



**Prepared Statement of**

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**U.S. House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations**

**Hearing on “Lessons from the Field: Overcrowding in National Parks”**

**December 6, 2022**

**1. Main Points**

- Recent visitation growth in some national parks comes with real management challenges for ensuring a quality visitor experience and protecting park resources.
- There is no “one size fits all” solution to accommodate crowding at parks. Park superintendents should have the flexibility to respond creatively with solutions best suited for their individual parks.
- Addressing infrastructure maintenance needs can help alleviate the impacts of overcrowding while also helping distribute visitors more widely within congested parks.
- National park visitors can be a part of solutions to congestion through existing funding models that direct visitor fees back into creating a positive visitor experience in parks.

**2. Introduction**

Chairwoman Porter, Ranking Member Moore, members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you to discuss ways to address the challenges associated with recent increases in visitation to our national parks. My name is Hannah Downey, and I am the policy director at the Property and Environment Research Center (PERC), a conservation research institute based in Bozeman, Montana.<sup>1</sup> For more than 40 years, PERC has explored market-based solutions to conservation challenges, including managing our national parks.

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<sup>1</sup> The Property and Environment Research Center (PERC) is the national leader in market solutions for conservation, with over 40 years of research and a network of respected scholars and practitioners. Through research, law and policy, and innovative applied conservation programs, PERC explores how aligning incentives for environmental stewardship produces sustainable outcomes for land, water, and wildlife. Founded in 1980, PERC is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and proudly based in Bozeman, Montana.

Americans are rediscovering the outdoors in record numbers. National park attendance has been rising over the past decade, with a surge in the years leading up to the Covid-19 pandemic, and for many parks during the pandemic itself. As conservationists, it is encouraging to see widespread interest in national parks because it shows Americans care deeply about enjoying their public lands. This increase in visitor pressure, however, comes with challenges for park managers, such as traffic jams, crumbling roads, overused wastewater systems, and other impacts to park resources and infrastructure. While it is important to note that not all national park system units are experiencing overcrowding, those that are seeing visitor booms must find creative ways to ensure quality visitor experiences while protecting park resources.

My testimony will argue that there is no “one size fits all” solution to accommodating increased visitation challenges in national parks. Park superintendents should have flexibility to respond creatively with solutions best suited for their individual parks, which are often different in their geography and layout. Congress and the National Park Service have an opportunity to harness enthusiasm for America’s national parks in ways that empower local park superintendents to get creative, address their infrastructure and maintenance needs, and alleviate the pressures of visitation growth in national parks.

### **3. National parks have received record visitation in recent years, creating challenges for some parks.**

Since the creation of the National Park Service in 1916, visitors have flocked to experience the natural wonders of the United States. For decades, visitation climbed, fueled by the expansion of the park system, development of the U.S. highway system, and an enthusiasm for the family road trip. For the National Park Service’s 50th anniversary in 1966, the service launched Mission 66 to expand visitor services and “modernize” park facilities, further attracting visitors.

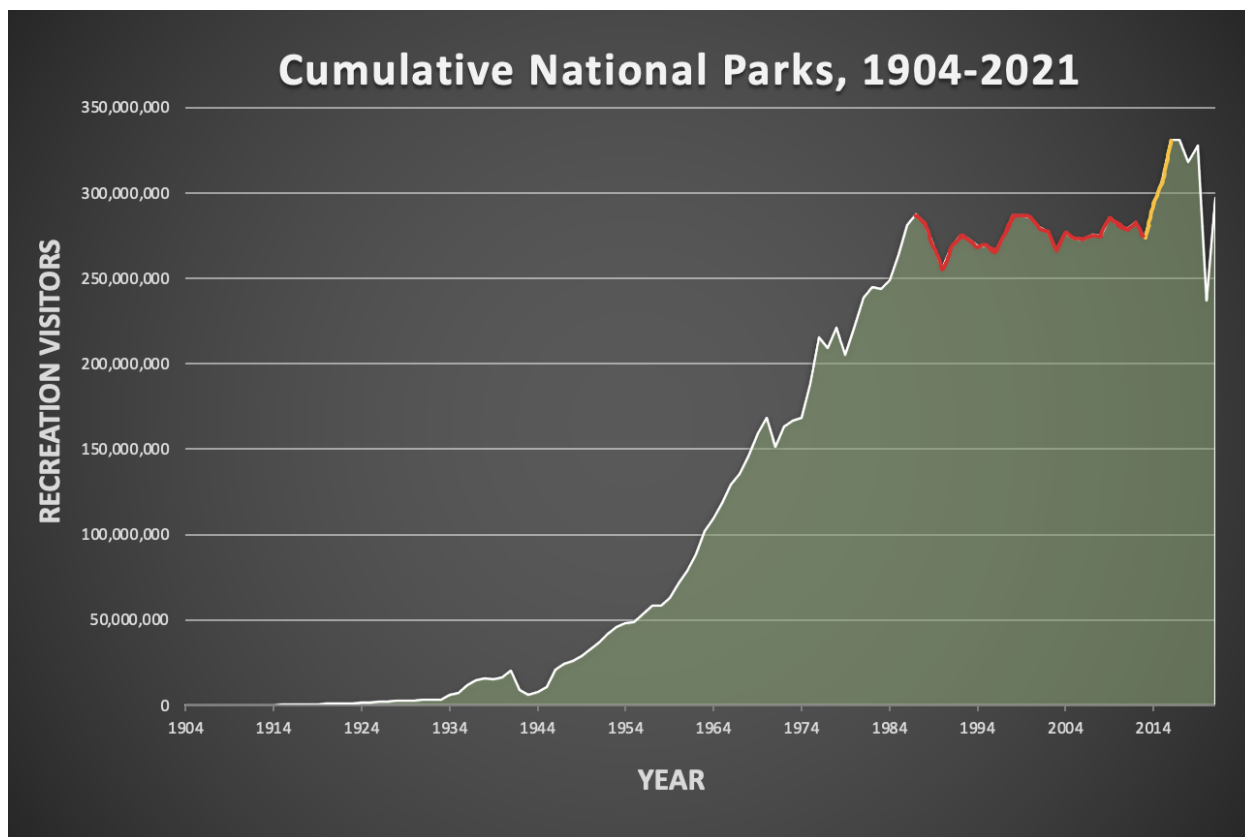
But that stopped in 1987, when visitation flatlined as parks faced competition from the rise of amusement and theme parks and international travel became more accessible. For 26 years, park visitation remained largely steady with occasional declines. Even though the American population grew by 31 percent during that period, National Park Service visitation in 2013 was the same as it had been in 1992.

Then, visitation exploded. It grew by 57 million visitors from 2013 to 2016, a more than 20 percent increase in only three years, and it has stayed high since. Numerous factors have contributed to this growth, including notable advertising campaigns to promote the parks. Utah launched the Mighty 5 campaign in 2013, contributing to a 70 percent increase in visitors to Utah national parks in five years. Then the National Park Service celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2016 with the “Find Your Park” campaign, encouraging people to visit national parks and find their own personal connections to our parks.<sup>2</sup> The rise in social media and outdoor

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<sup>2</sup> [“Find Your Park: About,”](#) National Park Service and National Park Foundation.

influencer accounts<sup>3</sup> and a more than 30 percent increase in visits from international visitors between 2013 and 2016 also contributed to recent surges in national park visitation.



Despite overall system visitation growth, the impacts are not felt equally. In 2021, 44 out of 423 national parks units set records for visitation, and parks hosted a total of 297 million recreation visits. More than half of those visits, however, were to the 25 most-visited parks in the country, which represent just 6 percent of the national park system units.<sup>4</sup> To further complicate matters, those visitors do not disperse evenly within parks. Yellowstone National Park, for example, estimates that 98 percent of visitors never get more than a half mile away from their car, staying within the 1,750 acres of developed areas within a 2.2 million acre park, meaning the majority of the visitation is located in far less than 1 percent of the park.<sup>5</sup>

Congestion in such areas is negatively impacting visitors, park service personnel, and the natural resources the parks were created to protect. Visitors find themselves waiting in lines and traffic, competing for camping site reservations or coveted parking spaces, or using dilapidated facilities. National park superintendents and employees face increased maintenance needs, more search and rescue calls, and difficulty finding housing.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Nate Hegyi, "[Instagramming Crowds Pack National Parks](#)," *NPR*, May 28, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> "[Most Famous National Parks Set Visitation Records in 2021](#)," National Park Service, February 16, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Cam Sholly, "[Introduction: Yellowstone National Park's 150th Anniversary](#)," *Wyoming Law Review* 22, no. 2 (2022).

<sup>6</sup> Shawn Regan, "[Yellowstone's 'core' focus is a winning strategy](#)," *Bozeman Daily Chronicle*, April 13, 2021.

Natural resources are also harmed as more visitors mean more pressure on wildlife, more garbage, and more people venturing out of designated areas. Resolving the negative impacts of crowds and caring for our national parks while also ensuring the public get to enjoy our public lands is a complicated challenge that will require creative solutions.

#### **4. Empower park superintendents to make decisions that work for their parks.**

Addressing the challenges of increased visitation will look different for each park. As discussed above, not all parks are experiencing overcrowding, and visitor density is not evenly distributed throughout parks. Parks have also been designed differently based on geography and features. Oftentimes, congestion is microgeographic in nature, impacting certain hotspots in a park such as Grand Prismatic Spring in Yellowstone National Park or Logan Pass in Glacier National Park, and requires tailored actions. Park superintendents should be empowered to make decisions that work to alleviate the unique pressure points in their parks. Congress should support park managers' ability to develop local solutions, be creative and flexible, and embrace public-private partnerships.

While the instinct might be to call for more funding, or to even add more national parks, it is important to instead first look for simpler solutions to alleviating congestion issues. Consider one example from our backyard: Yellowstone National Park recently faced a visitor pressure point at the popular Madison Junction, where cars waiting to turn routinely backed up for miles. The park transportation study explored adding an overpass or roundabout, but those would have cost millions of dollars and taken years to complete. Instead, an employee suggested simply adding an all-way stop—a quick and cheap proposal. Superintendent Cam Sholly decided to give it a try, and the results were impressive. The crowded pressure point was alleviated, improving the experience for visitors and making traffic management easier for park employees.

Another simple approach parks might consider, if appropriate for the park's unique situation, is the use of parking ambassadors to help distribute visitors more efficiently within a park. Visitor congestion often occurs at parking areas for popular attractions within parks. Current national park visitor use assistants could help quickly direct visitors to open spots in parking lots or communicate when the lot is full, easing the jams that often occur in the search for parking. Another approach could be to use volunteers or even contract with an outside company in a public-private partnership to provide parking ambassadors.

For example, Teton Pass, a popular recreation area on U.S. Forest Service land outside of Jackson, Wyoming, has faced mounting visitation pressures in recent years. It became increasingly common for shouting matches to break out between various users competing for a limited number of parking spots, or for visitors to park their vehicles in dangerous locations because the designated spots were occupied. A local volunteer group emerged to provide Teton Pass ambassadors, which help direct traffic and provide information about the area.<sup>7</sup> While

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<sup>7</sup> Tom Hallberg, "[Teton Pass Ambassadors Pick Up Jay Pistono's Mantle](#)," *Jackson Hole News & Guide*, April 21, 2021.

recreationists continue to flock to the area, the ambassadors have helped reduce conflict and foster a shared culture of responsible recreation.

Technology can also help reduce congestion and better distribute visitors within a park. Webcam streams showing various parking areas, trailheads, or recreation areas in real time could help provide visitors with information on how crowded different areas are so they can plan accordingly. While many parks have webcams, most are trained on visitor entrances or natural features, and there is not a centralized landing page to access the many feeds. Yellowstone Insider, a private publication and online resource for park visitors, for example, has compiled a collection of webcams from various locales showing areas of the park, noting that webcams showing the various park entrances can inform visitors of how busy the park is.<sup>8</sup> The National Park Service should work with partners and concessionaires to consolidate webcam streams and include footage of parking or recreation areas on park websites and apps to better inform visitors. A related idea is for parks to maintain real-time displays throughout the park, showing which areas are busy or not, similar to how airports or amusement parks display line wait times to clear security to get on a ride.

Beyond dispersing visitors within a park, some parks might find it necessary at some points in time to limit entrance to the park as a whole or certain areas of the park. Several parks have implemented reservation systems, such as Glacier National Park (requiring reservations to drive the Going to the Sun Road) and Arches National Park (requiring timed-entry reservations during high-visitation months). While these reservation systems can be effective in reducing overcrowding and provide certainty for visitors planning their trips in advance, they also raise important concerns over accessibility and the opportunity for visitors to spontaneously visit their public lands. Moreover, they may not be appropriate for every major park given the drastic differences in road networks, visitation patterns, and popular attractions from park to park.

For example, what works in parks such as Arches or Zion may not work in Yellowstone or Grand Teton. While reservation systems might be appropriate for some parks, sometimes an even simpler approach will suffice to address congestion issues. When Yellowstone National Park had to quickly reduce daily visitor numbers by half this past summer due to catastrophic flooding destroying many parks roads and infrastructure, Superintendent Cam Sholly brought in the impacted gateway communities and stakeholders with a process that reached out to 1,500 people within 72 hours of the flood. A reservation system was considered, but in this case failed to provide the certainty that would encourage visitors to book accommodations in the impacted gateway communities. Instead of a reservation system or a complicated lottery program, Sholly went with a simple and cheap approach offered by a stakeholder: alternate which day visitors are able to enter the park based on whether their license plate ended in odd or even numbers during the busy summer season.<sup>9</sup> Visitors were able to have some certainty about when they could enter the park, locals and out-of-town visitors were not competing to enter the park, and park officials were able to welcome visitors while also conducting flood response activities.

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<sup>8</sup> [“Yellowstone National Park Webcams,”](#) Yellowstone Insider.

<sup>9</sup> Brian Yablonski, [“Yellowstone’s Innovative Flood Response Offers a Lesson For All National Parks,”](#) The Hill, June 27, 2022.

Beyond dispersing visitors within the park unit they are visiting, it is also worth considering how to highlight outdoor recreation or natural attraction visitation opportunities on less-visited public lands. Many national park system units—and other public recreation sites—do not see much visitation. The National Park Service should work to more widely promote sites that have capacity to accommodate more visitors in its public awareness campaigns. Additionally, parks could share information about public land recreation opportunities outside of the park during high-visitation seasons. While many people travel from around the world to visit a specific national park or experience certain features of a park, many people also visit parks for multiple days and could be interested in visiting nearby attractions once they have checked off the must-see sights on their lists.

Senators Steve Daines (R-Mont.) and Angus King (I-Maine) have proposed legislation to address part of this challenge. The Gateway Community and Recreation Enhancement Act aims to boost awareness of lesser-visited recreation areas.<sup>10</sup> The pilot program aims to inform potential park visitors in real time of crowd levels at national parks or other federal lands as they travel and provide suggestions for alternative recreation destinations. To be successful, this program will need to be locally driven, with superintendents and other land managers deciding on the best approach for their communities to ensure other public land areas are prepared to manage more visitors.

Ultimately, every park unit is unique. Any solutions to today's visitation challenges will need to be flexible and reflect the unique needs of each unit. Park superintendents and managers must be empowered to develop creative approaches that work for their situations. Onerous and time-consuming processes required to make adjustments on the ground can stifle innovation and experimentation by local managers. The result will be to hamstring their ability to address overcrowding challenges. For park superintendents to tackle visitation pressures, they will need opportunities to experiment, time to figure out what works in their local contexts, and flexibility to change course as new information comes to light.

## **5. National park visitors can be a part of the solution to congestion through existing funding models that direct visitor fees to fund park projects that enhance the visitor experience.**

Increased visitation can stress park infrastructure and maintenance capacity, including wastewater systems, parking lots, and trails. The enthusiasm for and surging visitation to parks over recent years has also brought attention to the overdue repairs and unmet needs within the park system. The deferred maintenance backlog, which includes eroding trails, crumbling roads, dilapidated visitor centers, failing wastewater systems, and many other needs, now totals an estimated \$21.8 billion.<sup>11</sup> Significant funding through the Great American Outdoors Act is a major effort toward improving the situation. But the reality is that the underlying issue that spawned the backlog remains unresolved: a lack of attention to routine maintenance.

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<sup>10</sup> Gateway Community and Recreation Enhancement Act, S.3551, 117th Congress (2022).

<sup>11</sup> ["What Is Deferred Maintenance,"](#) National Park Service.

When park assets are not serviced on time as part of today's cyclic maintenance, they become tomorrow's deferred maintenance. Overdue maintenance can disrupt public access; cause shutdowns of trails, campgrounds, roads, and other amenities that increase crowding elsewhere; and can be more expensive and time consuming to address than routine maintenance.

Fortunately, national park visitors can be a part of solutions to congestion through existing funding models that direct visitor fees back into creating a positive visitor experience in parks.<sup>12</sup> Visitors add costs and create impacts on national parks. But visitors also provide resources to help mitigate their costs through recreation fees that charge for a portion of the benefits enjoyed. The fee system also connects visitors and their needs to the park superintendents and staff who serve them, aligning incentives between users and managers. Fee revenues give park managers sound incentives to prioritize visitors and provide financial resources to create a better overall experience.

Even as popular national parks have dealt with congestion challenges in recent years, visitors themselves have helped mitigate some of those challenges. Fee revenues have increased overall and have become a significant funding source for certain sites. From 2015 to 2019, fee revenues at national parks grew from \$228 million to \$308 million, an increase of 35 percent, before falling due to the Covid pandemic.<sup>13</sup> Several high-profile parks, including Joshua Tree, Zion, and Grand Canyon, some years generate more revenue from visitors than they receive in discretionary funding from Congress, and these funds help address visitor impacts. At Joshua Tree National Park, for instance, revenue from fees has helped fund graffiti removal at high-traffic campgrounds and trails.<sup>14</sup> Fee revenues are concentrated at high-profile parks, a reality that parallels the concentration of visitation at a relatively small number of parks. In 2019, 17 highly visited national parks generated \$163 million in revenue, or more than half of total National Park Service fee revenue and one-third of total fee revenues from all federal lands.<sup>15</sup>

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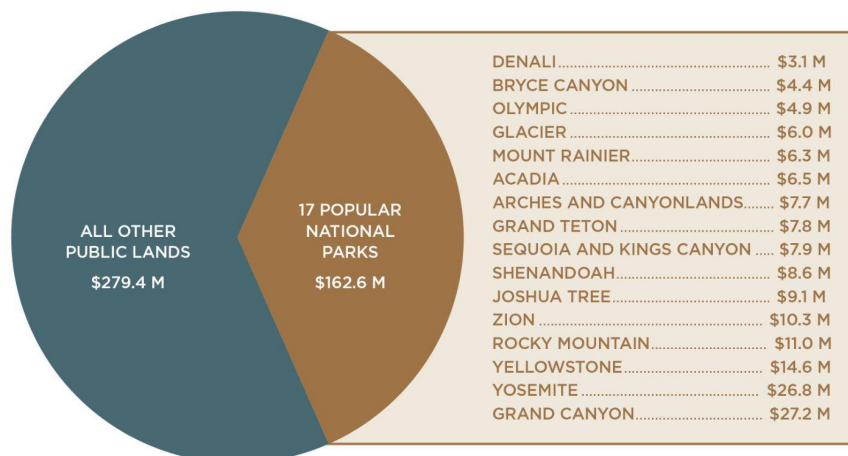
<sup>12</sup> The Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) authorizes the agency to retain all park fees within the National Park Service. Under FLREA, at least 80 percent of the fees remain in the individual parks where they were collected, while the remaining amount is used agency-wide without additional approval from Congress.

<sup>13</sup> Fee revenues fell approximately 20 percent, to \$250 million, from FY2019 to FY2020. Carol Hardy Vincent "[Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act: Overview and Issues](#)," Congressional Research Service (2021).

<sup>14</sup> "Implementation of the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act," U.S. Department of the Interior (2021) p. 51.

<sup>15</sup> Tate Watkins, "[Enhancing the Public Lands Recreation Fee System](#)" PERC Policy Brief (2020).

## Recreation Fee Revenues at 17 Popular National Parks



Recreation fee revenues across all public lands equaled \$442 million in 2019, and 17 national parks accounted more than one-third of the total.

*Note:* Includes 17 parks at which the National Park Service proposed a peak-season fee increase in 2017. The National Park Service reports combined recreation fee revenues for Arches and Canyonlands, as shown.

*Source:* National Park Service and Congressional Research Service, Fiscal Year 2019

This concentration helps demonstrate that congestion issues are not ubiquitous. Where congestion is a problem, local staff have the best knowledge and context about ways to address it. Consequently, it is crucial to empower superintendents and their staffs when it comes to decisions about dealing with overcrowding, which includes how to spend recreation fee receipts. Vesting authority at the local level allows managers to take advantage of their on-the-ground knowledge to flexibly use these dollars on visitor-focused projects, and it can also promote accountability because it is clear who is responsible for spending decisions.

One way the National Park Service could further empower local managers is by granting them more flexibility in how they can use visitor revenues to address their park-specific congestion issues. Currently, local park managers do not have flexibility to decide how to best allocate the majority of the visitors fees collected in their parks. The National Park Service directs parks to spend 55 percent of fee receipts specifically on deferred maintenance projects.<sup>16</sup> The directive was borne from valid concerns over snowballing maintenance backlogs. But deferred maintenance, while important, may not be the most effective use of visitor revenues in light of today's visitation challenges.<sup>17</sup> The agency should consider ending or relaxing its rule that parks spend 55 percent of fee receipts on deferred maintenance so that park managers have the ability to use the majority of their revenues to respond to visitation challenges as needed. Local staff are best positioned to know what type of maintenance or other projects to prioritize and should have the flexibility to do so, while being held accountable for their decisions.

<sup>16</sup> National Park Service, "[Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Justifications](#)," p. FLREA-2.

<sup>17</sup> Tate Watkins, "[Fixing National Park Maintenance For the Long Haul](#)," PERC Policy Brief (2020).



## **Conclusion**

Increased visitation in the most popular national parks poses challenges for the visitor experience and park management. Each situation is unique and requires innovative solutions. Congress should celebrate more people enjoying our public lands while also supporting park superintendents by giving them the flexibility to use their resources and address the problems in ways that work best for their parks and communities. With these approaches, visitors and park managers alike can have unforgettable experiences in our national parks.