

## Outside Magazine

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# Have 50 Years of Overcrowded Parks Taught Us Nothing?



**For decades, park leaders have predicted that swarms of tourists could ruin public lands. Is anyone heeding their advice?**

After World War II, Americans flush with cash and vacation time (then a new concept) started exploring national parks in droves. After 1945, the final year of the war, visitation skyrocketed. Yellowstone alone saw 189,000 people—more than double the year before. In the early 1960s, by the time the first baby boomers were getting driver’s licenses, Old Faithful’s audience [had grown tenfold](#).

These crowds pushed the parks to their limits. The infrastructure at nearly every park, starved of funding during the war, struggled to handle the tourists. As Sara Dant, a historian at Weber State University, writes in her book [Losing Eden](#), the National Park Service struggled to live up to its founding mission of conserving ecosystems while also opening them up for the enjoyment of all, a task that at times felt contradictory. “With ‘tourism’ as its prime directive,” she writes, “the newly minted Park Service struggled to reconcile protecting the sublime and providing pit toilets.” In 1953, conservationist and author [Bernard DeVoto wrote in \*Harper’s\*](#) that until Congress produced enough funding to manage them properly, parks should “be temporarily closed and sealed, held in trust for a

more enlightened future.”

The parks never closed. And the enlightened future never arrived. Overcrowding remains common at the most popular national parks, and the Park Service faces a maintenance backlog of nearly \$12 billion. In hearings before House and Senate committees earlier this month, Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke defended his idea to [raise entrance fees](#) by saying, “When you give discounted or free passes to elderly, fourth-graders, veterans, disabled, and you do it by the carload, there’s not a whole lot of people who actually pay at our front door. So, we’re looking at ways to make sure we have more revenue in the front door of our parks themselves.” (The reason for these hearings, paradoxically, was to justify President Donald Trump’s call for a [17 percent](#) cut in funding to the NPS.)

So, while Zinke bemoans parks being “loved to death,” we find ourselves asking a 50-year-old question: Will tourists kill national parks?

The answer—and the solution to the problem—might come from a little-known report published in 1967 by then Park Service Special Assistant Ronald E. Lee. At the time, Americans were around zipping the country after a decade-long highway, lodge, and visitor center construction binge known as [Mission 66](#). Lee saw this frenzied movement and studied how this explosion of tourism would alter America’s greatest landscapes. [In the report](#), he cited four trends that were profoundly shaping parks and continue to do so today: population growth, car travel, the growing popularity of outdoor recreation, and ecosystem preservation. All, Lee suspected, would cause park visitation to skyrocket. The Park Service, he cautioned, needed to prepare accordingly: “For only a little while longer can the Service meet the pressures of increased travel by additional development without unacceptable impairment of park values.”

In Lee’s estimation, that challenge would become increasingly difficult. His visitation predictions were a tad high—he thought 1.32 billion visitors would materialize by 2000, but the record high, set in 2016, was a billion shy of that. Those lofty expectations, however, allowed him to consider overcrowding in a long-term, pragmatic fashion.

To stem the “obvious objections to unregulated tourism,” Lee’s answer was better zoning. He wanted to designate certain areas of parks as car-free wilderness and plan others for various tiers of traffic. At the time, some were arguing for a hard stop on development to curtail traffic; fewer roads, lodges, and interpretive centers, they reasoned, would hold tourism at sustainable levels. But Lee wrote that this stance “was like arguing the cock crowing causes the sun to rise.” Tourists were inevitable, and Lee wanted to manage them through designated use areas, permits, and public transit.

He didn’t think fee hikes, like the ones recently passed by Zinke, would work. (And, indeed, most Republicans and Democrats dislike the idea.) Lee wrote that raising entrance fees “would be discriminatory, favoring affluent visitors in contrast to those less economically fortunate. Such a public policy would be intolerable in the United States.”

Ultimately, though, the goals in 1967 and 2018 are different. Lee wanted to reduce crowds. Zinke wants to monetize them to pay for better infrastructure.

The biggest difference between then and now is money. When Lee penned his report, Congress had just finished spending more than \$900 million on Mission 66—the equivalent of more than \$7 billion today. Nowhere in his report does Lee mention the need for greater funding; in 1967, when the environmental movement was in full swing and legislators on both sides of the aisle fought for preservation, one could safely assume Congress would foot the bill for our treasured parks. Lee probably focused on planning because he didn’t need to mention money.

Today, there’s a very different picture. Even legislators who are critical of Zinke often fail to pony up more money. Aside from [a few bumps](#) in last week’s spending bill, the most sincere take on funding

NPS is Zinke's idea to tie park maintenance to energy extraction profits in a sort of [Faustian bargain](#).

It's Congress' tight purse strings that have some believing the hordes of visitors need to pay up. "It does not look like Congress is going to allocate additional dollars for managing our public lands," says Holly Fretwell, a fellow with the [Property and Environment Research Center](#), a free-market think tank. "That's nothing new. It doesn't matter what administration is in there—getting more dollars for public land management is not a high priority." Fretwell and her colleagues have advanced numerous ideas that would pay for parks independent of congressional funding, from [national park franchises](#) to higher fees, as Zinke has suggested.

Funding parks independent of Congress presents another ethical quandary, one Lee addressed in 1967. "The offensive multiplication of hot dog stands, tourist traps of all kinds, fake museums, and other money-making enterprises near or in areas of serious importance become in some cases a public disgrace," he wrote. Lee felt national parks were no place for commercialization.

Yet Interior Department leaders have tried just that. Jonathan Jarvis, the park service director under Barack Obama, opened up the ability for corporations to [plaster their brands](#) on projects they sponsor in national parks, a policy that was quietly enacted in January 2017. Zinke has angered many with plans to fund national parks via visitor fees and oil and gas development. (Renewable energy would also contribute, but the vast majority of energy development on federal land is of a carbon-heavy nature.) But perhaps critics' anger is misdirected. As DeVoto wrote in his 1953 *Harper's* article that suggested closing the parks, the true fix lies in the hands of voters: "Build a fire under your Congressman."