

Portales (NM) News Tribune

Public lands fee column generates responses

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By [Karl Terry, PNT Managing Editor](#)

It seems last week's column on access fees on public lands managed to get around a bit thanks to the Internet.

I received feedback both positive and negative after my rant.

Here's a sampling:

One woman wrote that the reason they are taking my taxes along with a fee to maintain public lands is that Congress doesn't appropriate enough money to cover the base costs, let alone escalating costs of maintaining parks. Fees supplement the appropriations and help provide much needed visitor services, facilities and amenities.

I agree we may be under-funding our parks and recreation lands. But in the scheme of the overall budgets for these parks, user fees are a drop in the bucket. Simply fund them adequately if the public desires or cut back on the visitor services, facilities or amenities.

I'm a lot more interested in the view, the fresh air and the interaction with nature than I am with how good the restrooms are in the campground or whether or not there's an electrical hookup available. If I want electricity, cable TV or a hot shower, I could rent a motel in town.

She goes on to say that in some cases user fees are applied as a way to manage visitor numbers to keep our treasures from being trampled. Why should those with extra money in their pockets be the only ones doing the trampling?

Another woman, who heads a group in Colorado called Western Slope No-Fee

Coalition applauded my column, which evidently had made the rounds among her membership.

She questioned why New Mexicans seemed so slow to get on the bandwagon as have people in Colorado, California, Oregon, Washington and other states. She notes that our senators are in key power roles that could be used to move forward a bill that would repeal fees on federal lands and expand access.

The group's Web site has pictures of scenic spots in various National Parks with a price tag laid over the photo, denoting the fee charged to experience the site personally.

Finally, I got a response from Dwight T. Pitcaithley, an Eastern New Mexico University alumnus who is now a history professor at New Mexico State University. He previously held the position of historian with the National Parks Service and he thinks fees are undemocratic.

He forwarded an essay he wrote last year on the centennial (2016) of the National Park Service. In that essay he notes that if the current NPS budget were doubled to \$5 billion it would still only constitute 0.002 percent of the president's proposed 2008 budget.

He says the fee system provides just \$150 million annually. He wonders why if fees are such a good idea that we don't apply them other places like the National Archives or the Smithsonian Institution. Or why not put up toll booths on all federal highways? Or charge tuition to children attending public schools?

"We do not do that because of the national pride we have in those institutions and the belief that both should be publicly funded and free to those who take advantage of them," Pitcaithley said in the essay. "Why should our national parks be any different?"

Why indeed.

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