

Testimony of  
Kristen Brengel, Senior Vice President, Government Affairs  
National Parks Conservation Association for the  
National Parks Subcommittee of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee  
July 28th, 2021

Chairman King and Ranking Member Daines, thank you for the invitation to discuss overcrowding within our popular national parks with the subcommittee today. I am Kristen Brengel, Senior Vice President of Government Affairs for the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA). NPCA is the leading voice of the American people in protecting and enhancing our National Park System with nearly 1.6 million members and supporters nationwide.

We are pleased to share our views about the hurdles overcrowding presents to the National Park System. It was only five years ago that we celebrated the 100th anniversary of this incredible agency, the people who have powered it and the parks we cherish. During the celebration, we witnessed the admiration Americans have for their national parks—from the spectacular views of Acadia’s coast and the jagged peaks of the Tetons to the stories of our cultural heritage including the indigenous history preserved at Mesa Verde, the suffragettes at Belmont-Paul and the tragedies at Manzanar. We rely on national parks to be our retreats and our national memory—to be storytellers and protectors of nature and its sights, sounds and health.

The National Park Service (NPS) strives to uphold its mission to “conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” From the designation of Yellowstone National Park in 1872 to the creation of the New River Gorge National Park and Preserve just last year, the National Park System has continued growing to guarantee that all American’s can access their natural and cultural heritage. Park resources are preserved in perpetuity by the National Park Service staff who work every day to make certain that the American public can learn from, enjoy, and be inspired by some of the most breathtaking vistas and stories that exist anywhere in the world. These national parks tell diverse and impactful stories about who we are as a nation, and range from the craggy rocks of Maine in the east, to the sandy shores of Gaum in the west, and hundreds of special places in between. No greater testament to the success of the National Park System can be cited than the ongoing interest visitors pay to these 423 sites. In 2019 alone, 327.5 million visits were made to the park system, which nearly equals the entire population of the United States. These visitors are evidence of the success of the federal government in protecting locations that are both valued by the public and deserving of national park designation.

However, the growth in visitation at our popular national parks is also posing one of the greatest challenges that NPS has ever faced.

In 2019, the last year on record before the pandemic started, overall visitation in the National Park System was nearly 20 percent greater than what it was in 2013. In 2019, the Congressional Research Service estimated that the NPS staff size shrunk nearly 14 percent compared to just a decade earlier. The decline in staffing capacity and park funding over the last ten years give us a sobering view of the ability of NPS to successfully respond to these rapidly evolving visitor use patterns. There is no reason to believe increased visitation will let up anytime soon, especially as Americans and international visitors seem more eager than ever to recreate outdoors.

As the initial COVID-19 restrictions lifted nationally last spring, many Americans gravitated to the outdoors. Local parks and trails became critical for the public's health and well-being. As people ventured further from home with limited international travel, it was no surprise when they started flocking to national parks, and gathering in large numbers at popular destinations. This volume of people was widely covered in the media, and while the National Park System experienced an overall decrease in visitation in 2020 compared to 2019, this represents a notable exception to the general trend of steadily increasing visitation to NPS units nationwide, particularly over the past decade.

As previously mentioned, NPS received a total of 327.5 million recreation visits in 2019, an increase of more than 9 million, or 2.9 percent, from the previous year. The overall 2020 visitation numbers reflect the effects of temporary park closures and restrictions implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, but—importantly—many parks continued to experience surges in visitation when parks reopened at the end of the summer into the fall. Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore had a 41 percent increase in visits from July to October. Yellowstone hit a record high in October and Zion documented seven consecutive months of record visitation starting in September, again during a time of almost non-existent international travel.

Many superintendents are already in the midst of yet another season of exploding visitation with many of the same staffing limitations as 2020. In April of this year, Yellowstone National Park reported a 40% jump in visitation. Arches National Park is having to turn away visitors on a nearly daily basis, and Canyonlands National Park has already seen a 45% jump in visitation this summer. Grand Teton National Park set an all-time monthly visitation record in May and Zion National Park alerted travelers of a 4 hour wait time to access popular trailheads. While NPS released the "Plan like a Ranger" campaign earlier this year that will help educate visitors on ways to reduce some of the tensions that come with such high visitation, many parks this summer will almost certainly continue to deal with a visitor base that remains unaware of the hurdles they will face when accessing a popular park.

While year-to-year visitation at a particular park unit may be influenced by seasonal weather variability, regional economic outlook, or even local promotional campaigns, NPS ensures consistent visitation data collection year-to-year that allows park managers to analyze larger trends of visitation. When examined critically, the experience of many parks during the past year fit a pattern of exponential growth in visitation, after considering the temporary downturn in visitors caused by the pandemic. Left unmanaged, the crowds that naturally come with such high visitation might unintentionally hinder the ability of the NPS to uphold its conservation mission to protect and preserve park resources as outlined in the Organic Act of 1916.

While visitation has generally increased across the entire National Park System, there are certain iconic parks experiencing such rapid visitation growth that we should be concerned about natural and cultural resource protection. For instance, Rocky Mountain National Park has been concerned about the growing pressures put on the fragile high alpine terrain by visitors packing onto Trail Ridge Road. The heavy concentration of visitors to these beautiful places has not only led to visitors spreading out beyond existing trails, it has also increased concerns about wildlife disruption, with elk and moose being pushed from natural habitat corridors. In Acadia National Park, wildflowers and sensitive sub-alpine vegetation was repeatedly damaged as heavy foot traffic impacted trail systems and cars parked illegally off-road at trailheads. Arches and Canyonlands National Parks and surrounding areas have seen multiple, high-profile cases of vandalism of cultural sites, particularly defacement of Indigenous rock imagery.

Further, many parks are seeing such large crowds that the visitor experience could easily be diminished. Traffic gridlock, long lines for basic services, and crowding at the parks' most popular attractions and services can result in unpleasant trips to some of our nation's most cherished places. Alongside crowding, increased visitation has resulted in alarming upticks in graffiti, litter, social trailing and improperly disposed-of human waste in parks. This undesirable and harmful visitor behavior suggests unprepared visitors are recreating in parks and evidences a need for more opportunities for visitors to interact with rangers and encounter effective educational messaging. These can and should be addressed through outreach, education and active visitor use management.

It has become increasingly clear that some parks have reached, and other parks have surpassed, their limits for balancing increased visitation and protecting resources. At this subset of parks, active management tools are needed to protect park resources in perpetuity. The changing nature of visits and visitors to parks due to the pandemic, increasing types of recreation, climate change, extended shoulder seasons and shrinking off-seasons, and the increase in remote work opportunities mean many parks are likely to continue to see increasing visitation in the coming years. Amidst inadequate budgets for park planning and a priority to help new, young and diverse audiences discover their parks, NPS must increase their ability to

actively manage visitor use across the system in order to meet one of the greatest challenges facing NPS in its second century.

### **Visitor use management strategies**

As outdoor recreation continues to grow across the country and become a larger portion of our economies, parks are front and center in attracting visitors to communities around the country. Those same parks must be able to put equitable and effective visitor use management plans in place to protect park natural and cultural resources while also advancing positive visitor experiences. Failure to do so might negatively impact the long-term viability of the park to attract the visitation that has long been found to boost local economies. To best protect the visitor experience and park resources, parks across the country employ a range of systems and tools to manage the impacts of visitors on natural and cultural resources, facilities, and staff capacity. (See Appendix A: Working List of Examples of Active Visitor Use Management in Parks). These systems include:

- **Permits and reservations:** Managing the number of visitors entering a park or part of a park at a given point (time of day, day of the week/month, time of year) via pre-arranged reservations including lotteries.
- **Messaging and communications:** Managing visitors' expectations and encouraging pre-visit planning or adjusting plans via extensive outreach before and during a park visit.
- **Infrastructure and facilities:** Managing visitor movement or behavior by expanding or adjusting hardened facilities including roads, trails, parking lots, visitor centers and restrooms.
- **Transportation:** Managing how visitors get into and move around a park by allowing or requiring bus or shuttle ridership, improving foot and bicycle traffic, and managing parking areas.

These management techniques not only reduce crowded areas within parks, but they lessen the environmental impacts that we know come with visitor density. Carefully planned active visitor use management can reduce air and noise pollution, reduce disruption to wildlife, and further protect soils and vegetation. As such, adaptable visitor use management systems are a valuable tool to managers in a changing climate. These systems also reduce strain on park facilities and staff, giving them the time necessary to complete the primary responsibilities for which they were hired. These systems and tools can also benefit the park employee daily experience. For example, enhanced mass transit into a park reduces congestion for employees getting to work. Where reservations are employed, gateway communities can benefit from consistency of visitation throughout a season.

In addition to preventing and mitigating impacts, active visitor use management tools and systems can meaningfully enhance park experiences. For instance, employing permits and reservations to manage for a specific number of people in a park or location at one time results in easier access to parking and facilities and increased visitor interaction with park rangers (who help form a connection between visitors and resources and inspire stewardship behavior). In places like Cadillac Mountain in Acadia National Park, reservation systems have reduced crowding and vehicle density. At Rocky Mountain National Park, the pilot timed-entry reservation system resulted in less crowded trails. These systems result in a better visitor experience, as a lack of crowds allows for less obstructed views, easier access to points of interest, reduced time spent in traffic and waiting in line and prevent visitors from being turned away at the gate when parks are full. National Park Service leadership should ensure that park managers have the resources necessary to effectively study the social science that will lead to the best possible management systems for a specific park unit.

We appreciate that these are not new concepts, and many of these tools were used effectively throughout the pandemic. Yosemite and Rocky Mountain utilized entrance reservation systems through recreation.gov. Visitors pick a date and receive an email with their reservation to show the rangers at the entrance stations. Rocky Mountain had already conducted a visitor capacity survey prior to the pandemic and was able to identify daily entrance limits that allowed social distancing at popular sites. At Zion National Park, it was important to continue operation of shuttle buses into Zion Canyon where there is extremely limited parking, but these buses operated at reduced capacity to maintain distance between visitors. NPS utilized recreation.gov to reserve shuttle bus tickets for several months. Each of these reservation systems allowed visitors to have certainty while traveling more safely and responsibly to these popular parks. The application of these tools in response to the pandemic gave NPS insight into how quickly the public can adapt to reservation systems and how to improve the systems in response to public feedback. This can also be useful when international visitors start returning to parks, which will continue to be a major factor as travel restrictions lift. Finally, these systems can be applicable in a wide variety of parks, but park managers need continued support to study and deploy these systems to ensure that park resources receive the protection they deserve.

## **Equity**

An area of visitor management that will require NPS's critical examination and deliberate solutions is the impact of active visitor use management on people who have been historically disenfranchised and underrepresented in parks. Making national parks welcoming and relevant for Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) and young people must continue to be part of the NPS vision in this second century. Employing an equitable access lens may well help us identify solutions that address visitor use management and enhance equity. Significant areas of equitable access to explore include:

- **Ability to Plan:** More research is needed on people's ability to plan their visits to parks and options for mitigating any barriers.
- **Enforcement:** Perception of safety in parks, as in all other places in society, fundamentally affect visitors' experiences, and we must incorporate and prioritize safety and perceptions of safety for BIPOC visitors as we work on visitor use management.
- **Expectations:** More research and targeted community engagement is needed to understand how perceptions of visitor use management systems affect expectations of the park visit and what can be done to influence intention to visit.
- **Language:** More research is needed to inform best practices and resources needed for making communication about visitor use management available in a multitude of languages and cultural communication contexts. Even now, many of the systems necessary for park visitors to plan adequately are only offered in English.
- **Finances:** Research suggests that increasing user fees is not an effective strategy for addressing increased visitation and overcrowding. Instead, implementing or increasing visitor fees only changes who can access those spaces and potentially poses barriers that disproportionately impact or exclude low-income populations. We should invest in non-fee related visitor use management options to ensure that access to parks remains part of the American vision of shared heritage for all to benefit from.
- **Location and transportation:** Research shows that location and transportation are two related structural barriers that result in reduced access to nature-based parks for people of color compared to white visitors. Location and ease and variety of transportation options should be assessed to assure equitable access to parks and determine suitability for permits and reservations.
- **Technology:** Many messaging, communications, permits, and reservations tools require visitors to have access to reliable technology and the knowledge to navigate online systems. The research on digital literacy gaps in a park-specific context is lacking and further research in this area is needed.

Close and innovative collaboration is needed to navigate an interdependent dynamic between parks, visitors, future visitors, communities, philanthropic partners and concessioners. Supporting collaborative processes and clear communication with visitors and communities will lead to productive, inclusive work on visitor use management, as has been the case in places like Acadia National Park. Collaboration should be done early and often to support efficacious visitor use management policy, ensure landscape-level resource protection, and uphold principles of equity, inclusion and justice.

We recommend vetting reservation systems, studying the application of recreation ecology science, and enhancing NPS' capacity (staff, training, equipment) for conducting good social science and using it in adaptive management. These focus areas will underpin a robust set of NPS policies and practices to support sustainable visitor use management so that the parks continue to represent a democratic vision of accessibility for all.

## **Funding challenges**

NPCA's long standing priority of advocating for adequate funding for park operations to improve and maintain infrastructure and add staff for interpretation, search and rescue, law enforcement, resource management — including social science monitoring and data collection — can help address the challenges of high visitation. Between 2011 and 2019, NPS lost 16 percent of its staff capacity while at the same time struggling to accommodate a 17 percent increase in visitation. Robust funding would help fill vacant positions, support efforts to address visitor use and climate change, and make progress on diversifying the NPS workforce.

There are thousands of vacant positions across the agency and park system, from maintenance to interpreters, historians, social scientists and more. Record visitation compounds the impacts of understaffing, as staff take on multiple collateral duties and attempt to keep up with crowds to ensure adequate visitor services. It is not uncommon, for example, to find trail crews attending to busy restrooms, or law enforcement officers helping with parking. In Yosemite, there aren't enough staff to keep the restrooms in the valley clean during the day.

While dispersing visitors has been suggested as another potential technique to reduce the impacts of crowd density within a park, NPCA has concerns that NPS underfunding and understaffing will present challenges to ensure dispersal is managed properly. Dispersal could happen either regionally, with visitors being dispersed to additional national parks or public lands, or it could happen within a specific park unit, with visitors being spread out across additional locations that receive less visitor use. Both strategies could lead to unintended consequences if not handled or studied carefully. For instance, visitors who are encountering a temporarily delayed entry at Arches National Park are making their way in large numbers to nearby Canyonlands National Park's Island in the Sky district and increasingly the more remote Needles district. The wait to enter Canyonlands Island in the Sky district is stretching to thirty minutes or more, a big change from years past, and the park is seeing record numbers of visitors month after month. In June, visitation to the Island in the Sky district was up 62.5 percent from June 2020 and the Needles district was up 146 percent. This is just shifting traffic and crowding not improving visitor experience.

While record-setting visitation for a historically less-visited park may seem on the surface to be a good thing, parks like Canyonlands are not sufficiently resourced, especially in terms of staff, to serve so many visitors. As park superintendents have told us, increased visitation has

also led to increased search and rescue needs. If dispersal is increased, park visitors could access terrain that they are not equipped for, which could add to the staffing and financial burdens that parks are already trying to manage. Even if visitors are encouraged to explore front-country sites, the park must ensure that there are adequate staff and facilities to guarantee that the visitor experience is maintained and that park resources can be best protected.

Staff are already pressed by increased search and rescue operations, heavy use of facilities in need of constant maintenance (e.g., restrooms) and the sheer task of serving public information needs at entrance stations and visitor centers. These demands on staff time for basic operations leaves almost no time available for visitor education about park resources and stories and stewardship behavior, which are key responsibilities of the park. While dispersal might provide some relief to parks that are experiencing the brunt of the crowds, it has to be further studied and the financial and human resource costs must be considered before implementation.

Additional funding to return staff to our parks is also an opportunity to diversify the National Park Service, which is challenged by a significant lack of racial, gender, and ethnic diversity. The vast majority of NPS staff, 83 percent, are white, a percentage significantly higher than other federal agencies, while more than three in five are men. The lack of ethnic and racial diversity among park staff is cited as one reason that people of color comprise a disproportionately low percentage of park visitors. For example, only two percent of national park visitors are African American. Bringing rangers back to our parks and ensuring a diverse and inclusive workforce while doing so, can help make more Americans feel welcome in their parks.

## **Conclusion**

We appreciate the committee's oversight on the impacts overcrowding presents to some of our most precious natural and cultural treasures. Now, as we continue to grapple with the pandemic and get our country back on its feet, we should take the time to address longstanding planning, monitoring and funding issues within the National Park Service. The issues that face the National Park Service today are multifaceted, requiring a nuanced and technical response that NPS has the expertise to employ. The intersectional challenges of climate change, outdated infrastructure, and increased visitation on our public lands, demand a coordinated response. The committee should make sure the next National Park Service Director has a vision for addressing the depth of the issues discussed here today. As the National Park Service prepares for its next one-hundred years of preservation and education, the challenges that must be addressed are unlike any that have been navigated previously. We applaud the committee and NPS' commitment to ensuring that the full American story can be experienced by generations to come.



## Appendix A: Working List of Examples of Active Visitor Use Management in Parks

Permits and reservations —Managing the number of visitors entering a park or part of a park at a given point (time of day, day of the week/month, time of year) via pre-arranged reservations (including lotteries)

### Park Entrance

- Timed-entry reservations
  - [Rocky Mountain National Park](#), summer/fall 2020 COVID-19 safety protocol
- Day use entry reservations
  - [Yosemite National Park](#), summer/fall 2020 COVID-19 safety protocol
- Shuttle Tickets
  - [Zion National Park](#), 2020 COVID-19 safety protocol
- Parking reservations
  - [Muir Woods National Monument](#), year-round required effective 2018
- Parking capacity gate closures
  - [Arches National Park](#), episodic

### Destination/Experience

- Location- and time-bound reservations
  - [Cadillac Mountain, Ocean Drive Corridor](#)—Acadia National Park, October 2020 pilot
  - [Haleakalā Summit Sunrise](#)—Haleakalā National Park
  - [Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell](#)—Independence National Historical Park
  - [Rapidan Camp](#)—Shenandoah National Park,
  - [USS Arizona Memorial](#)—World War II Valor in the Pacific National Monument
  - [Statue of Liberty Crown and Pedestal](#)—Statue of Liberty National Monument
- Wilderness and backcountry permits (lottery and advanced reservation)
  - [Half Dome Cables](#)—Yosemite National Park
  - [Zion Wilderness Reservations and Permits](#)—Zion National Park

### Ranger-Guided Experience

- Cave tours
  - [Lehman Caves tours](#)—Great Basin National Park
  - [Timpanogos Cave National Monument Tours](#)
  - [Carlsbad Caverns National Park Tours](#)
- Boat tours
  - [Cruises](#), Voyageurs National Park
  - [Ranger-Guided Canoe Tour](#), Congaree National Park
- Other guided tours
  - [Cliff dwelling and backcountry tours](#), Mesa Verde National Park

Messaging and communications — Managing visitors' expectations and encouraging pre-visit planning (or adjusting plans) via extensive outreach before and during a park visit

### Real-Time

- Real-time communication platforms
  - [Recreation Access Dashboard \(RAD\)](#) - Glacier National Park
- Visitor smartphone app
  - Zion National Park, in development

### **Dispersion Messaging**

- [Mount Rainier: Off the Beaten Path](#)—Mount Rainier National Park
- [Greater Zion](#)—Greater Zion Convention and Tourism Office

### **Stewardship Education**

- Zero Landfill Initiative—[Denali](#), [Grand Teton](#) and [Yosemite](#) National Parks

Transportation — Managing how visitors get into and move around a park by allowing or requiring bus or shuttle ridership, foot/bicycle traffic, etc. (i.e., not individual vehicles)

### **Shuttles and Buses**

- Critical access most of the year to most of the park, concessioner managed, fee required
  - Denali Park Road bus—Denali National Park
- Critical access most of the year for most visitors, NPS managed, free access
  - Zion Canyon shuttle—Zion National Park
- Supplementary access during peak times of year, NPS managed, free access
  - Shuttle—[Rocky Mountain National Park](#)
  - Shuttle—Yosemite National Park
  - Shuttle—Grand Canyon National Park

### **Boats**

- Critical access to boat-accessed park sites, concessioner managed, fee required
  - Statue of Liberty National Monument
  - Alcatraz Island National Monument
  - Resurrection Bay boat tours—Kenai Fjords National Park

Infrastructure and facilities — Managing visitor movement or behavior by expanding or adjusting hardened facilities (e.g., roads, trails, parking lots, visitor services, restrooms)