



11. PARKS: Fee-free weekends spark debate over paid admission (06/11/2009)

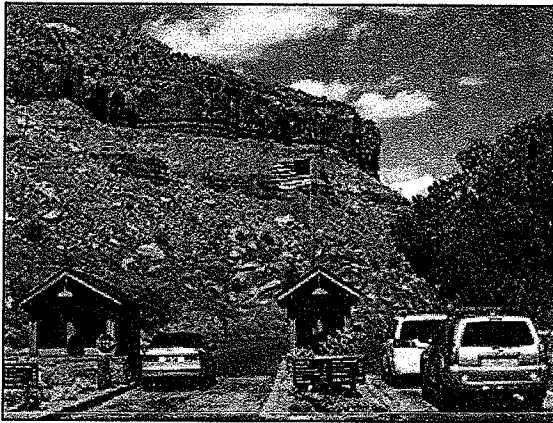
Phil Taylor, E&E reporter

The National Park Service's plan to waive park entrance fees during three of the most popular travel weekends this summer is being promoted by the agency as a gift to cash-strapped families and an opportunity to reverse a decade of gradual decline in park visitors.

But for some, the move provides a key opportunity for broader park management reforms, including the possible permanent lifting of all park fees, which some critics say are responsible for declining visitation at many parks.

While most of the 391 National Park Service units are free to visitors, 147 of the highest-profile parks charge entry fees ranging from \$3 to \$25 per vehicle. Though the fees are relatively insignificant compared to associated expenses like food, gas and lodging, some critics argue that they do little to boost revenue but are highly effective at deterring families from experiencing the nation's most treasured landscapes.

Kitty Benzar, president of the Durango, Colo.-based Western Slope No-Fee Coalition, said she plans to scout the parking lots at national parks during the free weekends this summer to see if the strategy works.



Visitors' cars line up at Zion National Park's south entrance station, where most drivers will pay \$25 fee to drive into the park. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar has waived all national park entry fees for three weekends this summer. Photo courtesy of the National Park Service.

"[Interior Secretary Ken] Salazar thinks it's going to boost visitation, and I agree with that," Benzar said. "Fees do deter visitation. I don't check baggage anymore because there's a fee for that."

Benzar's group supports lifting Park Service fees for all backcountry permits and interpretive services, but she said that even with Salazar's three-week reprieve, the no-fees campaign still faces long odds in Washington, D.C..

"I would love for all national parks to be free, but there is no political support for that," Benzar said.

Among the arguments made by no-fee advocates is that money spent on park fees is revenue lost to private businesses that support the parks by provisioning visitors and employing seasonal workers year after year. Last year, for example, 275 million national park visitors pumped \$10.6 billion into local economies, far above what the parks themselves took in, according to agency estimates.

The Interior Department estimates that it collects roughly \$100 million a year in admission fees at national parks, but that figure pales in comparison to the \$18.2 billion the department earned just last year

from royalties on federal oil, gas and mineral leases.

Bill Schneider, the travel and outdoors editor of the online publication *New West* and a longtime critic of park fees, last week argued in a [column](#) that since entrance fees cover such a small portion of the National Park Service's budget -- less than 5 percent, by his calculation -- the service would feel little effect from eliminating fees altogether.

Schneider noted that Interior officials calculated that the three weekends of lost entrance fee revenue would cost the agency roughly \$500,000. But the increased spending -- both inside and outside the parks -- associated with the expected boost in visitors would more than make up for the lost income.

"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?" Schneider wrote. "So what's stopping us from coming out even further ahead, economically, by permanently waiving park entrance fees?"

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

Fees 'put to awful good use'

But defenders of park fees say that with a massive maintenance backlog and tight congressional appropriations, the Park Service

needs every dollar it can get just to maintain the basic level of services. Moreover, they argue, the fees deter at best only a few visitors.

"Admission fees really have never been an issue of dispute with the general public," said Phil Voorhees, a senior fellow with the National Parks Conservation Association, the nation's largest national parks advocacy group. "Entrance and user fees are a pretty substantial amount of money that's put to awful good use around the country."

By congressional mandate, about 80 cents of every dollar spent at an entrance gate must be put to use in the receiving parks, while the rest is shared by parks that do not charge fees, said NPS spokeswoman Kathy Kupper.

"There is a big benefit, and it's not just to the Park Service, but to visitors," Kupper said. She noted that Yellowstone National Park had used revenues from entrance fees to help finance a new visitors center, while other benefits -- such as upgrades in water filtration systems -- are less visible.

The maximum \$25 entrance fee charged at popular national parks like Yellowstone, Yosemite or Grand Canyon entitles a full-sized vehicle and its passengers access for an entire week, Kupper said, much less than what many families pay for a restaurant meal or other entertainment.

"You're going to spend more than that to take your family to a movie back home," Kupper said.

To address claims that park entry fees are to blame for declines in visitors, Kupper pointed out that visitor numbers nationwide have stayed mostly flat over the past decade. Roughly 275 million people visited national parks in 2008, down from 287 million in 1999, with the numbers rising and falling in between.

Abolish forest fees?

Voorhees of NPCA said that while national park fees remain an essential revenue source for the Park Service, he believes the government could consider eliminating fees in the national forests, which are managed by the Forest Service for multiple uses, including recreation, timber harvesting and mineral extraction.

Legislation introduced in April by Sen. Max Baucus (D-Mont.) would repeal certain provisions of the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act, including fee collections at all national forests as well as at sites managed by the Bureau of Land Management and Bureau of Reclamation. The [bill](#) would also waive fees for any national park visitor under age 16 and require the Interior Secretary to analyze the benefits and cumulative effects of all park fees.

While many national parks are destination sites, with visitors traveling hundreds or even thousands of miles to see world-renowned landmarks and landscapes, the national forests tend to draw visitors from their immediate surroundings, and those visitors expect less in the way of services. Acre for acre, Voorhees said, the national forests cost much less to manage, because they provide less visitor interpretation, require less maintenance and earn revenues from other resources.

Voorhees also said he would advocate getting rid of the \$80 America the Beautiful pass, which offers yearlong access to any site managed by one of the five federal land management agencies, including the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management. Revenue from those passes is rarely distributed to the units where they are used, he said.

Instead, Voorhees called for a return of the National Park Pass, which allowed users to visit any property in the NPS system. "Americans have a long history of very focused identity with national parks, which isn't true in the same way for other federal lands," he said. "There should be a way to support national parks directly."

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