Trump’s proposed fee hike will create class system at national parks

By Audrey Peterman, opinion contributor — 11/13/17 06:40 AM EST
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As an immigrant from Jamaica, I learned the history of America in our National Park System, standing in the places where events happened that made us who we are today. Climbing up into the caves at Bandelier National Monument near Albuquerque, N.M., where Anasazi Indians lived from 11,000 years ago, soot from their fires still prominent on the ceiling makes me realize where we started.

Standing in the spot where Crispus Attucks and four other men were shot dead in the opening salvo of the Revolutionary War at Boston African American National Historic Site in Massachusetts makes me proud as a black person for our role in the foundation of our country. Touring Belmont-Paul Women’s Equality National Monument on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., I marvel at the fearless activism of these women who made it possible for American women to finally be able to vote.

These experiences in our National Park System are free to the American population and tourists. Ironically, the parks that charge fees are those considered the “Crown Jewels” of the system — including the spectacular landscapes of Acadia, the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone and Yosemite National Parks.

It was at Acadia National Park that my passion was first inflamed in 1995, where I became inspired to explore and expose these hidden gems to the American public. The four other parks I listed are among 17 that the administration has targeted to make more exclusive.

By proposing to double — even triple — entrance fees at Denali in Alaska; Rocky Mountain in Colorado; Bryce Canyon, Zion, Arches and Canyonlands national parks in Utah; Mount Rainier and Olympic national parks in Washington, and Shenandoah in Virginia, the Trump administration will make it harder for modest-income families to visit these parks at “peak season,” meaning around summer, when people have vacation time to visit, as well as comfortable weather.

I’ve had the luxury of visiting all these parks without having to worry if I could afford to go at the optimum time. The national parks are supposed to be the most egalitarian spaces in our country, veritably the public square.

Tiered entrance fees could create a class system in our national parks. The proposed fee hikes from approximately $30 to approximately $70 per vehicle and doubling the price for walk-ins could actively discourage the less affluent from visiting at all.

Consistently, surveys have shown that nonwhite communities feel they may be unwelcome in our national parks. I’ve seen progress in recent years, pushed by leaders such as the Next100 Coalition comprising more than 50 founders of environmental and civil rights organizations. The Park Service's Centennial “Find Your Park” campaign; the “Every Kid in a Park” initiative and grass-roots
organizations across the country have addressed the disparity by actively introducing people to the parks and equipping them to care for and manage our national treasures.

The park system was established to conserve our natural, cultural and historic treasures for “the enjoyment, education and inspiration of this and future generations.” So the need to keep them completely egalitarian and inclusive should be enough reason not to separate visitors by price.

But the most vital reason of all is that the future of the park system completely depends upon the support of the American electorate, which is increasingly racially diverse. As more nonwhite representatives are elected to Congress, the chance of them voting to fund national parks when faced with pressing needs such as health care and education becomes increasingly slim.

Our national parks keep the best acreage of American real estate off limits to exploitation and development. For the places described by documentarian Ken Burns as “America’s Best Idea” to survive and thrive, more Americans need to become bonded to them — not fewer.

The parks have endured and expanded since President Lincoln took time during the Civil War to protect the Mariposa Grove and Yosemite Valley in 1864, and President Ulysses Grant protected Yellowstone as a “pleasuring ground for the people” in 1872. The quality of leadership today that proposes to take land out of the system instead of adding it — opting to reduce Bears Ears National Monument in Utah and 26 others, for example — raising fees to “fund” the parks while cutting the parks’ budgets, points to a retrenchment away from our conservation values. Americans must stand up and let the administration know that our national parks are beyond price.

Audrey Peterman is a member of the Next 100 Coalition, a group of 50+ organizations committed to the establishment of a just and inclusive system of our nation’s parks and public lands.