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With park fees up, visits down, some question fee hikes

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WASHINGTON - A four-year program to increase national parks entrance fees and make them more uniform could discourage many Americans from visiting their national parks - especially parks that are close to home, some parks boosters say.

The federal government's move in January to replace the National Park Service's \$50 annual pass with a new \$80 multi-agency pass is also drawing fire.

The National Parks Conservation Association, a nonpartisan group that lobbies on behalf of national parks, recently called on Congress to allow the park service to bring back the less expensive pass, which allowed free entry to the 145 parks that charge fees. Another 246 national park sites do not have entrance fees.

The new America the Beautiful Pass can be used at about 2,000 recreation sites operated by the park service, the U.S. Forest Service and several other federal agencies.

Meanwhile, the number of visitors to the national parks has been falling.

The fee increases appear to be getting out of hand, said Bill Wade, the retired superintendent of Shenandoah National Park in Virginia and chairman of the Coalition of National Park Service Retirees.

The park service raised entrance fees at 34 parks over the past two years and plans to raise them at another 124 parks in 2008 and 2009. Fees at some parks, like Glacier National Park in Montana and Joshua Tree National Park in California, will go up twice. Then beginning in 2011, park officials plan to increase fees every three years, based on inflation.

"It's puzzling because on the one hand, the park service and some of the tourism groups are worried about declining visitation, yet they're rushing just as quickly as they can to increase fees, sometimes doubling them," Wade said. "I see that as being somewhat inconsistent, to be sure."

The federal government has collected entrance fees to the national parks since 1908, when it began charging people to bring their automobiles to Mount Rainier National Park. The revenue was meant to help defray some of the expense of maintaining and operating the parks. Last year, the National Park Service collected \$84 million in park entrance fees and received \$1.7 billion from Congress. Over the years, funding has not kept up with park needs, resulting in a \$3 billion maintenance backlog.

U.S. Rep. Peter DeFazio, D-Ore., has asked the House Natural Resources Committee, to hold a hearing on the parks fee increases. DeFazio, a member of the committee, said the proposal to double entrance fees next year at Crater Lake National Park, now \$10 per car, will drive the local visitors away.

He said Congress should provide more money to the parks from the general fund or establish a royalty on precious metals mined on federal lands and use some of that money to support parks.

"Twenty dollars seems like a pretty stiff hit to me for a rural family or a family with modest income, plus the fact that the price of gas to get up to the park has gone up fairly dramatically," DeFazio said.

In surveys, park visitors overwhelmingly support the fees they pay, Parks Director Mary Bomar said.

"Many (visitors) said 'We'd pay double,'" Bomar said. "We heard that comment over and over.

"You can go to the movies today and it's \$7 and \$10 for a ticket. Many said, to help the national parks, they'd be glad to pay those fees."

Before a park can raise its fees, managers must hold community meetings and gather public comments, Jane Moore, the park service's fee program manager said. As a result of these hearings, three small parks discontinued their fees this year.

When setting the new rates, the park service created four fee categories, or tiers, of parks based on their amenities, Moore said.

"If it turns out that a manager gets a lot of concerns or pushback, then there is flexibility to delay the rate change or to request a tier drop," Moore said. "We want to have a consistent rate structure ... but we have to do it in a manner that's reasonable at the local level as well."

Congress used to set park entrance fees by law with all of the revenue going to the federal general fund. That changed in 1996 when Congress set up the fee demonstration program, which allowed the park service and three other federal land management agencies to set their own rates and keep the money. In 2004, Congress extended the program another 10 years. The agencies decided to go in together and issue one annual pass, the America the Beautiful Pass, as a convenience to the public.

However, since 1997, when the park service began raising fees, the number of national parks visitors has fallen 1 percent while entrance fee revenue has gone up almost 16 percent.

Park service officials point to a lot of reasons why visitation is down - the high cost of gas, fewer overseas travelers after the Sept. 11 attacks and competition with other forms of recreation, like video games.

A park service telephone poll in 2000 found that of the survey participants who had visited a national park within the previous two years, 80 percent were happy with the fees they paid. However, about one of four of all survey respondents said park entrance fees were too high. The study concluded that other expenses, like transportation and lodging, keep more people away from their national parks than the entrance fees do.

But another survey conducted for the U.S. Forest Service, also in 2000, in Vermont and New Hampshire found that even relatively modest fees discourage low-income people from visiting recreation areas.

"Whenever you start charging people, some people are going to be excluded," said Tom Stevens, one of the forest service study's authors and a professor of resource economics at the University of Massachusetts. "To what extent is that the right thing to do?"

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