

Testimony of

Aidan Robertson, President and CEO of the National Parks Conservation Association, and

Miles Weber, Superintendent of Yosemite National Park

House Committee on Natural Resources

Traffic Jam in Paradise: Overtourism at National Parks

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Thank you Chairman Westerman, Ranking Member Grijalva, and members of the House Committee on Natural Resources for requesting our testimony today on the issue of overtourism in our National Parks. I am Aidan Robertson, President and CEO of the National Parks Conservation Association, and my partner in today's testimony is Miles Weber, superintendent of Yosemite National Park. We are here today because we believe that our parks are in danger of being "loved to death." Overtourism at our nation's parks threatens the National Park Service's (NPS) ability to balance the agency's dual mandate, which holds that our parks must be conserved and enjoyed. We must ensure that our national parks, situated on federal public land, remain accessible to everyone, while also protecting the parks from overcrowding.

We believe that all national parks should be required to integrate visitor management plans into their general management plans. In addition, our nation's most visited parks, parks that struggle acutely from overtourism, should implement reservation systems for entrance during peak season. We do not mandate that every park have a reservation system. However, we believe that this can be an effective tool for facilitating responsible visitation to our national parks. We assert that the implementation of a reservation system is not a requirement, but that the NPS, park directors, and the public consider the benefits of a reservation system during peak visitation times. We are glad to be here today to inform this committee of steps that the NPS is taking through the regulatory process to manage visitors at national parks.

In this testimony, we will:

1. Assess the issue of overtourism at National Parks, specifically in relation to:
 - a. Effects on the visitor experience
 - b. Effects on the environment
 - c. Effects on wildlife
2. Advocate for incorporating visitor management plans, with an emphasis on a reservation system, into parks' general management plans;
3. Explore the implementation of a reservation system at most-visited parks;
4. Address concerns over the reservation system and equitable access;

Personal Backgrounds:

Miles Weber, Superintendent, Yosemite National Park

As a lifelong Californian, I have always enjoyed our state's natural splendor. Born and raised in Los Angeles, I attended UC Santa Barbara, where I received my Bachelors of Arts in History. After graduating, I went to work as a park ranger in Kings Canyon national park and really found my home in the Sierra Nevada. After six years at Kings Canyon, I went to UCLA to get my Master's in Public Policy.

I then worked for the National Park Service on legal compliance. After transferring to Yosemite, I worked with local environmental and activist organizations to ensure more citizen involvement in park management. I also have extensive experience in implementing rangers' recommendations into general management plans. Now as superintendent of Yosemite National Park, I oversee park operations at a park that received 3.6 million visitors last year! My main focus as superintendent has been managing all aspects of the park experience. Yosemite needs to ensure the protection of the park's resources, while also encouraging all Americans to visit our national parks. I hope that everyone gets the opportunity to visit Yosemite in their lifetime, and that the public is aware of the challenges of the park service's dual mandate.

Aidan Robertson, President and CEO, National Parks Conservation Association

Having graduated from the University of California, Santa Barbara with a Bachelors of Arts in Environmental Studies, I went on to work for the National Park Foundation (NPF) in the Department of Programming and worked to become the Vice President of Education and Engagement. There, I spearheaded communication between the National Park Service staff and the NPF to raise funds, while also educating donors and other corporate partners on the national parks.

The NPF works to raise funds for the parks, but I wanted to be an advocate for them too, so I pursued a Master's in Business Administration from the University of Pennsylvania. After that, I transferred to work at the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA), first as the Vice President of Conservation Programs, and then CEO and President. At the National Parks Conservation Association, our goal is to be the voice of the national parks. We focus on protecting and preserving our parks for future generations, specifically through public outreach, education, and lobbying. As the voice of America's national parks we work to restore our national parks' ecosystems and maintain their current protections.

Issue History: Increasing Popularity Creates Overtourism

In 2022, the National Park Service received 312 million visits (NPS Annual Visitation Highlights, n.d). While increased visitation indicates that our parks are being enjoyed, they are at risk from, what we call, being “loved to death.” From 2015 to 2019 Yosemite National Park averaged over 4 million visits a year (see chart). Park admittance numbers show, barring a COVID-19 induced disruption, that visitation has been sharply increasing since 2010. Although the park's overcrowding issue has been an issue for decades, in 2020 COVID-19 served as a catalyst for the park to implement a reservation system for its peak summer season (NPS Permits and Reservations, n.d). The reservation system returned to Yosemite in 2021 and 2022 and by then was being used to control visitor numbers to the park irrespective

2010	3,901,408
2011	3,951,393
2012	3,853,404
2013	3,691,191
2014	3,882,642
2015	4,150,217
2016	5,028,868
2017	4,336,890
2018	4,009,436
2019	4,422,861
2020	2,268,313
2021	3,287,595
2022	3,667,550

of COVID-19. However, in 2023, the reservation system was not required, except for select dates (NPS Permits and Reservations, n.d).

Yosemite's reservation system, as operated in 2022, its last full season of use, worked by requiring reservations from May 20 until September 30 (Reynolds, 2022). This window was intended to cover the main summer season, and each day a reservation was required to enter the park from 6 a.m. and 4 p.m. To make reservations for the summer season, the Park Service created a tiered release system. First, 70% of reservations for the entire May to September window were made available in March. The remaining 30% of reservations were to be made available on a rolling basis seven days before the arrival date. Reservations were made on "recreation.gov" and the site charged a \$2 processing fee, which is in addition to \$35 entrance fee paid at the gate (Reynolds, 2022). Recreation visits in the 2020-2022 period were much lower because of the reservation system, although part of the decrease can also partially be attributed to effects of the pandemic. In 2022, Yosemite recorded 3,667,550 visitors compared to 4,422,861 in 2019.

The implementation of reservation systems is not limited to Yosemite. Glacier, Arches, and Rocky Mountain National Park have all implemented pilot systems. Arches is a prime case of tourism to the parks exploding in recent years. From 2011 to 2021 visitation to the park "grew 73% from...1 million to 1.8 million visits" (NPS Arches...Pilot Entry System, 2022). These parks have used these pilot systems to control visitor numbers, but it is important to note that not all national parks have implemented reservation systems. In fact, of the 63 national parks only 7 require reservations: Yosemite, Glacier, Arches, Acadia, Haleakala, Rocky Mountain, and Zion. In addition, Muir Woods National Monument near San Francisco requires reservations (NPS Glacier Vehicle Reservations, n.d.; Chang, 2023). While these National Park Service units require reservations, they differ from park to park. Some, like Glacier, only require reservations for certain roads, Zion only requires them for hikes to Angels Landing, and Haleakala for sunrise entrance (Chang, 2023). The reservation system is not uniform and varies from park to park, showing the flexibility it gives park officials.

The focus on controlling visitor numbers is key to safeguarding the National Park Service’s dual mandate. The dual mandate originates in the National Park Service Act of 1916, the agency’s organic act. On one hand, the agency must “conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein” (NPS Organic Act in Wilson, 2020, pg. 83). On the other, the agency must “provide for the enjoyment of the same [parks] in such a manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations” (Wilson, 2020, p. 83). The dual mandate can be understood by the shorthand “conserve and enjoy.”

The dual mandate drives our analysis of the reservation system. It is our recommendation that each national park make managing overtourism part of its general management plan. Each park must analyze overtourism in concordance with local conditions and take steps to ensure that both aspects of the dual mandate are prioritized. We believe that the National Park Service must take a more active role in planning for tourism and managing crowds. Not only will this maintain the quality of the visitor experience, it will also preserve parks’ natural and cultural resources. We believe that reservations should be required at the park service’s most visited units, and that past and current pilot reservation systems should serve as guiding blueprints.

Impacts of Overtourism at National Parks:

Visitor Experience

The visitor experience itself is harmed by overtourism when visiting a national park becomes like going to Disneyland. Idling in traffic, waiting in line, hunting for parking spots, have all become parts of the visitor experience at our nation’s most visited parks. Glacier National Park’s Visitor Use Management Strategy notes that overcrowding harms “the quality of the visitor experience, visitor and staff safety, the timeliness of emergency response, and park staff’s ability to maintain aging facilities and perform daily operations such as educational services and custodial duties.”

Increased visitation has strained aging park infrastructure. One of the key points in Glacier’s Visitor Plan is that “visitation is stretching the capacity of the park’s historic infrastructure” which further

hampers the visitor experience by necessitating a “near-constant cycle of construction and maintenance, which contributes to delays and congestion.” The aging facilities and demand for new infrastructure have created a backlog of deferred routine maintenance and repair needs that the National Park Service estimates to cost \$21.8 billion (NPS Office of Communications, 2022). This extensive list of maintenance and repairs includes roads, buildings, trails, power and water systems, as well as improving accessibility, addressing safety concerns, and translating interpretation to accommodate a wider variety of visitors. Visitor’s experience would be greatly improved by these additions, but it is due to a lack of funding and disorganized maintenance logs that these improvements have been on the back burner. All of these concerns and more are in high demand in order to maintain the visitor experience, but the National Parks cannot serve as places of natural escape and serenity if they are construction zones. Overtourism has created a feedback loop whereby greater visitation requires more park upgrades and construction. However, this cycle should not be allowed to continue unabated, for it is harming the visitor experience.

Overtourism not only impacts the infrastructure, but forces visitors to change their plans entirely. A survey of members by the National Parks Conservation Association found that 84% of visitors had experienced overcrowding when visiting a national park, which negatively impacted their experience. That same survey noted that 86% of visitors reported having to change their plans to avoid busier times, whether that be arriving earlier, changing the week or day of their visitation, or changing the location entirely (NPCA, 2023). The picture to the right, from the Yosemite Visitor Access Plan, is an example of what should be a pleasant visit turning sour. Traffic jams should not be a feature of a visit to Yosemite Valley. Families are forced to adjust plans and cancel trips at the last minute because of crowding, or because they are turned away because a park is at capacity. A trip to a national park should be an enjoyable and fulfilling experience, not a headache. Furthermore, having to turn away



visitors harms the image of the NPS in the minds of the public. If Americans cannot access their public lands at the point of entrance, then the NPS is failing the public.

One way to think about tourism in national parks is that “carrying capacity” of parks in regard to visitor use is strained (Miller et al., 2017, pg. 38). Our nation’s most visited parks cannot support their current level of visitation. It is neither sustainable for the parks nor for the visitor experience. That is why it would be better if visitors had the ability to plan ahead. Implementing a reservation system would be beneficial to both park officials and prospective visitors. By capping daily visitor numbers during the peak visitation season, visitors and park officials alike would be able to set expectations, and the burden on park infrastructure would be lessened, allowing for improvements and fostering a better visitor experience as a whole.

Environmental Effects

The tension at the center of the NPS comes from the dual mandate. Park officials must constantly weigh protecting natural and cultural resources against prioritizing the visitor experience. Overtourism only makes this job harder. Parks’ attractions grow in popularity, while the ability to accommodate visitors in finite natural spaces does not.

At Yosemite, the clash of development to accommodate increasing visitation and the protection afforded to nature in a national park increasingly clash. With visitor numbers increasing, Yosemite has felt the need to undertake new construction projects, especially in the heavily trafficked Yosemite Valley. The Sierra Club is focusing on the negative effects of construction at Bridalveil Fall. At the fall, new viewing platforms are being constructed, pit toilets replaced with flush toilets, and more parking spots put in (Kohlruss, 2023). To accomplish this, trees have been cut down and sewer lines rerouted over portions of the Merced River. The construction has highlighted Yosemite’s “balancing act between conservation and the crush of millions of annual visitors” (Kohlruss, 2023). While building more parking lots may not always be a bad thing, since it can stem illegal roadside parking, it must be done responsibly. This construction boom has also included the construction of new campsites on the valley floor, within existing

campgrounds (Kohlruss, 2023). Park officials are clearly responding to overcrowding at Yosemite by building more. While environmental groups may not prefer this response, superintendent Weber notes that Yosemite needs the infrastructure to handle increased tourism.

Development of national parks harkens back to the idea of “nature as a commodity” thinking that can do so much damage to natural areas (Wilson, 2020). Over-development of parks’ non-wilderness prioritizes the visitor experience and visitation as making the park valuable. Park officials also see development as one part of addressing overcrowding, but environmental organizations are not pleased. However, one recent development project at Yosemite shows how environmental protection can be prioritized while also preserving the visitor experience. At Yosemite’s Mariposa Grove of sequoias a restoration project, completed in 2018, removed paved asphalt pathways from around the sequoias and replaced them with elevated boardwalks to protect the tree's shallow roots (Yosemite Conservancy, 2020). The Mariposa Grove utilizes a removed parking lot and a bus system to bring visitors to the grove. This removes the need to have cars near the big trees. This restoration project recognized the ecology of sequoias and how to keep balance in an ecosystem while allowing for human visitation. Elevated boardwalks, relocation of parking, and habitat restoration were all done with a basic understanding of the area’s environment.

The Mariposa Grove restoration project shows how visitation and ecological management can coexist. Park officials retooled and removed pre-existing infrastructure to assist the natural environment to better uphold the environmental end of the dual mandate. The Mariposa grove project also provides a template for balancing the needs of tourism and nature. By using existing infrastructure, park officials did not cause the same disruptions that Bridalveil Fall construction did. If new visitor infrastructure is to be built, it is better that it be done in the most sensitive way possible. For example, Zion National Park is building a new visitor center on donated land outside park boundaries (Eddington, 2023). However, to ensure that existing infrastructure meets visitor needs without further damaging the environment, a reservation system is needed in the nation’s most visited parks.

Not only is the Sierra Club concerned about the effects of over-development on the national Parks. President Robertson would like to highlight her organization's support for a reservation system. The National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) in a 2022 policy brief agrees with our prognosis, arguing that, "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 well as the enjoyment of those resources, as outlined in the Organic Act of 1916" (NPCA, 2022). The National Park Conservation Association believes that reservations can serve as effective tools for combatting overcrowding at national parks.

Effects on Wildlife

Central to the dual mandate is preserving and conserving the environment for future generations. This applies to the land itself, as well as the wildlife that reside on that land. Unfortunately, due to increased development and the presence of people, wildlife have been increasingly disturbed in our national parks. While the parks are advertised as a tourist destination where people can escape into nature and see wildlife, oftentimes wildlife do not want to see people.

A 2021 study conducted in Glacier Bay National Park used motion sensitivity cameras to measure the presence of wolves, black bears, brown bears, and moose throughout two summers. They controlled when and where human presence was allowed, and determined that when humans were present in an area, wildlife were much less active. In the backcountry, where human presence is extremely uncommon, the animals basically disappeared when humans were present (Sytsma et al., 2021). This study was conducted in a part of the park that does not experience high visitation rates, so the animals were not adapted to seeing humans. Similar results are expected in other parks with low visitation, and more people are likely to seek out less popular national parks, meaning that the wildlife in these parks are likely to be bothered by people.

Increased visitation creates an increased demand for roads and other development to accommodate the visitors. Just over half of National Park Service units have public access roads, which

means that wildlife interact with humans and transportation very often. This, combined with the fact that 57% of NPS units are at capacity with their current transportation systems, and this is reported to increase in 76% of units, means that wildlife will be more at risk of transportation-related incidents in the coming years. Road-related mortality of wildlife is an issue that 48% of parks report being their largest concern (Ament et al., 2008). However, increased visitation has worsened issues of illegal hunting, disease, increased stress during breeding and migration season, and invasive species, among other things. Even simple recreational activities like hiking can cause certain species to alter their feeding patterns and change how they live (Theobald et al., 1997). Wildlife can try to avoid the roads and people, but when there is overcrowding and hoards of visitors around the parks, it may become impossible for them to find a safe place to hide. Though there is no way for the parks to be completely free of disturbances for the wildlife, however, regulating and restricting the amount of visitors that can enter the parks at any time can lessen the stress on them.

Reservation Policy Proposal:

The NPS must respond to overtourism to safeguard the dual mandate, and to do this it should incorporate better “visitor use management.” Visitor use management (VUM) is an all encompassing term that entails managing “human use” for the achievement of certain desired conditions (Miller et al., 2020, p. 37). In this case, the NPS would guide visitor use to upholding the dual mandate. We recommend that each park implement visitor use management plans into their general management plans in order to provide a park-wide approach to the issue of overtourism. More holistic planning is necessary because of the damage that overtourism can do to every park.

Our proposal is to have every park implement visitor use management plans into their General Management Plans. Already, some of the most visited parks are creating variations on visitor use management plans. Yosemite has a “Visitor Access Plan” and Glacier has a “Visitor Use Management Strategy” but every park should be required to have one. Planning for visitor use has not caught up with the popularity of the parks, and current plans tend to be reactive. Instead, all parks must incorporate

visitor use management plans into general management plans. This would lead to a more thorough planning on the part of each park's staff and help prepare parks for managing tourism. While all parks are required to address visitor capacity, they must also take a forward-looking approach on handling park overcrowding (Yosemite Visitor Access Plan, 2023).

Our nation's most visited parks should utilize reservation systems to combat overcrowding. Yosemite's reservation system provides a great blueprint for parks that need to adapt such a system. However, we propose that the NPS be more involved in crafting each park's reservation system in order to ensure greater uniformity across the system. Reservations should be required to visit parks during their peak season. Furthermore, implementation of the reservation system should be adapted from recommendations from visitor use management plans that have received public input.

Reservation systems should function in the mold of the Yosemite model, with some modifications to ensure fair disbursement of reservations. We suggest that: 60% of reservations should continue to be released in the months before a park's peak season, 20% a week before a selected entrance date, and 20% first come, first served, for at-the-gate entry. The percentages do not need to be exact, but something along these lines, in order to ensure that all segments of society have access to our national parks. In the name of fairness and ensuring access, we would not charge the \$2 processing fee that parks currently charge. These are general policy outlines. In order to fully implement them, we encourage park officials to promptly create visitor management plans and in the interim reconcile them with their general management plans. The management of each park will be required to solicit public comment for the implementation of their visitor management plans.

This reservation system would give park officials better ability to manage the park. The reservation system could mainly be implemented during a park's peak season, but could also be used temporarily in response to changing conditions. For example, in Yosemite, reservations are required on select days in February to manage the Horsetail Fall event (NPS Horsetail Falls, n.d.). Reservations can also be used in response to natural disasters. For example, if certain portions of a park are closed due to

storm damage, reservations can help reduce visitor numbers, while still keeping the park somewhat accessible. All in all, reservations offer park officials greater flexibility in managing parks.

Concerns over Reservation System

National parks already struggle with including all members of American society. One major “leisure constraint” for many in enjoying the national parks is the financial cost (Scott, 2018, p. 74). Many parks charge an entrance fee, both Yosemite and Glacier charge \$35 per vehicle. Our goal is not to add to the burdens faced by visitors in coming to parks. If reservation systems are to be widely implemented, we will no longer require a \$2 processing fee, the cost of which would discourage reservations. We believe that the reservation is well-placed to remove barriers. To make the system fair we suggest tiered releases of entry reservations. Some reservations should be released months in advance, others a week before a certain arrival date, and some for first come, first served, at the park’s entrance. Requiring reservations is the best way to manage visitation without increasing leisure constraints. For example, while raising park entrance fees may discourage increased visitation, it would also make parks more inaccessible to the public, something that runs counter to the NPS mission.

We would also like to clarify that our general goal is to have every park implement a visitor management plan into its general management plan, in order to be better prepared for visitors and in protecting the park for increased visitation. We believe that the NPS can mandate that all parks implement visitor management plans through its regulatory process, and we encourage the committee to give the NPS adequate resources. We do not mandate that every park implement a reservation system. Only the nation’s busiest parks suffering from overcrowding should do this. Rather, we have presented an outline for parks that seek to utilize the reservation system. We believe that the reservation system offers the greatest flexibility to park managers. In regard to issues of equitable park access, we believe that parks must solicit public input to the maximum extent possible when implementing visitor management plans. In general, we recommend that parks conduct public awareness campaigns and community outreach in order to ensure that all segments of society enjoy our parks.

We would also like to note that while our testimony today is specifically addressed towards issues facing our national parks, overcrowding affects public lands at all levels of jurisdiction. We hope that our findings in regard to national parks can be helpful to policymakers, land managers, and engaged citizens at local, state, and federal levels.

Closing Statement:

We would once again like to thank the House Committee on Natural Resources for having us here today. With visitor numbers reaching new heights in the past decade, park managers have found it increasingly difficult to balance the public's desire to enjoy our national parks with the need to conserve their natural environments. National parks need to be ready for another century of sustainable enjoyment. The NPS must work toward mandating the implementation of visitor management plans into each park's general management plan. Furthermore, the NPS must facilitate system-wide coordination on visitor management plans and reservations in order to ensure more uniform implementation.

The creation of visitor management plans is a first step that all parks can take in order to better deal with increased visitation. Parks that are already struggling with overcrowding should utilize entrance reservations in order to maintain the balance inherent in the National Park Service's dual mandate. The NPS must act swiftly through the administrative and regulatory process to tackle overtourism. We know that Americans love visiting their national parks, but these parks, situated on our federal public lands, must be conserved for the enjoyment of future generations. We are hopeful that with proper management, our national parks will be ready for the future.

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