

Park fees threaten general access to public lands

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As we sprawled on the cool sands, the last bit of pink faded in the western sky and lightning flashed in the distance over the Sacramento Mountains.

It was a special Saturday evening but not a whole lot of people had joined us at White Sands National Monument for the ranger talk on night skies and how Native Americans used the constellations and the sun to mark time.

It was worth the \$3 per person we paid to get into the park, but I have to wonder how many would have taken advantage of the program if it had been free.

Camping and day use fees on our national parks, national forests and state parks and monuments has been a sore spot with me ever since they began using them. Anytime we roll up to one of those big brown signs that says "Entering Fee Area" my wife rolls her eyes and says "please don't start."

This most recent trip, when we made the trip to White Sands, we stayed in Cloudcroft and utilized that mountain town in the middle of the Lincoln National Forest as our base of operations. That would be the "closed for fire season" Lincoln National Forest.

No hiking, no picnicking except for city parks and county roads. We figured we could at least find a picnicking pullout somewhere, but the only place open wanted a camping fee. The Forest Service-operated picnic area was closed but the concessionaire-operated campgrounds were open.

My wife figured since there were plenty of tables not being used in those campgrounds no one would mind if we had our lunch at one. I pointed out that the sign said the fee was \$15 per spot. I also pointed out there was a camp host who would be sure to enforce the fee, right in the middle of the campground.

The first experience I had with a fee on public lands was when we backpacked to the

bottom of the Grand Canyon one Christmas break when I was in high school. You had to have reservations, pay a fee and adhere to a checkout time like a motel. Not my idea of a back-country experience, but we had a good time.

The other public lands experience that sticks in my craw is the Maroon Bells Scenic Area near Aspen, Colo. It costs \$10 per vehicle to get a view of this cherished public treasure but in the summer you can only drive in from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m. and from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. All other times you have to ride a bus.

My view is simply this: They're public lands, owned by us all. Why do they take my taxes to maintain them and then charge me again to get through the gate?

I worry a lot that the outdoor activities I enjoyed growing up will soon be lost to future generations unless they're rich. Hunting and fishing licenses and regulations and camping and day-use fees are going to keep rising, I fear, until the common man can't afford them.

I guess when no one can afford to get through the turnstile, our parks and national treasures will be truly protected from man.

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