

STATEMENT OF MICHAEL T. REYNOLDS, REGIONAL DIRECTOR FOR INTERIOR REGIONS 6, 7 & 8, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SENATE ENERGY & NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, REGARDING THE IMPACTS OF OVERCROWDING IN OUR NATIONAL PARKS ON PARK RESOURCES AND VISITOR EXPERIENCES, AND TO CONSIDER STRATEGIC APPROACHES TO VISITOR USE MANAGEMENT.

July 28, 2021

Chairman King, Ranking Member Daines, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the topic of the impacts of overcrowding in our national parks on park resources and visitor experiences; and to consider strategic approaches to visitor use management.

This past year has reminded us how important national parks and public lands are to our overall wellbeing. Throughout the country, national parks and all public lands have provided close-to-home and destination-based opportunities for people to spend much needed time outdoors for their physical and psychological health. National parks are also places for people to connect with the inspirational wonders of nature and the stories that bond us to the meaningful places of this nation. It is no wonder that we have seen steady increases in visitation at many national parks and at all public lands across the country.

The National Park Service wants every visitor to have a great park experience. We seek ways to provide a range of opportunities that support more diverse, equitable, accessible, and inclusive experiences that are compatible with the protection of the resources. It is exciting to see many new visitors exploring parks, with some camping or hiking for their very first time. Ensuring visitors have enjoyable experiences, however, is becoming increasingly challenging in our most popular parks.

Park Congestion and Overcrowding

There are 423 parks in the National Park System encompassing over 85 million acres across our nation, but visitation trends among the individual parks greatly vary. In 2020, overall visitation dropped by 90 million recreation visits, roughly 27.6%, to a 40-year low due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, one-third of the parks had at least one month of record visitation as people sought the physical and mental benefits of being outdoors.

Along with overall visitation numbers, changes are also occurring in visitation patterns. For example, many parks that used to experience a distinctive and quieter off-season no longer have one; their visitation numbers have largely remained steady or fluctuate only slightly in what used to be the shoulder season. Another example is the growing demand for campground reservations, which were up 73% across the system going into Memorial Day compared with 2019.

This year, based on the preliminary data we have available, overall visitation is increasing throughout most of the system. Similar to last year, it appears that half of all recreation visits are occurring at only the top 23 most-visited parks, with significant congestion conditions concentrated in the most popular 12 to 15 destination parks. Crowding conditions tend to happen at hotspots and where entries and exits are limited. Crowding can also be felt at the most popular scenic viewpoints that are within one-quarter mile of a parking lot.

Addressing Park Congestion at Individual Parks

The National Park Service is employing a range of strategies that are park-specific to provide a welcoming and inclusive environment while ensuring the protection of nationally significant resources. In addition to using pilot projects and flexible planning tools to test ideas, we are conducting robust public and stakeholder engagement before committing to long-term implementation. Our expanded social science research will also provide us with visitor information at the park level for visitor experience planning.

Some strategies for managing use have been used for decades. The National Park Service has long managed access in backcountry areas and wilderness, for example, by issuing trailhead and overnight permits. Permit systems for wilderness have helped preserve the qualities of solitude and minimize resource impacts.

To address vehicular congestion, the National Park Service has invested in multimodal transportation options such as shuttles and multi-use paths where biking and walking are encouraged. The National Park Service strategically supports the use of ride-hailing (Uber, Lyft, etc.), and micromobility options such as scooters, e-bikes, and bike-share where appropriate.

Parks are also working with local and regional tourism entities to develop strategies for promoting sustainable tourism and to coordinate messaging. We are working with the public, partners, and local communities and businesses to explore different tools and techniques that could help improve how visitors get to and experience popular features. Some parks are hosting mobile or pop-up visitor centers, increasing roving staff at key sites, designating new traffic configurations during peak visitation, and providing shuttle services.

Timed entry systems are now in place at several parks, with each addressing specific park-level issues. Muir Woods National Monument has used a successful concessioner-run timed-entry reservation system since the beginning of 2018. The year-round reservation system for all vehicle parking and shuttle riders is designed to provide for motorized vehicle access at levels that meet park goals for safety, resource protection, visitor experience, and public access while also ensuring the park is a good neighbor to nearby communities impacted by high visitation. Over the past three years, 96% of respondents to the concessioner's customer satisfaction survey report a positive experience visiting Muir Woods.

In 2017, Acadia National Park's visitation reached 3.5 million, an increase of 60% from ten years prior. The high volume of people visiting destinations along the Park Loop Road during peak times is causing gridlock, visitor conflicts, crowding, safety issues, resource damage, and of particular concern, delays in emergency response. Acadia implemented a vehicle reservation system, as approved in the May 2019 Transportation Plan, at Cadillac Summit Road during their

peak season, this year effective from May 26 to October 19. This system is enhanced by other visitor services, including by expanding the Island Explorer transit service and commercial tours. In addition, the Acadia Gateway Center, a transit hub and regional visitor center located outside of the park, will be constructed in partnership with the Maine Department of Transportation, Friends of Acadia, and the Federal Transit Administration.

Zion National Park implemented a temporary timed ticket system for the park shuttle system as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic; the ticket system assisted with managing large crowds and congested conditions while providing social distancing for visitors on shuttles and while waiting in queue lines to board the shuttles. Glacier National Park, Rocky Mountain National Park and Yosemite National Park have implemented reservation systems as pilot projects.

With the ticketed entry system, Glacier National Park estimates that the park has been able to adequately serve and support the same daily visitation on the Going-to-the-Sun Road corridor, even with decreased staff numbers and reduced visitor services. The system has also prevented the park from having to turn away visitors due to traffic congestion.

In 2020, Rocky Mountain National Park instituted a park-wide timed-entry system to provide visitors reasonable opportunity for social distancing during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The park is currently piloting an updated timed entry system for park-wide access with varying opportunities to all park destinations, including the highly popular Bear Lake corridor. Reservations are required on the Bear Lake Road Corridor between 5 am and 6 pm. In other parts of the park, reservations are required between 9 am and 3 pm. Timed entry has successfully spread visitation throughout the day, decreased congestion, and reduced queuing at entrance stations and parking lots.

Yosemite National Park's day-use reservation system was originally developed for 2020 to reduce risk of the spread of COVID-19. The current reservation period began May 21, 2021 and will run through September 30, 2021. In addition to reducing traffic and parking lot congestion the park has also seen a decrease in visitor complaints about Yosemite Valley traffic, which used to be common. Since 2010, Yosemite has also used a permit system for the Half Dome cable system, part of the Half Dome Trail, which is in designated wilderness. Permits for day hikers are distributed by lottery through Recreation.gov, with one preseason lottery and daily lotteries during the hiking season. Unregulated use in previous years caused crowding and long lines at the base, summit, and cables, resulting in an undesirable visitor experience and safety concerns, including six significant falls between 2006-2009.

Encouraging Advance Trip Planning

The National Park Service is working on several technological advances that will improve the visitor experience in parks through enhanced trip-planning tools. These efforts will expand access to recreational opportunities and coordinate data with other land management bureaus to allow for consistent communications with the public. To advance this effort, we are currently researching and piloting a number of traffic collection and analysis projects at both the statewide and park level with the goal of better understanding traffic volumes as well as where visitors are coming from and going to.

We are also collaborating with the other federal land managers to align and expand our recreation-based web information to allow for data consistency between federal websites. This data is also available to our partners, third parties and the tourism industry. Rec.gov is a one-stop reservation and trip planning service for the public and a centralized management system for facility managers. This contract-delivered service, administered by the U.S. Forest Service, provides reservation and trip planning capabilities to 12 federal agencies, and features more than 110,000 individual sites and activities across 4,000 recreation areas. The platform, launched in 2018, offers expanded features to improve the customer experience through visitor mapping and trip planning tools that allow visitors to discover locations and activities new to them, especially when their chosen sites are already reserved. The rec.gov mobile app offers visitors the convenience of making and managing reservations on the go.

Visitors to national parks have a new tool to assist them in their trip planning, the National Park Service Mobile App, launched in April during National Park Week. The app ensures visitors have access to the most current information about the parks they visit. It currently offers interactive maps, tours, accessibility information, and more. The app is built to be used even in remote parks where internet access may be limited by allowing visitors to download information to their phone in advance.

In addition, the National Park Service's #PlanLikeAParkRanger campaign, launched in May, shares insider tips from park rangers so visitors can better prepare for their national park experience. It points prospective visitors to park websites and resources like the National Park Service Mobile App that have recommendations about where to go, what to see and do, how to take care of these special places during their visit, and what is needed to include in trip planning. It advises visitors to know in advance where and when reservations are needed, be flexible and have backup plans, allow extra time to get from one place to another, where pets are or are not allowed, and encourages people to explore lesser-known parks.

Conclusion

The National Park Service wants visitors to have a high-quality experience everywhere they go in the National Park System. Parks are working to offer new ways for people to receive timely information to better plan and enjoy their trips. The National Park Service is committed to collaborating with local communities, businesses, and nonprofit partners to find solutions that improve the quality and diversity of visitor experiences, address crowding and congestion in a thoughtful way, and maintain the tremendous range of benefits that national parks provide. Given the iconic and finite nature of these highly valued places, along with the complexity of providing inclusive and high-quality visitor opportunities, creativity, active collaboration, and shared responsibility will be essential for building sustainable and effective strategies.

Chairman King, Ranking Member Daines, thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.