

## Can nation's parks survive the pressure?

Inside and just outside, they are increasingly being squeezed

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*This two-part Associated Press series found that the national parks are facing unprecedented pressures inside and outside their borders from population growth, homeland security concerns and Americans' desires for conveniences such as hotels, restaurants, stores, cell phones and vacation homes.*

GLACIER NATIONAL PARK, Mont. - The ice-covered mountaintops are shrouded by fog. A stream gushes against the rocks on a headlong rush to the lake. High above the deserted visitors' parking lot, an elk stares at a lone hiker.

Glacier National Park is an island, a sanctuary from the outside world.

For how long?

To the west, subdivisions, vacation homes and large chain stores march toward its borders. To the north, bulldozers pause for the winter before pushing deeper through the forests to a planned coal mine in the Canadian Flathead River Valley.

To the south, an emotional debate rages over whether to allow oil and gas interests to explore a sacred Blackfoot Indian plot. From above, gradual warming continues to nibble away at the park's famed glaciers. Once as many as 150, they barely number 35 today.

"If this keeps up, we may be looking at the National Park Formerly Known as Glacier," said Steve Thompson, a Montana program manager for the nonprofit National Parks Conservation Association.

Glacier is not alone.

### Cell phone towers appropriate?

Within their boundaries, the parks are generally calm, placid and among the world's most beautiful places. The National Park Service said 95 percent of visitors rate their experience as good or excellent.

Nonetheless, 30 cellular phone towers have been erected inside parks; one is in view of Yellowstone's famed Old Faithful geyser. At Georgia's Kennesaw Mountain, an emergency radio communications tower has been constructed above Civil War cannons.

At Arizona's Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, officials have built an \$18 million, 30-mile steel-and-concrete vehicle barrier to slow illegal immigration and drug trafficking.

Fifteen sea and lake parks have acquiesced to recreational enthusiasts and are allowing Jet Skis and other personal watercraft, or are expected to do so.

At the Grand Canyon in Arizona, the clatter of tourist helicopters and whine of planes compete with the rush of the river, the warbling of birds and the whispers of the breeze.

### Outside pressures

Just outside park borders, the pressures are more dramatic from construction, population explosions, pollution, exotic species — even illegal aliens.

An AP analysis of census data shows that more than 1.3 million people since 1990 have moved into counties surrounding six of the best-loved parks: Gettysburg, Everglades, Glacier, Yellowstone, Shenandoah and Great Smoky Mountains.

The average number of people per square mile in those counties has grown by one-third. The four urban counties around the Florida Everglades show the most dramatic gains. But even in the remote areas of Glacier, the number of people per square mile has risen from eight in 1990 to 11 in 2005.

Likewise, park visitation has soared from 79 million in 1960 to 273 million today.

Pollution that has drifted scores of miles into parks is affecting visitors, plant life and wildlife.

Last year, the air breathed by park visitors exceeded eight-hour safe levels of ozone 150 times in 13 parks, from California to Virginia. Overall, air at one-third of parks monitored by the Park Service continues to worsen even as the government puts in place pollution controls aimed at clearing the air by 2064.

Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Tennessee and North Carolina, the most frequently visited park, has air quality similar to that of Los Angeles.

Many others, including Shenandoah in Virginia, Mammoth Cave in Kentucky, Sequoia and Kings Canyon in California and Acadia in Maine also suffer reduced views and damage to natural resources, mostly from pollutants from coal-fired power plants.

Foreign species of plants, animals, bugs and worms that travel via vehicles and visitors now invade 2.6 million acres of national parkland and are destroying natural resources.

### **Trails for illegal immigrants**

The Mexican border and homeland security demands pose their own pressure. As many as 1,000 aliens and drug smugglers pour into Arizona's Organ Pipe daily, diverting 75 percent of rangers' time to the problem, superintendent Kathy Billings said.

The crush of human traffic has driven the endangered Sonoran pronghorn antelope and threatened pygmy owl from their habitats, while leaving a trail of ravaged vegetation and human excrement.

"Some areas, the smell of the human waste just hits you," Billings said recently. "It's overwhelming right now and it's not safe for our staff to go out and start a cleanup."

Massive new water demand from explosive population growth is draining water aquifers that affect parks.

In Florida, the fast-draining Everglades are affected by an average of 900 new Florida residents a day who create a daily new demand for 200,000 gallons of water, the park service said.

The Devil's Hole pupfish, a teaspoon-sized fish in the Nevada desert of Death Valley National Park, is the impetus for recurring complaints from park officials against sprawling development in southern Nevada.

Park officials link the incremental decline in the water level of the endangered fish's rock-pool habitat to pumping of the interconnected aquifers that quench the region's thirst.

The park awaits money from Washington to determine which part of the deep aquifers affect Devil's Hole and the 38 adult pupfish it holds.

### **Homes seen from inside parks**

The changes in the outside world are becoming more visible inside the nation's 390 parks, marring once unblemished vistas.

Vacation homes now dot the shores lining Acadia and the mountains that border the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Subdivisions have sprouted up around hallowed Civil War sites such as Manassas Battlefield Park in Virginia.

Convenience stores, strip malls and shopping centers line the roads to many parks. Traffic piles up, aggravating visitors and residents alike.

Pollution has diminished the average daytime visibility from 90 miles to less than 25 miles at Eastern parks, and in the West from 140 miles to between 35 miles and 90 miles, the Environmental Protection Agency said.

John Bunyak, branch chief in the Park Service Air Resources Division, said visibility is expected to improve in the coming decades with new regional haze regulations.

Even the parks' famed views of starry skies are in jeopardy.

Nighttime lights, beaming from cities and towns 200 miles away from parks such as Mount Rainier in Washington state and Yosemite in California, reduce star visibility and can affect nocturnal wildlife.

In urban regions, including Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area in California, visitors can only see a few hundred stars instead of the 8,000 that would be visible in pristine conditions.

"If there's no place that is clear and clean, if there's no place that is dark and starry, where does that leave us?" asks Chad Moore, program manager for the National Park Service's Night Sky Team. "If we can't protect the best parts of America in national parks, then we're certainly not going to be able to protect them anywhere else."

### **AP survey results**

Americans are split on park development.

More than 40 percent favor increasing development inside parks, such as cell towers and snowmobile trails, an AP-Ipsos poll found. One-third favored increasing developments such as resort hotels and residential subdivisions outside park boundaries.

Joe Westbrook, a coal miner in Corbin, Ky., said he occasionally drives through the heavily forested federal lands in eastern Kentucky and sees missed opportunities for development. "Folks have got to go some place," he said. "If they want to develop it, I'd have no problem with it."

Across the continent near Salem, Ore., Jessie Hankins, 22, said a cross-country drive that included a stop at Yellowstone convinced him that parks ought to be kept free of development. "To me, the parks ought to be enjoyed for the natural things that make them what they are," Hankins said.

With war, terrorism and budget pressures, there is little pressure in Washington for buffering the parks from outside development.

Lynn Scarlett, deputy secretary at the Interior Department, said it would be futile to try to create artificial barriers to protect parks from the outside world. Instead, she said, the government needs to work with state, local and private landowners. "Nature itself," she said, "knows no boundaries."

### **Operations uproar**

Park officials found themselves in a firestorm when a draft the revised blueprint for operating

national parks was leaked last year. Critics saw in its omissions and word changes an effort to expand recreational opportunities at a cost to preservation.

The director of the National Park Service, Fran Mainella, said officials were simply trying to address new issues such as homeland security and computer technology but concedes the process could have been handled better. A newer draft scratches most of the controversial language, according to park officials who have worked on it.

"When the issue is between conservation and use, conservation will predominate," Mainella said.

The administration signaled its commitment to preservation this month by creating the nation's newest national monument — a 1,400-mile chain of islands northwest of Hawaii that's larger than all national parks combined.

### **Boom town outside Denali**

In some cases, park officials have been able to balance the demands of visitors with the demands of progress. For instance, park superintendents increasingly rely on shuttle buses and vans to reduce traffic inside parks.

But superintendents are mostly powerless to control outside growth, which brings inevitable costs inside the parks.

Alaska's Denali National Park, more than 4,000 miles from the Park Service's Washington headquarters, was once among the nation's most isolated. Today, it borders a booming resort area nicknamed Glitter Gulch.

The number of hotel rooms has doubled, visitors are staying longer and park rangers are diverted to help local law enforcement. Ambulance runs grew 35 percent last year alone.

"In the height of the summer we are in a reactive mode responding to emergencies and incidents," said Elwood Lynn, assistant park superintendent for operations. "We have very little time to do routine patrols which translates into very little time for positive interaction with our visitors."

### **Pollution, nonnative species**

The pressures from pollution and invasive species illustrate the limits of what parks can solve.

The Park Service is required by law to aggressively protect air quality. But since 2001, it has appealed just one pollution permit while reviewing some 50 industrial plant applications annually.

Park air quality specialists say they do persuade plants to install better technology or reduce emissions, but state and local jurisdictions approve the permits.

"Our hands are tied," said Bunyak, the service's air pollution expert. "We don't have any control over external sources."

Invading species likewise threaten native plants and animals. Cheatgrass chokes streams in Zion National Park in Utah. Exotic deer are proliferating in Point Reyes National Seashore in California. The noisy and voracious Puerto Rican coqui frog has made forays into Volcanoes National Park in Hawaii.

Researchers believe anglers have introduced nonnative earthworms into Voyageurs National Park in Minnesota. The earthworms change the soil, which changes the trees, which affects water that flows into lakes.

Invasive species often proliferate quickly; eliminating them is expensive and labor intensive. In some cases, it requires hand removal of trees or plants and then chemical treatment of stumps

and roots.

### **Story with no happy ending?**

The encroachment shows no signs of diminishing. Scenic surroundings make for desirable real estate, uncertain oil supplies keep new coal-fired power plants coming and at least some tourists continue to demand conveniences in the wild.

National parks also are at the mercy of private "inholders," owners of parcels within park boundaries who could develop their land because the park lacks money to buy it.

Likewise, parks face development on their fringes. A casino is proposed within cannon range of a historic Gettysburg battlefield. Several hundred new homes are approved for construction along the scenic New River Gorge National River in West Virginia.

Tom Kiernan, president of the National Parks Conservation Association, said parks often are viewed as narrators of the American story.

"The parks are beginning to tell another story as well: the story of funding shortfall, the story of very poor air quality, the story of declining health of the ecological and cultural resources of the park," he said.

### ***Part II: Budget constraints make for a tough juggling act.***

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