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Anger as US national parks plan high-season price hikes

Visitor numbers at US national parks are soaring, yet the government says a proposed price surge is for 'maintenance', while slashing federal funding by almost $300m

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On an unseasonably grey Monday last month, steady drizzle did not deter visitors to Utah's Arches national park. Long queues of traffic crept sluggishly past viewpoints; car parks filled to capacity forced hikers to give up on planned trails. Such frustrations are typical nowadays: Arches' dramatic rock formations now draw more than double the visitors they did in 2000. And it's not an isolated problem: the US National Park Service (NPS) reported more than 330 million visits in 2016 – 44 million more than at the turn of the century.

This could be the real reason for NPS's announcement last week that it is considering surge pricing at 17 popular parks. Under the proposals, entry to Yosemite, Yellowstone and others would swell from the current $25-30 per vehicle, to $70 at peak times. Charges for motorcyclists and pedestrians would double.

The new peak-season fees would be implemented at parks including Arches, Bryce Canyon, Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, Yosemite and Zion from 1 May 2018. Parks such as Acadia, Rocky Mountain and Mount Rainer would follow from 1 June.

But when interior secretary Ryan Zinke announced the higher entrance fees, he cited an $11.9bn maintenance backlog as the reason, saying in a statement: "The infrastructure of our national parks is ageing and in need of renovation and restoration."

Odd, then, that he has also proposed slashing federal funding to the NPS by almost $300m. The $70m in projected earnings from the surge pricing hardly covers the difference.

Critics also argue that heftier entry fees would be prohibitive for lower-income families, who usually have to travel during public and school holidays (high season).

Nicole Gentile of the Center for American Progress (CAP), a progressive thinktank, pointed out that US taxpayers could end up footing part of the bill for private enterprises. The CAP says around $389m of the maintenance backlog the NPS cites relates to hotels, restaurants and gift shops within the national parks. She said: "Secretary Zinke should start by ensuring these private, for-profit businesses are paying their share."

A more realistic strategy for resolving the backlog is "a robust federal commitment to funding", according to John Garder of the National Parks Conservation Association.

That seems unlikely. The Trump administration is taking less interest in preservation than privatisation: Zinke has proposed trimming the area of national monuments to open up land to fossil-fuel industries, and his proposed interior department budget, while cutting NPS funds, sought to pour tens of millions into coal, oil and gas investments on public lands.

To address the overcrowding issue, Garder says he prefers solutions that increase efficiency rather than

reduce opportunity for visits, such as the lottery-based reserved entry system mooted at Zion national park, also in Utah.

Of the surge pricing plan, he said: “Most objectionable is that visitors are expected to pay their share, but there’s no acknowledgement the federal government bears responsibility.”