 13-mile-wide crater is filled by a verdant prairie, and Southern California's Mojave National Preserve, where the Joshua trees are no less mesmerizing than in their namesake national park. These are just two of the dozens of wilderness areas across the country that are already managed by the Park Service yet remain practically unknown.

Redesignating them as national parks could change that overnight.

"There's a credibility in the national park designation," said Stephan Weiler, an economist at Colorado State University who published a series of papers in the mid 2000s demonstrating how elevating a preserve to national park status can increase visits.

More recently, Headwaters Economics, a research group based in Montana, issued a report that found an average increase of 21 percent in annual visits at the eight sites that were redesignated as national parks over the past two decades. Those findings are borne out by New River Gorge in West Virginia, which was redesignated last December. A spokesperson for the park estimates that visits have increased by 24 percent in the months since.

The most substantial difference between national parks and monuments is that the latter are created by presidential decree rather than congressional action; indeed, many national parks began as monuments and were only later elevated to their now rarefied status.

Wade Vagias is the superintendent of Southern Idaho's Craters of the Moon National Monument and Preserve, an expanse of lava flows and cinder cones about the same size as Yosemite. He thinks that, for many visitors, the word "monument" is something of a misnomer. "It signals that maybe there's one thing of interest there," he said. That leads people unfamiliar with the region to think, "Let's plan on a two-hour stop at Craters of the Moon before we go on to Yellowstone."

The need for places like Craters of the Moon to be seen as destinations in their own right will only become more acute as the Park Service continues to pursue active visitor management across its busiest sites. Reservations are already required to enter Yosemite and Rocky Mountain, and rangers at Zion recently proposed introducing a lottery for tickets to Angels Landing, a spectacular trail that requires the harrowing traversal of a red rock ridge only a few feet wide.

“You’re going to see more and more of these reservation systems,” Mr. Weiler said. “They’re doing what they never thought they needed to do, which is ration access.”

Rationing access can’t help but push visitors elsewhere. Arches National Park, in Utah, has closed its gates entirely when things get particularly busy, stoking frustration among sightseers who arrive too late in the day to get in. Megan Lawson of Headwaters Economics points out that a family shut out of Arches is naturally going to scramble to find a nearby alternative. “They’re going to use Google and find another destination,” she said, “so we need to anticipate those pressures on surrounding public lands.”

The simplest way to ensure the preserves that absorb those visitors are prepared for the influx is to identify the national monuments closest to the most crowded Park Service sites and reclassify them, thus giving road trippers intent on visiting a national park another appealing option when they realize their initial destination is too busy.

How many of the six million annual Grand Canyon visitors might be enticed to go to Arizona’s similarly majestic Canyon de Chelly if it were a national park rather than a national monument? How many of the hundreds of thousands of eager hikers packing into Zion every month might take a chance on Cedar Breaks instead, especially given its crimson-stripped cliffs and bristlecone forests are a mere hour’s drive further into the Utah desert?

Of course, many Westerners will shudder at the notion of under-the-radar gems like Craters of the Moon and the Valles Caldera becoming the next Bryce Canyon or Badlands. Mr. Jenkins, the superintendent of Grand Teton, says the Park Service is constantly having internal debates about the tricky business of alleviating crowding at some sites without overwhelming others.

“Is it better,” he wondered, “to have more people go to some places that are hardened, where we create and manage the capacity to be able to host them and accept the consequences of doing that?”

In some ways it’s a moot question, since many national parks have already reached their limits, leaving less developed public lands vulnerable. Because Grand Teton can’t accommodate everyone who wants to stay there overnight, rangers from the surrounding Bridger-Teton National Forest have been scrambling to respond to the campers who want to pitch tents there instead despite the area not having a comparable amount of tourist infrastructure.

National monuments, then, represent an appealing in-between alternative: already “hardened” sites that many outdoors-minded travelers have never heard of that can still offer an experience every bit as memorable as a brand name park. Neither New River Gorge in West Virginia nor White Sands in New Mexico received additional funding when they were redesignated as national parks, yet officials at both sites say they haven’t had trouble handling the tens of thousands of new visitors they’ve seen this summer.

“There’s a paradox in the national parks,” said Senator Angus King of Maine, who held a hearing on overcrowding across the system last month. “They’re set aside as natural places to be protected forever; on the other hand, they’re for public enjoyment and experience.”

The current situation complicates both sides of that equation, by compromising the Park Service's conservation mission while also making parks less appealing places to visit. Creating more parks is an easy part of the solution. "If you've got a demand problem, one way to solve it is to increase supply," said Mr. King. "That's Economics 101."

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