

# Permits, caps and fees proposed to balance record crowds and protect Hanging Lake

## Plan would limit visitors to 615 per day, close parking lot in summer

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To help protect the fragile ecosystem of Hanging Lake, where as many as 1,100 people visit on a busy summer day, the White River National Forest is proposing a visitor cap, fees, timed reservations and shuttles to the trailhead.

“Hanging Lake is a Colorado treasure and really beloved by so many,” said Aaron Mayville, the Eagle-Holy Cross District Ranger for the most trafficked national forest in the country.

Maybe too beloved by too many. That’s becoming an increasingly urgent theme in Colorado, where treasures such as [the state’s 54 fourteeners](#), remote [backcountry lakes](#) and [popular national parks](#) have been swarmed by [record numbers of visitors](#) as the [state’s population surged](#). Federal and state land managers are navigating a delicate dance in Colorado, balancing those record crowds with duties to protect natural resources.

And Hanging Lake is the latest display of that discordant jig. Total visitation to Hanging Lake jumped to [150,000 in 2016 from 99,000 in 2014](#).

On peak days, when the packed parking lot and crowded trail degrade both the resource and the experience, more than 1,100 people make the steep 1.2-mile hike from Glenwood Canyon to the tantalizing, travertine lake.

“We have known for quite some time that that number is too high,” Mayville said.

The [proposed plan](#), which the forest service hopes to have installed as soon as spring, would cap visitors at 615 a day, close the parking lot and require permits. Visitors would have to reach the trailhead by bike or shuttle. The plan, released Tuesday after almost four years of analysis, is [open for public comment](#).

Details about permits, prices and shuttle arrangements have not been worked out. It’s likely the shuttling will begin and end in Glenwood Springs during the peak May-October season. From November through April, reservations will be required, but visitors would be able to park in the 112-spot lot, which was built in the 1980s as a highway rest area but evolved into one Colorado’s busiest trailheads. (Rest-area status will be removed if the management plan moves forward.)

The management plan comes after several hard summers at Hanging Lake. In recent years, there have been fights over parking spots, [vandalism on the trail](#) and visitors ignoring rules that prohibit such things as dogs on the trail, [swimming in the lake and walking on the lake’s distinct floating log](#). For the past few years, local tourism promoters and the Forest Service have supported rangers that patrol the parking lot, a duty that stresses the already budget-strapped agency charged with protecting public lands — not corralling cars.

“This has been a long time coming,” said Marianne Virgili, the head of the Glenwood Springs Chamber

of Commerce. The chamber has supported use of city tourism-marketing money for additional rangers at Hanging Lake. “It’s been apparent for a few years that something more would have to be done.”

The 615-visitor cap was identified after analyzing options that suggested as few as 400 and as many as 750. Reservations would iron out the peak periods — midmorning and midafternoon — on the busiest summer days.

“This reservation system aims to flatten that usage and visitation throughout the day — with timed entry, essentially, into Hanging Lake,” said Mayville, noting that pulling rangers from parking-lot duty would put more rangers on the trail.

White River officials studied shuttle systems deployed at other popular destinations, such as the new service that ferries [as many as 2,000 people a day to the Maroon Bells](#), and the bus networks in Rocky Mountain and Zion national parks.

The Forest Service could use the agency’s recreation reservation system and manage the shuttles through an outfitter and guide permit system similar to that which manages rafting companies floating the Colorado River through Glenwood Canyon. Or the shuttles could be part of the widely used public bus system that spans Glenwood Springs and the Roaring Fork Valley into Aspen.

The proposed plan is anchored in an adaptive strategy that allows the agency to monitor and adjust implementation to make sure the plan is working. That means capacity numbers for Hanging Lake could be adjusted up or down as the plan evolves.

More than 12 million people a year visit the White River National Forest, which is bisected by Interstate 70 and [hosts the busiest ski areas in the nation](#). As Colorado’s population grows, more people are venturing into the easily accessible wildlands along the I-70 corridor, and White River officials have spent several years managing that swell.

Hanging Lake exemplifies the agency’s management challenges, Mayville said.

“We love Hanging Lake,” he said. “Our Forest Service budgets have not exactly grown, and that makes things like this a challenge, but on the flip side, we take the White River visitation numbers as a point of pride and we are very pleased to see people enjoying their public lands.”

There will be a ripple effect as restrictions limit access to Hanging Lake. More visitors may hike the canyon’s other trails, including those above the Bair Ranch, Grizzly Creek and No Name exits. And more tourists may spend more time in Glenwood Springs, which is undergoing a massive face-lift with a redevelopment of its primary artery into the Roaring Fork Valley. With rafting, trails, two sprawling hot springs, cave tours, the tram-accessed Glenwood Caverns Adventure Park and new restaurants, Glenwood Springs has become an urban-but-wild draw that has earned it a new nickname: GlenVegas.

“I think, in many respects, this will make it easier for tourists. If you limit the availability of an attraction, it becomes more precious. I don’t see this plan as a deterrent,” the chamber’s Virgili said. “Colorado has been discovered, and when that happens, the pristine areas and beautiful environment need to be protected.”

Still, there’s a groundswell of opposition to fees accessing public lands, especially as the [National Park Service floats the idea of daily visitor caps and higher fees](#) at parks such as Rocky Mountain, Arches, Canyonlands, Zion and Yosemite to reduce the impacts of record crowds. The slippery-slope argument from groups including [Durango’s Western Slope No Fee Coalition](#) goes something like this: Once a federal agency starts charging for access to public lands, the lands become playgrounds only for those who can afford the fees.

The 2004 Federal Lands Recreational Enhancement Act allows federal land managers to charge a

“special recreation permit fee” for “specialized recreation.”

“The Forest Service likes to use that to mean any recreation in special places. No one will say hiking is specialized recreation, right,” said Kitty Benzar, the director of the coalition that earlier this year supported [a lawsuit protesting the White River National Forest’s \\$10 fee](#) to park and access the Maroon Bells Scenic Area.

If the Hanging Lake management plan is adopted, Benzar thinks private guides will grab all the permits for Hanging Lake access and start charging market rates, or permit fees will go to a private company that manages the reservation system.

“If you have to go through a private company,” she said, “it means those lands are no longer public.”