

STATEMENT OF JEFF BRADYBAUGH, SUPERINTENDENT, ZION NATIONAL PARK, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS, REGARDING “LESSONS FROM THE FIELD: OVERCROWDING IN NATIONAL PARKS”.

December 6, 2022

Chair Porter, Ranking Member Moore, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present the Department’s views on “Lessons from the Field: Overcrowding in National Parks.” We are pleased to discuss the impacts of overcrowding in our national parks on park resources and visitor experiences; and to consider strategic approaches to visitor use management.

The past few years have reminded us how important national parks and public lands are to our overall wellbeing. Throughout the country, national parks and all public lands have provided close-to-home and destination-based opportunities for people to spend much needed time outdoors for their physical and psychological health. National parks are also places for people to connect with the inspirational wonders of nature and the stories that bond us to the meaningful places of this nation. It is no wonder that we have seen significant increases in visitation at many national parks and other public lands across the country.

The National Park Service wants every visitor to have a great park experience. We seek ways to provide a range of opportunities that support more diverse, equitable, accessible, and inclusive experiences that are compatible with the protection of the resources. It is exciting to see many new visitors exploring parks, with some camping or hiking for their very first time. Ensuring visitors have enjoyable experiences, however, is becoming increasingly challenging in our most popular parks.

Park Congestion and Overcrowding

There are 423 park units in the National Park System encompassing over 85 million acres across our nation, but visitation trends among the individual parks greatly vary. In 2020, overall visitation dropped to a 40-year low due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, yet one-third of parks had at least one month of record visitation as people sought the physical and mental benefits of being outdoors. In 2021 and 2022, park visitation increased from 2020 levels and is now comparable to levels seen in the years just prior to the NPS Centennial of 2016. In 2021, the most recent year of complete data, the National Park Service received 297 million recreation visits.

Along with overall visitation numbers, changes are also occurring in visitation patterns. For example, many parks that previously experienced a distinctive and quieter off-season no longer have one; their visitation numbers have largely remained steady or fluctuate only slightly in what had been the shoulder season. Another example is the growing demand for campground reservations. Recreation.gov, the online trip planning and reservation portal for federal sites, saw over 10 million reservations in 2022, almost double the amount made in 2020.

Approximately one half of reservations made on Recreation.gov are for National Park Service sites.

Overall visitation is increasing throughout most of the system and half of all recreation visits occur in the top 25 most-visited parks. While significant congestion conditions are concentrated in a dozen or so of the most-visited parks, other parks with lower annual visitation have also experienced congestion and traffic issues over the last few years. Crowding conditions tend to happen at hotspots and where entries and exits are limited. Crowding can also be felt at the most popular scenic viewpoints that are within one-quarter mile of a parking lot.

Addressing Park Congestion at Individual Parks

The National Park Service is employing a range of park-specific strategies to provide a welcoming and inclusive environment while ensuring the protection of nationally significant resources. In addition to using pilot projects and flexible planning tools to test ideas, we are conducting robust public and stakeholder engagement before committing to long-term implementation. Our expanded social science research will also provide us with visitor information at the park level for visitor experience planning.

Some strategies for managing use have been employed for decades. The National Park Service has long managed access in backcountry areas and wilderness, for example, by issuing trailhead and overnight permits. Permit systems for wilderness have helped preserve the qualities of solitude and minimize resource impacts.

To address vehicular congestion, the National Park Service has invested in multimodal transportation options such as shuttles and multi-use paths where biking and walking are encouraged. The National Park Service strategically supports the use of ride-hailing applications, and micromobility options such as scooters, e-bikes, and bike-share where appropriate.

Parks are also working with local and regional tourism entities to develop strategies for promoting sustainable tourism and to coordinate messaging. We are working with the public, partners, and local communities and businesses to explore different tools and techniques that could help improve how visitors get to and experience popular features. Some parks are hosting mobile or pop-up visitor centers, increasing roving staff at key sites, designating new traffic configurations during peak visitation, and providing shuttle services.

Timed entry systems are now in place or have been piloted at several parks, with each addressing specific park-level issues. Muir Woods National Monument has used a successful timed-entry reservation system since the beginning of 2018. The year-round reservation system for all vehicle parking and shuttle riders is designed to provide for motorized vehicle access at levels that meet park goals for safety, resource protection, visitor experience, and public access while also ensuring the park is a good neighbor to nearby communities impacted by high visitation. Over the past three years, 96% of respondents to the concessioner's customer satisfaction survey report a positive experience visiting Muir Woods.

In 2017, Acadia National Park's visitation reached 3.5 million, an increase of 60% from ten years prior. The high volume of people visiting destinations along the Park Loop Road during peak times is causing gridlock, visitor conflicts, crowding, safety issues, resource damage, and of particular concern, delays in emergency response. In 2021, Acadia implemented a vehicle reservation system, as approved in the park's Transportation Plan, at Cadillac Summit Road during the peak season. This system is complemented by other visitor services, including expansion of the Island Explorer transit service and commercial tours.

In addition, the Acadia Gateway Center, a transit hub and regional visitor center located outside of the park, will be constructed in partnership with the Maine Department of Transportation, Friends of Acadia, and the Federal Transit Administration. The Center will allow visitors to explore the park carefree and car free, further alleviating vehicle congestion.

In 2021, Zion National Park welcomed over 5 million visitors for the first time in its history, a record high and part of a longer trend that has seen visitation double since 2010. In response to visitor comments and as part of the park's longer-term visitor use management planning, Zion began issuing permits for one of its most popular trails, the route to Angels Landing. This pilot permit program has improved visitor experiences by decreasing crowding and congestion on the precipitous trail.

The park also tested timed ticketing for its transit bus system during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach maximized visitor access to Zion Canyon while accommodating COVID limitations to bus capacity. Park staff will use data collected during these pilot projects, along with data collected from almost a decade of research, to inform potential future management alternatives for its longer-term visitor use management planning.

In 2021 and 2022, Glacier National Park piloted vehicle reservation systems for Going-to-the-Sun Road during the summer months. This approach enabled the park to manage the number of vehicles using the Going-to-the-Sun corridor at one time, avoiding gridlock conditions and the cascading impacts to resource conditions, operational capacity, and visitor experience. The park's managed access system created predictable opportunities for park access for reservation holders.

From 2020 through 2022, Rocky Mountain National Park implemented a pilot timed-entry reservation system. The system provided park-wide access with varying opportunities to all park destinations, including the highly popular Bear Lake Road corridor. Based on data collected to date, the pilot has demonstrated that timed entry has successfully spread visitation throughout the day, decreased congestion, and reduced queuing at entrance stations and parking lots.

Yosemite National Park implemented a temporary reservation system during the summers of 2020 and 2021 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and during summer 2022 when numerous key visitor attractions were closed for critical infrastructure repairs. The reservation system successfully protected public health during the pandemic and provided a great visitor experience all three years by significantly reducing traffic congestion. Yosemite National Park will not use a reservation system during the summer of 2023 but will soon announce a public process to design a longer-term fix to decades-long congestion.

Encouraging Advance Trip Planning

The National Park Service is working on several technological advances that will improve the visitor experience in parks through enhanced trip-planning tools. These efforts will expand access to recreational opportunities and coordinate data with other land management bureaus to allow for consistent communications with the public. To advance this effort, we are currently researching and piloting a number of traffic collection and analysis projects at both the statewide and park level with the goal of better understanding traffic volumes as well as where visitors are coming from and going to.

We are also collaborating with the other federal land managers to align and expand our recreation-based web information to allow for data consistency between federal websites. This data is also available to our partners, third parties and the tourism industry. Recreation.gov is a one-stop reservation and trip planning service for the public and a centralized management system for facility managers. This contract-delivered service, administered by the U.S. Forest Service, provides reservation and trip planning capabilities to 12 federal agencies, and features more than 110,000 individual sites and activities across 4,000 recreation areas. The platform, launched in 2018, offers expanded features to improve the customer experience through visitor mapping and trip planning tools that allow visitors to discover locations and activities new to them, especially when their chosen sites are already reserved. The Recreation.gov mobile app offers visitors the convenience of making and managing reservations on the go.

Visitors to national parks have a new tool to assist them in their trip planning, the National Park Service Mobile App, launched during National Park Week in 2021. The app ensures visitors have access to the most current information about the parks they visit. It currently offers interactive maps, tours, accessibility information, and more. The app is built to be used even in remote parks where internet access may be limited by allowing visitors to download information to their phone in advance.

In addition, the National Park Service's #PlanLikeAParkRanger campaign, also launched in 2021, shares insider tips from park rangers so visitors can better prepare for their national park experience. It points prospective visitors to park websites and resources like the National Park Service Mobile App that have recommendations about where to go, what to see and do, how to take care of these special places during their visit, and what to include in trip planning. It advises visitors in order to know in advance where and when reservations are needed, to be flexible and have backup plans, to allow extra time to get from one place to another, to know where pets are or are not allowed, and encourages people to explore lesser-known parks.

Conclusion

The National Park Service wants visitors to have a high-quality experience everywhere they go in the National Park System. Parks are working to offer new ways for people to receive timely information to better plan and enjoy their trips. The National Park Service is committed to collaborating with local communities, businesses, and nonprofit partners to find solutions that improve the quality and diversity of visitor experiences, address crowding and congestion in a thoughtful way, and maintain the tremendous range of benefits that national parks provide.

Given the iconic and finite nature of these highly valued places, along with the complexity of providing inclusive and high-quality visitor opportunities, creativity, active collaboration, and shared responsibility will be essential for ensuring sustainable and effective strategies.

Chair Porter, Ranking Member Moore, thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.