

The (Olympic) Peninsula Daily News

OUR VIEW: Speak out on massive park fee hike

WE NEED TO yell our heads off.

The Trump administration has proposed that entrance fees be raised nearly three times from \$25 per carload to \$70 for the peak season — May through September — in Olympic National Park beginning next May.

No matter what you may think of President Donald Trump's actions on other issues — no matter what your ethics, your morals or your political philosophy might be — his administration has taken aim at a major regional livelihood, and if you live here, it's going to hurt.

It's part of a plan for equally huge entrance fee hikes at 16 other popular national parks, including Mount Rainier, Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon.

The National Park Service has estimated that such a peak-season price structure could increase national park revenue by \$70 million per year.

That's with no studies done, no documentation. The estimate apparently counts on the popularity of the parks. Olympic, for instance, reported nearly 3.4 million visits last year, making it in the top 10 of the parks visited nationwide.

Many of those visitors ate, lodged and shopped in North Olympic Peninsula communities. The park estimated that those who visited in 2016 spent \$286,786,300 in nearby communities, dollars that supported 3,842 jobs in the local area and had a cumulative benefit to the local economy of \$398,689,900.

Will droves of visitors still come here to ski at Hurricane Ridge or traipse through the Hoh Rain Forest if the federal government prices the park out of an ordinary person's budget?

Yes, the \$70 entrance fee is good for a week — seven consecutive days — but many come here for one, two or three days only. It's a big attraction for a long weekend.

Will the park beckon so brightly if the federal government puts a single park visit in competition with food, clothing, school supplies, a month of internet service or a portion of rent?

It's even worse for those arriving without a car. The fee would be \$50 for a motorcycle and \$30 for a person on a bicycle or on foot.

It seems to be an attempt to induce more to buy park-specific annual passes for \$75, again cutting out those who don't want to invest so much into a weekend.

And it's even more outlandish given the careful step increases in fees the park undertook two years ago.

The proposal comes on the heels of Trump's requested \$2.55 billion FY2018 budget for the National Park Service, down from the current \$2.85 billion.

The park service says the increase in fees would be applied to deferred maintenance projects, a backlog of some \$11 billion that badly needs attention.

But there are other ways than raising user fees.

For instance, there is a bill — the National Park Service Legacy Act — co-sponsored by U.S. Rep. Derek Kilmer of the 6th Congressional District that would address the backlog by distributing revenue the government receives from oil and gas royalties back into a restoration fund.

There is no need to make our national parks, what the late U.S. Interior Secretary Cecil Andrus described as “the crown jewels of America,” accessible only to the wealthy.

The parks belong to us all.

The National Park Service is taking public comment on this proposal through Nov. 23.

The public can comment online at <http://tinyurl.com/PDN-parkfeehike> or by mailing written comments to National Park Service, Recreation Fee Program, 1849 C St. NW, Mail Stop: 2346, Washington, DC 20240.

Please do. Even if you disagree with us and think it’s a great idea, don’t let this happen without participating.

Speak up. Yell about it.