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THREE FREE WEEKENDS IS GREAT; NOW TAKE IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Salazar, Permanently Waive National Park Entrance Fees

The Interior Department admits that ever-increasing fees discourage Americans from enjoying their national parks and hurt local economies. Hopefully, this leads to making our national parks a free tradition, every weekend.

By Bill Schneider, 6-03-09

Yesterday, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar announced he was waiving national park entrance fees for three prime summer weekends (June 20-21, July 18-19 and August 15-16), a widely reported and welcomed pronouncement.

But I'm more interested in the back story.

To me, even though Salazar didn't say a word about it, his action seems to forecast a new philosophy coming out of the National Park Service (NPS), starting with this admission that ever-increasing fees are partly responsible for steadily declining park visitation. And ending, hopefully, with something I trumpeted two years ago in this column, making our national parks a free tradition.



National Park Service photo.

Last year, notably, when Ken Salazar was still the senior senator from Colorado, he signed on as a co-sponsor of the [Baucus-Crapo bill](#), which would've repealed the Federal Lands Recreational Enhancement Act (or the RAT, for Recreation Access Tax, to its critics), eliminated most fees imposed on access to national forests, and rolled back many national park fees that have soared up to \$25 in most major parks.

The bill died a silent death at the end of the 110th Congress, but in April, Senators Max Baucus (D-MT) and Mike Crapo (R-ID) reintroduced it into the 111th Congress.



In announcing the free weekends, Salazar noted that last year our national parks had more than 275 million recreation visits, directly and indirectly pumping \$10.6 billion into local economies and supporting more than 213,000 jobs, not counting NPS jobs.

“National Parks also serve as powerful economic engines for local communities and we hope that promoting visitation will give a small shot in the arm to businesses,” he added. “During these tough economic times, our national parks provide opportunities for affordable vacations for families. I encourage everyone to visit one of our nation’s crown jewels this summer and especially to take advantage of the three free-admission weekends.”

Kendra Barkoff, a spokeswoman for Salazar, told [Associated Press](#) that giving up entrance fees for the three weekends on the 147 national parks charging them would mean about \$500,000 in lost revenue for the NPS. But she said increase in park-related tourism income for gift shops, outfitters, restaurants, hotels, and other local businesses would more than make up for the loss.

Take a moment to digest that statement. If this is true, and I have no doubt that it is, for these three free weekends, then it would be even more true for the entire year, right? So what's stopping us from coming out even further ahead, economically, by permanently waiving park entrance fees?

The NPS can then forego the high administrative costs and use personnel now managing the toll booths for more critical tasks such as interpretation, enforcement and maintenance of the failing infrastructure we see everywhere in our national parks.

All park fees (entrance fees, plus camping, backcountry permits, outfitter fees, et al) cover roughly 6 percent of the NPS budget. Entrance fees only probably cover 4 or 5 percent, or less. Then, deduct the high cost of collecting, administrating and accounting for millions of small transactions, and you're really not left with much, nor are you giving up much on the scale the federal government works on.

That seems simple enough. Abandoning entrance fees has lots of economic upside and minimal downside.

Even though the economic benefits of eliminating fees is obvious and noteworthy, the non-economic benefits may be even more significant. Far more momentous, perhaps, is doing all we can to reverse the disastrous trend of Americans, especially our youth, losing their connection with nature. (More on this next week.)

Most Americans, even most of the population living in urban areas, live within an easy day's drive of a national park. To many, right or wrong, national parks are synonymous with the "outdoors" and "wild nature."

It's well documented that participation in most outdoor activities is declining along with park visitation, as are sales of outdoor equipment (except guns and ammo, of course). Discouraging people, particularly children, from enjoying their national parks and other public lands with access fees is definitely one reason, and probably a bigger factor than agencies want to admit. Since Salazar now concedes that entrance fees reduce national park visitation, he is positioned to really make a difference by taking the next step and waiving entrance fees permanently. You've sent up your trail balloon, Secretary Salazar, and it worked, so go for it.