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That National Park Fee Hike Could Be a Corporate Giveaway

Private concessionaires and oil and gas companies are among those who may benefit most from parks' alleged maintenance crisis

by Lori Gross

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The National Park Service announced last week its intention to steeply increase peak season entry fees in seventeen of the nation's most popular parks. The cost for a car to enter parks like the Grand Canyon, Acadia, Yosemite, and Yellowstone will now be $70 during each park's five busiest months. That's more than double the current fees of $25 or $30 for those parks.

Wealthy people may not flinch at higher fees, but it is likely to deter people on tight budgets from visiting the parks during summer vacation. Those who live within short driving distances of parks may be able to confine their visits to various fee-free days, like the National Park Service's birthday in August. But if you were considering a trip to Acadia National Park in Maine (an eight-hour drive from New York) or Shenandoah National Park in Virginia (a five-hour drive), the price of entry is about to get much steeper.

What's troubling is that it's not clear that the increases are actually necessary. NPS says it's raising fees to improve parks' infrastructure. But parks advocates say it would be balancing the Park Service's budget on the backs of those least able to pay.

"It's discriminatory against people who have the least financial resources," says Kitty Benzar, president of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition, which advocates for fee-free entry to federal public lands, usually focusing on those administered by the Forest Service. "They're going to be shunted off into the shoulder season," she says, referring to the times in the winter, early spring, and late fall when the higher fees won't be implemented. Many families and college students whose vacations are tied to long school breaks will find it prohibitively difficult to schedule visits, though fourth graders and their families will still gain free entry through the "Every Kid in a Park" program.

National parks were created so that natural treasures like Yellowstone's great geysers would be preserved and open to all. The 1872 Act of Congress that established Yellowstone called it a "pleasuring-ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people." You didn't have to be a wealthy landowner to enjoy a natural patrimony.

Not everyone can afford to sightsee the chateaus of France's Loire Valley, or take their kids on a Disney Cruise. But $30 did have the purchasing power of entry to America's cathedrals, as the parks have been called.

In addition to Acadia and Shenandoah, the new fees would affect Arches, Bryce Canyon, Canyonlands, Denali, Glacier, Grand Teton, Olympic, Sequoia and Kings Canyon, Zion, Joshua Tree, Mount Rainier, and Rocky Mountain National Parks, all starting in 2018.

"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," U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke said in defense of the increases. (The Department of the Interior administers the parent agency of the Park Service.)

NPS's recent announcement claims the fees will provide "badly needed revenue for improvements to the aging infrastructure of national parks." By providing an additional $70 million annually, the Park Service said, the fees would allow repairs and upgrades to roads, bridges, campgrounds, and other visitor services.

But that additional $70 million would be a pretty poor offset to President Donald Trump's $300 million cuts to NPS announced in his 2018 budget plan earlier this year. And it would be an even feebler response to the Park Service's reported $12 billion maintenance backlog.

A large chunk of that backlog, though, may not be for things that should fall on the backs of either parkgoers or taxpayers. An analysis earlier this year by the Center of American Progress discovered that at least $389 million of the items on that insurmountable maintenance backlog are actually projects that should be paid for directly by the concessionaires, which are private companies contracted to run services within the parks.

"Much of this so-called backlog is earmarked for renovating facilities where corporate concessionaires bring in gross revenue of $1.14 billion annually, while the NPS only collects $70.5 million in franchise fees on behalf of U.S. taxpayers," the report points out. "Maintenance of taxpayer-provided facilities should be paid for with their own dime."

"NPS and their concessionaires have a very chummy relationship," says Benzar. "They work together to maximize profits for concessionaires."
NPS can be a pretty generous landlord. Technically the cost of a project reverts back to NPS if the concessionaire is unwilling to pay for it — this despite the fact that almost all of the contracts to do business in the parks stipulate that concessionaires are responsible to maintain the facilities they occupy, according to CAP.

"Concessionaires are private businesses that are profiting from operating in a national park without fully absorbing the cost," says Nicole Gentile, one of the authors of the CAP report. "For example, these businesses don't need to buy the hotel, but they get to profit from it. They get a captive audience and a healthy profit margin."

One $31 million entry on the Yosemite maintenance list, for example, is work on the main building of the Ahwahnee Hotel, a Yosemite National Park institution that recently changed its name to the Majestic Yosemite Hotel, which since 2016 has been privately operated by a subsidiary of the food-service and facilities giant Aramark. That one project alone would eat up almost half of the first year's proposed fee increase.

Aramark could not confirm whether it or the NPS would be picking up the price tag for that project. "Without addressing the specific figures cited in the [CAP] report, I can tell you that since assuming the park's concessions operations, we have been working with NPS to assess and address the deferred maintenance log," says company spokesperson David Freireich.

Xanterra, which operates the Mammoth Hot Springs Hotel in Yellowstone, with $10 million in deferred maintenance, did not immediately respond to clarify who would be paying.

The Park Service does earn some revenue from private concessionaires. An NPS spokesperson said the average concessionaire contributes 7.5 percent of its gross revenue back to the parks. But, says Gentile, that doesn't excuse excluding private entities from paying for the cost of maintaining their facilities: "Secretary Zinke should start by ensuring these private, for-profit businesses are paying their share

before pushing a fee increase that would make national parks — that belong to all of us — cost-prohibitive for some families."

There are also questions about how much of that $12 billion price tag will really fall on NPS. Nearly $5.9 billion of the project list, for example, is for paved roads, which traditionally have been funded through separate transportation bills. Only about 10 percent of the total figure is pressing enough to be considered "a priority for necessary maintenance," according to CAP's tabulations.

CAP and others have speculated that the $12 billion figure has been purposely bloated to justify the leasing of public lands to energy companies by the Department of the Interior. Zinke, a former Montana congressman who has close ties to the oil and gas industry, has directed his agency to speed up leasing of public lands for drilling.

The National Parks Conservation Association, founded in 1919 as a parks watchdog, has suggested tapping revenue the government gets from energy leases to maintain parks, instead of resorting to increased fees. NPCA's solution is a U.S. Senate bill called the National Park Service Legacy Act, which would take $500 million annually that the U.S. Treasury receives from coal, oil, and gas royalties and assign it toward park maintenance. The bill currently has 11 cosponsors, including both Democrats and Republicans.

NPCA is urging those opposed to the new fees to speak out during the 30-day comment period, which ends on November 23. The nonprofit has been in favor of previous fee increases, but believes increases at this level would create an unreasonable financial barrier to entry.

"Asking visitors to pay down a share of this massive debt one trip at a time is not a sound fiscal strategy for our families or our parks," NPCA CEO Theresa Pierno wrote in a recent blog post. In 2016, NPS celebrated 100 years of its existence as a federal bureau. If it relies only on entry fee increases, the Park Service will be celebrating their bicentennial year long before paying for all that purported maintenance.