Private Concessionaire: We Aren’t Trying to Take Your Land

By Guest Writer, 3-12-10

Editor’s Note: Two weeks ago I posted a hard-hitting column about recreation fees leading to privatization of our public lands and how the Forest Service facilitates the process by turning over management of so many campgrounds and other recreation areas to private concessionaires. After this commentary went online, I was contacted by Warren Meyer, who runs one of the major companies involved in private management of public recreation. He made some good points, and I asked him to write this guest commentary so you can see the other side of this issue.--Bill Schneider

I know there has been a lot of concern about the role of private recreation businesses on public lands, and the relation this might have to the expansion of recreation fees. As the head of one of the larger Forest Service campground concession companies, I wanted to address some of these issues.

When discussing the word “privatization” in the context of recreation, it’s important to understand we are talking about a partnership, not a replacement. We are not trying to take the land away from the public. We aren’t trying to pave the wilderness. We aren’t trying to build condos in front of Old Faithful. Public agencies still must establish the mission and character of their lands, and set the standards for its preservation and use.

Our company’s approach is to accept whatever recreation or preservation mission the public owner of a park sets, and then to manage the park to that mission. What we bring to the table is that we can often operate a park and keep it open less expensively than can
the government. Typically, we operate with the fees paid at the gate, without big fee hikes and without the need for subsidies from taxes.

And this is the heart of the problem—that recreation costs money. Even a small roadside picnic area can require thousands of dollars a year to clean the bathrooms, haul the trash, and maintain the area to keep it safe. For decades, recreation costs in the Forest Service were funded by timber sales, but these have largely disappeared and Congress has not provided a funding source to replace them. Forest Service recreation budgets have, for years, been insufficient to cover recreation operations as well as necessary major maintenance and refurbishment of facilities.

The Forest Service, looking to stretch its meager recreation budget as far as possible, has turned to private companies to run many of its campgrounds and developed day use facilities. This partnership has largely worked well, with the Forest Service benefiting from the efficiency and customer service focus of private management while retaining tight control over operating standards (concessionaires can’t change a fee, or modify operating hours, or alter any number of other aspects of a park’s operations without the Forest Service’s written approval).

Private concessionaires play a critical role in keeping fees reasonable. Without private concessions, the Forest Service would be forced to raise fees substantially or to close hundreds of recreation areas, a story we unfortunately see being played out in many state parks organizations. For an illustration of this, we can look to my home state of Arizona, where the state parks organization is closing some campgrounds and day use areas and doubling entry fees in many of the others. Similarly, the proliferation of new use and access fees on Forest Service lands has nothing to do with private companies that actually serve to keep fees reasonable. The problem is not privatization; the problem is appropriations, or the lack thereof.

I know that the recent Forest Service proposal to reduce Golden Age discounts has been blamed on demands made by private concessionaires. In fact, the new proposal does little if anything to benefit our company.

The Forest Service presented their current fee discount proposal to concessionaires as a trade. The Forest Service wanted concessionaires to provide free or discounted use for a number of newly created passes, which, by the enabling legislation, did not clearly apply at concession-run facilities. In turn, the senior camping discount would be reduced to offset the cost of accepting these new passes. A further benefit was that camping fees to younger campers that had been rising in order to subsidize the senior discounts could be kept in check.

In our official comments, I agreed that this was financially fair for our company—that one part roughly balanced the other and that our company didn’t gain or lose financially—but that the plan did not address some of the real inequities in the fee pass program. The solution to maintaining current programs like the senior camping discount lies with the appropriations process—without new funding, any new discount or pass can only be
provided at the cost of reducing an existing program or increasing fees to other visitors, and this is true irrespective of whether the Forest Service or a private concessionaire operates the parks.

My sense is that the use of “privatization” for what we do is perhaps a poor choice of words, as I think many people associate the word with a total takeover of public lands by private companies, to do with as they please. This is certainly not our goal. We want the public to retain ownership of its public lands, and to have control, through its agencies, of how these lands are used. Within this context, however, in our times of trillion dollar government budget deficits, private recreation management is a critical part of the solution to keeping public recreation sites open.

Footnote: Warren Meyer is President of Recreation Resource Management. He welcomes readers to contact him with questions of concerns either by email (Warren@camprrm.com) or by going to his blog, parkprivatization.com.