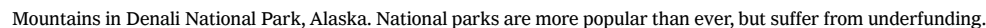


The New York Times

Opinion

Our National Parks Are in Trouble

Blame overcrowding, invasive species, climate change and money woes.

Mountains in Denali National Park, Alaska. National parks are more popular than ever, but suffer from underfunding.**By Jon Waterman**

Mr. Waterman is a former park ranger and the author of National Geographic's "Atlas of the National Parks."

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CARBONDALE, Colo. — Deep inside Alaska's six-million-acre Denali National Park and Preserve, I could see miles of space beneath my feet as I stood on the summit of the tallest mountain in North America. The startling view from the 20,310-foot Denali of rugged wilderness spreading out in all directions, plus the challenge of climbing it, were just two of the many wonders and adventures that I've experienced in America's national parks.

I recently finished writing a book for National Geographic, "Atlas of the National Parks," based on extensive research, a lifetime of exploring the parks and several years in the 1980s working as a ranger in two of them, Denali and Rocky Mountain in Colorado.

I meant the book as a celebration of the 103-year-old national park system, and it is. But what I also discovered was an operation in deep trouble, with some parks degraded by ruinous overcrowding; invasions of nonnative plants and animals that are upending delicate ecological balances; and a warming climate that is melting glaciers and withering away the rare yuccas that give their name to Joshua Tree National Park.

Adding to these woes, the system is badly underfunded and suffering from neglect. This is not a new problem, but it is getting worse, with deferred maintenance that mostly predates the Trump administration now topping \$11 billion. But President Trump

isn't helping. He wants to cut the National Park Service's budget by \$481 million next year and is reportedly considering privatizing campgrounds and commercializing the parks in ways that contradict the agency's goal of harmonizing with nature.

We need to arrest this decline and make the park system the national priority it should be. We need to assess the health of these magnificent parks and ask some hard questions about their capacity to withstand the millions of visitors who arrive every year. In 2016, the centennial of the Park Service's creation, 330 million were recorded at the 419 parks, recreation areas, monuments, seashores and battlefields and other places that make up the system. The agency's mandate of wide-open access *and* preservation has become a paradox that we need to sort out.

As Dan Wenk, the former superintendent of Yellowstone National Park, put it, "The least-studied mammal in Yellowstone is the most abundant: humans." Unfortunately, a lack of leadership has prevented the Interior Department, which oversees the Park Service, from determining at what point crowds interfere with the preservation of each park.

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The challenge is a tough one. Mr. Wenk told a group of businessmen in 2016 that he could foresee a peak-season cap on visitors to Yellowstone. The new superintendent has said he has no plans to limit access to the park.

Our parks were intended as havens from the stresses of the modern world and places where the nation's natural and historic legacies would be preserved. But the world continues to close in on them. In May, the National Parks Conservation Association said that 96 percent of the parks were compromised by "significant" air pollution problems, with most having unhealthy air for portions of the year.

Yellowstone has 1,386 native plant species and 225 nonnative ones. And this is only a fraction of the more than 6,500 species of disruptive invasive animals and plants found proliferating on some of the 85 million acres administered by the Park Service.

Even high up on frigid Denali, I saw troubling changes. Three years ago, we skied past melt ponds on the Kahiltna Glacier at an elevation of 8,000 feet; before that, I had never seen water there in my more than 40 years of climbing the mountain. Since 2004, the glacier has consistently thinned. In Washington's North Cascades National Park, as much as 56 percent of the ice has disappeared over the last century. Montana's Glacier National Park is on the way to having no glaciers.

And when climbing Denali in 2016, I had to wait my turn behind dozens of other climbers to clip into fixed ropes safeguarding our passage. That had never happened on my previous Denali climbs, but traffic on the mountain and in the park has nearly doubled since I was a ranger there in the early 1980s. Over a thousand climbers now attempt Denali each summer. Like the three most popular national parks in the Lower 48 — Great Smoky Mountains, Grand Canyon and Rocky Mountain — Denali National Park's renowned mountain, at least on its easiest route, has become crowded. Fortunately, elsewhere in that enormous, remote place there is still plenty of room for visitors.

This is not true at some other parks. At Zion National Park, which has more visitors per acre than any other national park, I had to wait my turn in a long line to finish the classic hike up to Angels Landing. At Arches National Park, I watched as tourists blithely walked off trail across the desert, destroying fragile cryptobiotic soils. In Grand Canyon, I saw Ancestral Puebloan petroglyphs on sandstone walls defaced by graffiti artists. And in Rocky Mountain, I paddled my pack raft past thousands of acres of reddened pine-needle trees killed by the invasive pine beetle that is ravaging many Western national parks.



A crowd at Yellowstone National Park waiting to photograph the eruption of Old Faithful, the park's famous geyser. Ann Hermes/The Christian Science Monitor, via Getty Images

Last winter I visited the 1.5-million-acre Everglades National Park, and I delighted in identifying dozens of different native wading bird species, from roseate spoonbills to storks. But I also saw a nine-foot-long Burmese python wrapped around the axle of a neighboring camper's truck. Numbering in the thousands but mostly invisible because of their camouflage-patterned skin, this invasive predator from Southeast Asia, which can grow more than 20 feet long and weigh up to 200 pounds, is slowly squeezing out some species of the park, including small deer and an occasional alligator. Bounty hunters are trying to make a dent in the population. The python is one of more than 100 animal and plant invasive species pushing out natives in the park.

I came away distressed by my visit. The park is often overrun with motorboats tearing up sea grass; it suffers from a lack of clean freshwater from the north because of human diversions, while ocean storm surges in the south contaminate the freshwater marshes with salt water. (To his credit, President Trump signaled support in May for \$200 million for federal work on watershed restoration in the Everglades.)

Over the decades, this park has accumulated a huge backlog of maintenance problems that affect everyday tourism. And tourists have gotten wind of this decline: Visits dropped to less than 600,000 last year after averaging about a million annually over the previous six years. Does Everglades National Park offer a portent for other parks?

Perhaps it's no surprise that my most instructive visit was to the Interior Department's Washington headquarters in 2018. The spacious hallways of the five-acre, stone-quarried edifice, where the Park Service's bison motif was omnipresent, were strangely empty. Some 1,500 employees during the Trump administration, including many scientists, had been dismissed or reprimanded. So the three longtime Park Service officials I was there to meet with about my book were clearly demoralized.

One of them spoke to my fears when she told me that they couldn't recommend anyone there to write an environment-focused foreword for the book, even though the Park Service had collaborated on it with my publisher. Not long after my visit, Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke would resign under pressure as he faced investigations into his business dealings and policy decisions. He was replaced by David Bernhardt, a former oil and gas lobbyist.

At the president's bidding Mr. Zinke had shrunk two national monuments in Utah, Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante, by 85 percent and about 50 percent, which will open the way for the newly unprotected land to be exploited by mining and fossil fuel companies. Despite his departure, these pro-development park policies remain unchanged.

Amid this lack of respect for our protected public lands, it will take a dedicated course change to stop the impending tragedy facing our park commons. But as a lifelong visitor and former ranger, I know it's not too late for a rescue.

Congress must provide more money to turn around the deferred maintenance and run the park's day-to-day operations. We need to strengthen essential environmental laws like the Clean Water and Clear Air Acts. We must preserve these places, not open them to mining, grazing and timber cutting. And we need to address the international urgency of reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Otherwise, the national parks that define us as a country and are visited by hundreds of millions each year will be beyond saving.

Jon Waterman is a writer, photographer and the author, most recently, of National Geographic's "Atlas of the National Parks."

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