The Economist: Why are Americans shunning the Great Outdoors?

12:00 AM CDT on Sunday, July 27, 2008

This essay was adapted from a longer piece in The Economist. The magazine does not publish the names of articles' authors.

On July Fourth, normally the busiest public holiday of the year, tourists were put off by high gas prices and wildfires raging across California. On Memorial Day, it was cold. In 1999, there was a grisly murder. In 1997, the Merced River flooded, inundating a hotel and wiping out hundreds of campsites.

There are always excuses for the absence of people in Yosemite National Park.

The number of visitors to California's most spectacular valley has dropped for nine out of the past 13 years and seems to be heading down again this year. Even in 2007 – a relatively busy year – attendance was 11 percent below the mid-1990s peak. In America as a whole, the number of visitors to national parks and historic sites peaked in 1987.

Visitors are staying for less time and camping less often, especially in the wilderness. And rangers are hearing less American-accented English. Were it not for British and German tourists enjoying the weak dollar, the parks would be desolate.

Falling enthusiasm for what writer Wallace Stegner called America's "best idea" is especially striking in such a fast-growing part of the country. Since 1994, California has swollen from 31.5 million to more than 38 million.

The speediest growth is inland, close to parks like Joshua Tree, Sequoia and Yosemite. And the same pattern holds farther east. Larry Swanson of the Center for the Rocky Mountain West notes a strong correlation between population increase and proximity to national parks and forests. Americans plainly think it is a good idea to live near national parks, but they are not so keen on visiting them.

Americans are retreating from other outdoor activities, too.

Despite an explosion in the deer population, the number of hunters fell from 19.1 million to 12.5 million between 1975 and 2006. Fishing has declined more steeply, particularly among the young.

This worries everybody from urban liberals (who fret about the health of a generation growing up indoors) to rural conservatives (who fear that public lands will be closed to hunters if not enough turn up).

By contrast, it is not clear to everyone in the National Park Service that the lack of visitors is a problem, admits Dean Reeder, its tourism director. Some rangers, indeed, seem to view visitors as an impediment to the smooth running of the parks.

Wiser heads know this is folly. As Americans lose interest in the national parks, they will become less willing to pay for them through taxes.

Like many things that go wrong in America, the drift away from nature is commonly blamed on television, video games and the Internet. This is implausible. The number of park visitors rose steeply between the 1950s and the mid-1980s, even as the first two electronic lures spread.

A more credible explanation is competition.

Attendance at national parks was not the only thing that peaked between the late 1980s and the early 1990s. In 1991,
the U.S. homicide rate reached 9.8 per 100,000 people. Many cities were known for lawlessness; not surprisingly, vacationers passed them up for greener spots.

Then, miraculously, the murder rate began to slide, falling to just 5.5 per 100,000 in 2000. Led by New York, cities spruced themselves up and began to attract more tourists.

Fred Kent of the Project for Public Spaces, a consultancy, reckons Americans have rediscovered the pleasures of densely populated, exciting places. Not all of these are cities, although they tend to look like them.

In 1994, the year Yosemite's crowds were at their thickest, MGM announced plans to build a casino on the Las Vegas Strip that resembled New York. By the time it was finished, three years later, work had begun on Paris and Venice. Shopping malls began to transform themselves from covered boxes into ersatz downtowns open to the elements.

In California, the Merced River flood of 1997 almost halved the number of campsites in Yosemite Valley. Today there are just 464, accommodating 2,700 people at most. The park wants to build more, as part of a modest package of improvements to the park's infrastructure and one of its hotels.

So far, conservationists have managed to block the renovations, on the ground that they fail to address threats to the valley's ecology. And they have opened a broader front in the battle against development.

Earlier this year a federal court ruled that the National Park Service must limit human use of Yosemite Valley. That may mean a daily cap on visitors. If the park imposes one, the example is likely to spread across America. This will create pressure to solve environmental problems by turning more people away.

This is a shame, and self-defeating. America's environmental movement emerged in the 19th century to push for national parks. In the 20th century it sold them to the public through photographs and writing. It now seems bent on driving people away.

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