

Connelly: Trump would cut Park Service budget while hiking entrance fees

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The Trump administration has proposed \$70 entrance fees at 17 popular national parks across the country, including Mount Rainier and Olympic, saying it needs money to tackle \$12.5 billion in deferred maintenance in a system that stretches from Alaska to Maine to Florida.

The sticker shock has made news. What the Trump administration is doing to the budget of the National Park Service and its parent agency, the U.S. Department of the Interior, has received neither airtime nor ink.

National parks, an idea America bequeathed to the world, operate on an annual budget of around \$3 billion. The system manages 417 "units", from tiny memorials to Civil War battlefields to the 13 million acre Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve in Alaska.

President Trump made a splash earlier this year, donating \$78,333 -- his paycheck for the first quarter -- to the Park Service. Here, however, is what's been happening backstage:

-The administration's budget calls for a \$1.5 billion cut, or 12 percent, in the budget for the U.S. Department of the Interior, parent agency of our public lands. Its domain embraces national parks, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Bureau of Land Management.

--The Trump administration wants a \$2.55 billion FY2018 budget for the Park Service, down from the current \$2.85 billion.

--Unless Congress reaches a sequestration deal over the next 5 months, the Park Service will have to make deep cuts in its budget for the current fiscal year. NPS Director Jon Jarvis has told park superintendents to begin planning those cuts. In a memo leaked last week, Jarvis told them:

"We expect a cut of this magnitude, intensified by the lateness of the implementation, will result in reductions to visitor services, hours of operation, shortening of seasons and possibly closing of areas during periods when there is insufficient staff to ensure the protection of visitors, employees, resources and government assets."

One more park-related cut deserves mention. The Trump administration is taking aim at Amtrak's long-distance rail service. A prime target is the Empire Builder, a train that provides vital access to both the west and east sides of Glacier National Park.

A gutsy former Olympic Park superintendent, Maureen Finnerty, who heads an organization of Park Service retirees, has warned of an emptying out of parks. A motorcycle-riding rock climber, bound for Illusion Dweller in California's Joshua Tree National Park, would have to fork up \$50. An individual visitor, without wheels, would have to pay \$30.

What's different about our parks? They have always provided access to everyone wanting to see what the late, great U.S. Interior Secretary Cecil Andrus described as "the crown jewels of America."

An apt analogy, given that choice spots in Europe were set off as hunting reserves for royalty, or later vacation domains for such communist royalty as Yugoslavia's President Josef Tito.

Out in Port Angeles, on summer days, a line snakes down the corridor of those waiting to get backcountry camping permits and bear-proof food containers, so as to enjoy 900,000 acres of magnificence in the Olympic National Park.

The park is the product of two Roosevelts, Republican Theodore and Democrat Franklin, with a Shi-Shi Beach-Point of Arches addition signed into law by President Gerald Ford. Note the role of Republican presidents in creating and expanding the park system, beginning with Grant setting aside land at Yellowstone.

Donald Trump makes repairs to golf courses he owns, rather like those royals of old who went to their domains in the Alps. Americans have other traditions, gazing in wonder at geysers, at such peaks at the Grand Teton and Mount Rainier and Denali, or renting a houseboat to cruise Lake Roosevelt.

"Targeted fee increases at some of our most visited parks will help ensure that they are protected and preserved in perpetuity and that visitors enjoy a world-class experience that mirrors the amazing destinations they are visiting," much-traveled (at public expense) U.S. Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke said in announcing the proposed fee hikes.

Restoring and modestly increasing the Park Service budget would yield more money at less cost to America's park-bound families.

One wonders: Is this really an attempt to hold down visitor counts, and move to "privatize" park lands by selling them off or inviting corporate sponsors into the business of running parks?