



## Kitty Benzar: Squeezing the geezers on our public lands

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SPECIAL TO THE ASPEN TIMES WEEKLY,

Maybe the U.S. Forest Service needs a dope slap. Any politician can tell you that there are two constituencies you don't want to mess with: senior citizens and the permanently disabled. Yet the Forest Service has riled both groups by proposing to eliminate the 50 percent discount at national forest campgrounds that has been available since 1965 to holders of lifetime senior and access passes.

The problem? As America ages, there are just too many of us qualifying for the discounts. That's hurting the bottom line of the private companies that manage roughly half of all Forest Service campgrounds and 82 percent of all campsites that can be reserved.

Until now, law and/or agency policy required private concessionaires to honor the passes and discounts for older or disabled people at facilities they manage. That makes sense, since public funding built these facilities and the public owns them. Contracting out their management may be a convenience for the agency, but it's little benefit for the visitor. For the public, it shouldn't matter who's cleaning the toilets or emptying the trash, as long as the work's being done. But it does matter, and here's why.

Until 2005, the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act governed the recreation fees charged at developed campgrounds. That law established the Golden Age and Golden Access passports that granted free lifetime entry at national parks plus half-price discounts for camping on public land. Concessionaires were required to honor the passes.

Then a new law passed in 2005, called the Recreation Enhancement Act (REA), and the rules changed. The REA established a pass called the "National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass," which comes in four flavors: Annual, \$80, Volunteer Annual, free if you volunteer 500 hours, Senior Lifetime, \$10, and Access Lifetime for the disabled, free. But REA does not guarantee any camping discount for Access or Senior Lifetime pass holders.

The Forest Service continued the discount — for a while. Now the agency says it's costing concessionaires too much. The REA says Golden Age and Access pass holders can, "to the extent practicable," continue to use passes in accordance with the terms under which they were issued, so the camping discount was grandfathered in when the law changed. Then the Forest Service encouraged Golden Pass holders to exchange their old passes for new ones, and many did. But pass holders were not told that when they did so they relinquished an important benefit. The Forest Service claims that granting the camping discount for Golden Pass holders is no longer "practicable."

Let's call it "bait-and-switch."

In addition, the REA allows "Standard Amenity Fees" at day-use sites that meet specific criteria. All four types of passes were supposed to cover standard amenity fees, but under the proposed policy only the annual passes will be accepted as full payment. Seniors and the disabled would get a measly 10 percent discount with their lifetime passes. This appears to be a clear violation of existing law.

The proposed change is the latest in a long series of policy decisions that are transforming recreation on public lands into a for-profit business.

Until 1997, it was government policy that the public lands were equally available to all, with modest fees for only a few highly developed sites as well as for entrance to national parks. Public lands were one of the benefits

we enjoyed as citizens and supported with our tax dollars.

Since then there has been a systematic policy shift. Even though the Forest Service's tax-supported funding has been increasing for more than a decade, in many places you now need a \$5 or \$10 pass just to take a walk in the woods or enjoy the sunset over a mountain lake. Access fees of all kinds have proliferated, and public lands are now expected to pay their own way.

At concessionaire-managed sites they are even expected to turn a profit.

As the Forest Service's concessionaire program has expanded over the past 30 years, it has moved from a small mom-and-pop business model to one dominated by large corporations. Camping fees have increased and concessionaires charge fees the Forest Service itself is prohibited from charging, such as for parking.

Until now, these changes have had limited impact on seniors or the disabled because their lifetime passes have been honored as originally issued. Now that senior and disabled passes make up 78 percent of all pass sales, their associated discounts are cutting into the profits of the private companies that control much of our public land. Those companies are trying to dictate public policy.

This time, though, they may be messing with the wrong crowd. The public can comment on these proposed changes until Feb. 1; let's hear it for geezer power.

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