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The price of popularity

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Belgium residents Nicky Feys and Gerrie De Waard were touring Colorado earlier this month when they made a point to stop in Glenwood Canyon to make the hike up to Hanging Lake.

They'd read about the scenic attraction through a blog and a Lonely Planet travel guide recommendation, and weren't disappointed. They were struck by the steep canyon walls heading up to the emerald-green lake. And the Spouting Rock falls located a short hike beyond the lake came as a pleasant surprise, not mentioned in anything they'd read beforehand or heard from their Airbnb host.

De Waard compared Hanging Lake favorably to Estes Park, their previous Colorado stop.

"This is more the image I had of Colorado," he said.

The duo's image of Hanging Lake might have been quite different had they come, say, last summer, rather than on an early spring day with occasional light flurries, icy spots and even small snow-slide areas covering parts of the 1.2-mile trail climbing about 1,000 feet up to the lake.

During their visit, just a dozen or so cars were in the trail head parking lot right off Interstate 70, whereas during the summer the lot regularly fills, turning away hikers on days when sometimes more than 1,200 people take to the trail.

More than 186,000 people visited Hanging Lake last year, compared to 78,000 in 2012. The growing visitation has resulted in trail widening and vegetation damage, and harm to the fragile ecosystem at the lake, where visitors are prohibited from doing things like swimming but the rules aren't always heeded.

All that is expected to change Wednesday, when the U.S. Forest Service, working in cooperation with the city of Glenwood Springs and a contractor, H2O Ventures, begins requiring people to have a permit to visit Hanging Lake, and to take a shuttle there from Glenwood Springs from May through October. (Reservations can be made at www.visitglenwood.com/hanging lake or by calling 970-384-6309.)

People can take the bike path to the trail head but still must get a permit and pay the fee. They can drive to the trail head during the offseason, but an off-season permit costing \$10 still will be required.

The program also limits the number of permits issued per day to 615, putting an end to the intense single-day visitation levels.

Feys and De Waard had mixed feelings about the Forest Service's plans. De Waard said it would be a shame to see the trail and lake overcrowded.

Said Feys, "Yeah, I think a reservation system is good, but \$12 is a lot, it's a short hike."

De Waard said if the fee "is only for the money," it's a lot.

If it prevents too many people from coming, and maybe littering, the evidence of which they noticed on their recent visit, "then I can understand it. I would pay \$12," he said.

The Forest Service says the revenue cost covers parking at the Hanging Lake Welcome Center where the shuttles are based in Glenwood Springs, the online reservation system, shuttle service, ranger presence, and long-term stewardship of the Hanging Lake area.

Feys said she likes when such arrangements include free visitation during the off-season, if people want to be able to arrange their schedules to see an attraction for free.

She added, "We were glad we had the free version. America is already expensive enough."

Paying to play

National parks and monuments aside, paying for access to public lands tends to be the exception more than the norm, but it's becoming a growing reality in certain circumstances, such as when increasing visitation puts pressure on land managers to address the impacts.

Last year, the Forest Service implemented a year-round permit requirement for camping at the Conundrum Hot Springs outside Aspen. Between the 8.5-mile hike in, with a 2,500-foot elevation gain, and the payoff of warm waters at treeline that awaits hikers, most visitors choose to camp there rather than make it a long day hike. The result before the permit requirement was too many campers, and problems such as unburied human feces, trampled vegetation from an excess of tents, trash left for forest personnel to have to pack out, and trees being stripped to feed illegal campfires.

Katy Nelson, wilderness and trails specialist for the Aspen- Sopris Ranger District of the White River National Forest, is happy with how the first season of the permit requirement went. She said the Forest Service got positive feedback from people on the trail — especially locals who used to avoid that area for a long time due to all the crowding, but now thought it looked better and offered a better experience.

"In our minds that was a good success," she said.

She said the whole point was to improve conditions in the Conundrum Creek valley.

"There was quite a bit of resource damage out there," she said.

The new permit system allows camping at 20 sites, with the \$6 permit fee covering the use of a site by one or more people, for one or multiple nights.

From the permit system's debut about a year ago through Sept. 30, 1,567 permits were issued, with an average of just under three people making use of each permit.

The Conundrum area represented the most urgent one the Forest Service has been dealing with in the Aspen area from an overuse perspective.

Said Nelson, "We're in the process of planning the next permits for the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness. There are other areas in addition to Conundrum that are sort of in need of that additional love, if you will."

Hot spots the agency has in mind for expanding the permit system include the Snowmass Lake and Capitol Lake areas. Both serve as popular base camp locations for people looking to climb nearby 14,000-foot peaks. Snowmass Lake also is part of the popular Four-Pass Loop 28-mile hike, which encircles the Maroon Bells Fourteeners. The Forest Service also is considering overnight permit requirements on the rest of that loop.

Additional permit requirements might be implemented next spring at the earliest.

"Just like Conundrum, we take the planning aspect pretty seriously because we want to do right by the land and make sure visitors have a good experience," Nelson said.

'Losing the war'

Requirements such as those being imposed at Hanging Lake and Conundrum Hot Springs are viewed with chagrin by Kitty Bazar, president of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition, based in Durango.

"We're losing the war," she said. "We still fight battles now and then, but I think the war for not having to buy a pass to go outdoors – sadly, tragically, I think that has been lost. No one in Congress is willing to step up and make that case anymore."

She said the loosely knit group formed in 2001 to oppose an effort to make the road to Yankee Boy Basin in Ouray County a toll road.

"It's not one now, thanks to us," she said.

She said the Forest Service charged a fee for a while but eventually dropped it because of the opposition to it.

She said the coalition has followed the Hanging Lake situation but hasn't gotten involved in it.

"If local people were getting upset about it and opposing it in any kind of organized fashion, we'd be happy to support that (effort). As far as I can tell people are just getting out their wallets and paying," Bazar said.

She said she's fine with public lands agencies implementing permit systems to control usage numbers, but not with charging for it.

"They're using the permits as moneymakers, and using money as a way to reduce visitation. I think it's the wrong way," said Bazar.

Beyond camping fees, Bazar said some fees are being charged merely to hike in places such as the wilderness at the Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area.

Bazar thinks the general lack of opposition to fees today results from a fee demonstration program Congress decided in 1996 to let federal agencies implement.

"Since then a whole generation has grown up thinking that you need to buy a pass to go outdoors, and I think that's tragic, but people seem to have gotten used to it," she said.

The fee demo program, intended to let agencies reinvest fee revenues into visitor facilities and services, lasted nearly a decade before being succeeded by the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act.

Part of Bazar's concern is the commonplace use by agencies of www.recreation.gov, operated under a contract by management consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton, as a site for people to make reservations.

"They're not in it to just break even. They're making money," she said of the company.

She'd prefer to see agencies handle reservations in-house, at no cost to the public, as part of what she considers their responsibility to protect lands and serve the public, although she knows those agencies talk already about having inadequate budgets.

Agencies respond

The Forest Service uses recreation.gov as the means for the public to obtain Conundrum overnight permits. Nelson said originally the permits cost \$10, but the amount was reduced following a change in the contractor running recreation.gov.

Nelson said that before the Forest Service began requiring the Conundrum permits, it looked into how they're handled elsewhere, and learned that to issue permits in-house required considerable resources.

She said the Forest Service decided it made more sense to have its personnel out in the field providing services to the public, such as trash removal and maintenance, wilderness ranger patrols, and restoration and rehabilitation projects.

"We really wanted to make the best use of our limited resources and summer crews," she said.

Edd Franz, manager of the Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area, which is administered by the Bureau of Land Management, said fees for the nearly 18,000 acres encompassing the wilderness area in the inner canyon of the gorge are collected via envelopes supplied at self-pay stations.

The day-use fee is \$3 for everyone 16 or over, or \$15 for an annual day-use pass. The overnight fee is \$5 a day, meaning a minimum of \$10 to cover a night and two days, and a maximum of \$15 because there's a two-night limit, Franz said.

Use levels didn't drive the decision to require a permit.

"The difficulty of accessing the wilderness limits the use," he said.

Much of the overnight use involves hikers or boaters accessing the Gunnison River for its world-class fishing. Franz said planning for the fees started back in 1997, and they've been in place for quite a few years now.

The revenue goes back to managing the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness. It covers things such as staffing river put-ins to help out the public, having rangers on the river to monitor campsites, installing and maintaining trail head informational kiosks, monitoring commercial permittees, pumping toilets, and collecting and processing the fees themselves.

Franz said he understands that some people are philosophically opposed to such fees.

But he added, "It's not a huge fee. It's certainly not the biggest portion of what it costs you to get your act together and go fishing in the gorge, that's for sure."

"... Through my observation I don't think our fees are preventing a whole lot of people from going into the Gunnison Gorge."

Closer to Grand Junction, the BLM began requiring permits years ago for camping on the Ruby-Horsethief section of the Colorado River to better manage camping there. It also is moving to limit camping to developed campgrounds in the Rabbit Valley area near the Utah border, while possibly starting to charge for camping there as well, to deal with impacts including those from dispersed camping that occurs outside developed areas.

Public-driven

In some cases, fee-based permit systems reflect agencies responding to public demand.

"I think the public really wanted us to do something up there," Nelson said of the Conundrum Hot Springs situation.

"We really put a lot of investment in working with the public to come up with a good plan how to become better stewards up there."

Aaron Mayville, district ranger for the Forest Service's Eagle-Holy Cross Ranger District, which manages the Hanging Lake area, said more than 95 percent of the responses the Forest Service has gotten to the new permit system there have been positive.

"They're like, yeah, we want these places to remain beautiful, and I'll pay a fee to help keep these places around."

More than 8,000 Hanging Lake permits have been issued so far under the new system, including from

people across the United States and in other countries, but the majority have gone to Front Range residents. Weekends and holidays are proving to be the most sought-after days for permits, as would be expected, but Mayville said the system also is helping in spreading out usage, such as on weekdays, in keeping with the goal of the management plan for Hanging Lake.

That management plan is adaptive, leaving it open to being tweaked over time as merited. Mayville said he's happy with the \$12 fee reached under the contract between the city of Glenwood Springs and H2O Ventures. He said it's consistent with the \$10-\$15 range people mostly indicated support for paying during earlier surveys of the planning process.

"What that 12 bucks is getting you, I think, is just a much better visitor experience," he said.

David Hamilton, executive director of Roaring Fork Outdoor Volunteers, which does trail work at Hanging Lake, applauded the Forest Service for putting the daily limit on Hanging Lake visitation.

"Usage had gotten so great over the last few years that the site couldn't really handle it," he said.

"It is a big change for people. Obviously there's always a negative reaction when there's a charge to use public lands, but it's well worth it in my opinion" at Hanging Lake, he said.

Said Hamilton, "Hanging Lake is such a special place. That's why people want to go there. We want to make sure when they go, they have a good experience and it doesn't look run-down."

Mayville said the bigger picture is that there are places in Colorado and across the West that are just getting too much use.

"If we don't go toward managing (the problem) with these kinds of tools, they're going to be gone," he said.

Mayville's ranger district is in the process of data-gathering to determine if there are places in its jurisdiction that might merit the kind of approach being pursued in the Aspen area at places like Conundrum Hot Springs.

"We really do rely on data and science to make these decisions — not just kind of willy-nilly throwing permits out there," he said.