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Waive entrance fees at national parks

by **Robert Weiner and Jonathan Battaglia** - Jul. 13, 2010 12:00 AM
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From the grasslands of Petrified Forest to the stratified depths of the Grand Canyon, our national parks are blessed with some of the most beautiful stretches of land in the world.

However, attendance has been on the decline.

In 1995, more than 68 million people visited the parks. By 2009, the number was down to 63 million - an 8 percent decrease amid a 26 percent increase in U.S. population. Even at the Grand Canyon, the nation's most popular park, attendance has dropped by 200,000 since 1995.

Americans aren't visiting our national parks because they simply aren't the bargain they once were. Since 2007, 131 park units have raised their prices - at a time when inflation has stayed essentially at zero.

The rising costs to visitors reflect inadequate federal support. Park funding in 2010 was \$3.16 billion - less than 0.1 percent of federal spending. The National Park Service's 2011 budget request was \$15 million *below* 2010. And with a new budget freeze, Congress isn't likely to be generous. If we see higher admission fees make up the difference, attendance will keep sliding.

Last month, President Barack Obama encouraged all Americans to "explore the great outdoors." Ken Burns' recent PBS documentary "National Parks: America's Best Idea" put a spotlight on these natural and historic treasures.

We can make sure all Americans have the opportunity to visit our national parks with one simple step: make them admission-free. While park-admission fees are not high, waiving them would be a catalyst and incentive to come. Just check the attendance at free national monuments: It's hitting record highs.

We can afford it. The Grand Canyon brought in 4.3 million people in 2009. At a price of \$12 a person, that's \$51 million from admission fees. The federal government can cover that; one Apache helicopter costs \$50 million.

Waiving entrance fees would not only motivate people to visit parks, but it would also stimulate local economies. Spending by non-local visitors at national parks provided \$10.6 billion in 2008, according to Interior Secretary Ken Salazar.

More visitors means more money for tour operators, hotels, restaurants, gift shops - it's a stimulus for America's rural areas.

To keep attendance from hitting rock bottom, the Park Service now offers a few free-entrance days. There have been 11 free days so far in 2010, with four more to come.

But a few free days aren't enough to make up for the rest: Overall attendance is down 2.5 percent from this time last year.

At the very least, the National Park Service should institute fee-waivers for low-income citizens.

President Theodore Roosevelt said our national parks "belong to the people." Federal taxes pay for our federal lands; we shouldn't have to pay for them twice. The best solution would be to make our parks free for all. Waive entrance fees permanently.

Robert Weiner, an issues strategist and former White House spokesman, proposed to his wife at the Grand Canyon. Jonathan Battaglia is a college student working this summer at Robert Weiner Associates.