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The price of a national park fee hike

The proposed increase in entrance fees reignites old questions about who should fund the West's open spaces.

Krista Langlois | **Dec. 14, 2017**

When Kitty Benzar bought her house in Colorado's San Juan National Forest 30 years ago, federal law prohibited land-management agencies from charging people to use undeveloped public lands, like those in her backyard. Fees for developed campsites, public cabins, and access to certain national parks and monuments were legal and widely accepted. But if a trailhead or backcountry site offered only a toilet, a picnic table or drinking water, the 1965 Land and Water Conservation Act required that it be free.

That changed with the Recreation Fee Demonstration program in 1996, which allowed agencies to start charging for day use. But the new regulations didn't directly affect Benzar until five years later, when the U.S. Forest Service began charging $5 to access a trailhead in Yankee Boy Basin, a high-alpine bowl not far from her house. Benzar and about 35 others protested the fee — not because they couldn't afford it, but because, Benzar says, they felt it was part of a broader effort to "monetize our public land and turn recreation into a product to sell us."

Today, access to Yankee Boy Basin is free, but Benzar hasn't stopped fighting. As president of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition, she battles other fee hikes that she believes are contrary to the spirit of public lands.

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Few such proposals have troubled Benzar more than the U.S. Department of the

Interior's Oct. 24 call to dramatically raise entrance fees at 17 popular national parks — in some cases from $25 to $70 per car.

The National Park Service says the hike could raise $70 million a year to chip away at a $12 billion backlog of deferred maintenance on roads and buildings. Proponents claim it's a necessary step toward ensuring the future of chronically underfunded public lands. But fee watchdogs and many conservation groups see it as simply another example of a dangerous trend: federal lands run less like a public resource and more like a commercial enterprise.

A biker exits Joshua Tree National Park at the west entrance fee station. It currently costs $25 per vehicle and $12 for a bicycle to enter the park.

Brad Sutton/NPS

The debate over how to fund the West's sprawling public lands dates back to the Park Service's founding, according to Barry Mackintosh, author of *Visitor Fees in the National Park System: A Legislative and Administrative History*. Because the nation's earliest parks received little or no congressional appropriations, outsourcing food and beverage services to private businesses and passing costs on to visitors made sense. In 1915 — the first year Yellowstone allowed cars in and charged an entrance fee — the park's revenue exceeded its spending. Administrators believed that the burgeoning popularity of automobiles could make all parks self-sustaining.

But as the 20th century progressed, this became increasingly unrealistic. Some popular parks, like Mount Rushmore, were forbidden by Congress to charge for entry. Others, such as Alaska's Lake Clark, are so rarely visited that relying on entrance fees to maintain trails and infrastructure isn't practical.

Philosophical hostility to fees also emerged. In the 1930s, Utah Republican Reed Smoot led a growing group of lawmakers in opposition to the idea that Americans should pay *anything* to access lands that belonged to them. A 1932 Park Service policy barred the agency from seeking “financial gain” and asserted that parks should "be free to the people without vexatious admission charges and other fees.”

Yet entrance and camping fees remained part of public-land management. Although revenue generated by user fees has risen sharply since 1996, it still makes up roughly the same portion of the Park Service’s budget that it did decades ago. In 1947, 11 percent of the agency’s budget was generated by user fees. In 2016, 9 percent was, with the remainder coming from donations and congressional appropriations.

Political opinions, on the other hand, have changed drastically. Today, some conservatives find the very idea of public lands antithetical to their ideology. As Steve Hanke, a Johns Hopkins University economist, wrote in a June *Forbes* op-ed, public lands “represent a huge socialist anomaly in America’s capitalist system.” Republicans in Congress are increasingly reluctant to dole out money for public-land management, and appropriations in recent years have been far less than agencies need to manage an ever-growing numbers of visitors.

That’s why Shawn Regan, a former backcountry ranger in Olympic National Park and a research fellow with the Montana-based free-market think tank Property and Environment Research Center, thinks that raising user fees is the best way for public lands to maintain a “direct, consistent stream of revenue.”

Many GOP lawmakers agree with Regan, arguing that only Americans who actually use these lands should pay for them, and that public lands would be more efficient if they were managed like private businesses. It’s this perspective that underlies the Interior Department’s proposal to raise entrance fees at 17 national parks during the peak season.

Yet John Garder of the National Parks Conservation Association says the fee increase “couldn’t possibly cover anywhere close to the actual amount of funding needed to address the maintenance backlog.” Eighty percent of the fees collected at any given park remain there, while the rest goes to a general fund split by the hundreds of national parks and monuments that don’t collect entrance fees. Garder says that 80 percent of the revenue from the fee hike would cover only 2 percent of the maintenance backlog at the 17 affected parks.

Plus, he and others worry that a $70 entrance fee will simply drive more people to purchase an $80 annual pass, which covers entrance at any national park. If a vacationing family buys an $80 pass at Grand Canyon National Park and later visits Zion and Arches, for instance, those parks won't get extra money despite shouldering the cost of the extra visitors. Plus, if a yearlong pass costs just $10 more than visiting a single park, it's likely that the cost of an all-parks pass will also go up before long.

Kitty Benzar has yet another concern. Under the new pricing structure, national parks will be able to charge higher rates during the summer months, when the most visitors come. If prices go up during peak season, visitors who can't handle the $70 price tag may be more likely to visit during quieter times of year. And that, says Benzar, is exactly what private hotel and campground operators have wanted for decades: to fill more hotel beds and campsites in May and October, while turning away fewer paying customers in June and July.

In other words, she explains, "Rich people can see wildflowers in Rocky Mountain National Park at the best time of year, and poor people can't see them at all."

The question of how user fees impact public access is at the heart of the debate over their role in land management. And there are no easy answers. In one Forest Service study, 49 percent of visitors earning less than $30,000 a year responded to a $5 fee increase by reducing their public-land use or going elsewhere, compared to 33 percent of more well-off users. Another peer-reviewed study from 2017 found that low-income recreationists were willing to travel over three times as far to reach fee-free parks, something that could potentially shift socioeconomic diversity on public lands.

Research by the National Park Service, however, shows that visitor fees make up just 3 percent of the average family's budget on a visit to Yellowstone; the rest goes to expenses like gas, food and lodging. Shawn Regan of PERC believes it's possible to maintain socioeconomic diversity while still raising fees — perhaps by lowering prices for local families who just want to visit for a day, or by allowing individual parks to set their own pricing. Although he supports the latest proposal in theory, he considers it an experiment with a number of unanswered questions.

The public review period for the fee increase (https://parkplanning.nps.gov/document.cfm?documentID=83652) ends Dec. 22. At this point, no one knows what it will cost to visit certain parks next summer.

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Meanwhile, Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke's push to bring more free-market capitalism to public-land management may be just getting started. Last summer he told an RV industry group that he'd like to outsource more campgrounds to private operators, who almost always charge more than campgrounds run by public agencies. And an Oct. 25 leaked copy of the Interior Department's five-year strategic plan (http://www.hcn.org/articles/department-of-interior-interiors-return-to-the-robber-baron-years) revealed that Zinke also plans to "review" other fees on public lands, which could include the prices charged for camping, parking and backcountry permits.

As Benzar sees it, raising one fee opens the door for more fee hikes, and ultimately greater commercialization of public lands. With each turn of the screw, she says, "We lose more of our ownership stake and concede it to private companies there to make a profit."

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