National parks belong to Americans. They should remain accessible to all.

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My siblings and I tucked my daughter’s stroller behind a boulder off the carriage road and climbed up a granite ridge for one of Acadia National Park’s famous sunrises. At 4 a.m., Eagle Lake was incredibly still in the gray light. The edge of the water blurred into the rocks. A loon called below us.

It was a couple days after the 2016 summer solstice, and from our trail we watched a line of headlights zigzag up the road to Cadillac. We had Conners Nubble completely to ourselves.

I unpacked my 9-month-old from her baby carrier while my brother and sister coaxed my dog to the summit in the predawn chill. Our seats were an open hunk of granite, and the show was the wild landscape unfolding below us as we watched the first light hit the East Coast.

In 2016, a record 3.3 million people visited Acadia for magical experiences like my family’s. More than 330 million recreation visits were recorded across the National Park System — the third consecutive year of record-breaking visits in Acadia and nationally.

In October, the National Park Service proposed a targeted fee increase at the 17 most popular parks. Under the proposal, during peak season, visiting Acadia, the Grand Canyon and Yellowstone would cost $70 per vehicle, a jump of almost $50. The fee per person would, at minimum, double.

The park service presents this plan as a means to increase revenue to address a backlog of deferred maintenance. Yet, at the same time the fee hikes are being proposed, the agency faces deep funding cuts.

The Trump administration’s proposed budget reduces the park service’s budget by 13 percent, the largest cut to the agency since World War II. Under this budget, national parks would lose $400 million in fiscal year 2018, more than the combined total of entrance fees collected in 2016 at Acadia, Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon.

Fee hikes are not the answer. If implemented, these high entrance fees would reduce access to public lands and be especially devastating for 45 million Americans living below the poverty line.

National parks belong to all Americans, regardless of income level. They provide vast opportunities for recreation, education, conservation and research. And they should remain accessible to all.

Increased fees move our national parks toward a pay-to-play model, diminishing our country’s long tradition of accessible public lands, and contributing to disparities in access to our most popular parks.

The park service is soliciting public comments on the proposed fee increase. When the Department of the Interior invited public comments on 27 national monuments proposed for review last summer, it received more than 2.8 million responses. Two analyses concluded the overwhelming majority of the comments supported the monuments.
Now we have another opportunity to support public lands through public comments.

I wrote a public comment along with my conservation research colleagues. As conservation researchers, we strongly believe the ability to afford a national park entrance fee should not be among the barriers facing future conservation biologists.

I first visited Acadia with my grandparents when I was 10. I came back as a teenager to romp in the snow, roast marshmallows over campfires and explore the wooded trails. These experiences inspired me to pursue a Ph.D. in ecology and conservation. Last spring, I defended my dissertation on the plants of Acadia.

I would not be the scientist that I am today without the close encounters with nature I’ve had in Acadia. Its sunrises, rose-pink granite and the snowy owls that sometimes haunt its mountains in early spring are a fundamental part of who I am.

My work as a scientist is motivated by a mission similar to that of the park service: to protect the natural and cultural heritage of these wild places for current and future generations. That is why I shared my thoughts on the proposed fee increase on the National Park Service’s website.

Comments are being accepted through Dec. 22, and I hope you’ll join me in standing up for the parks you love.

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