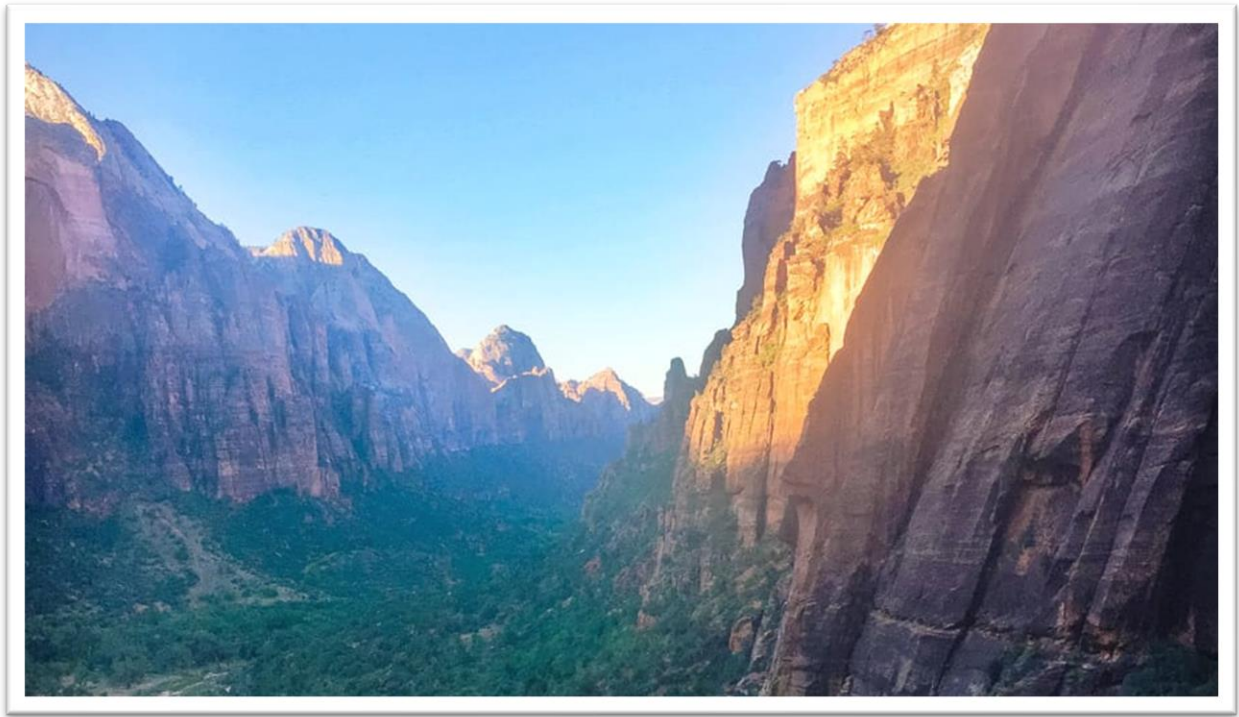


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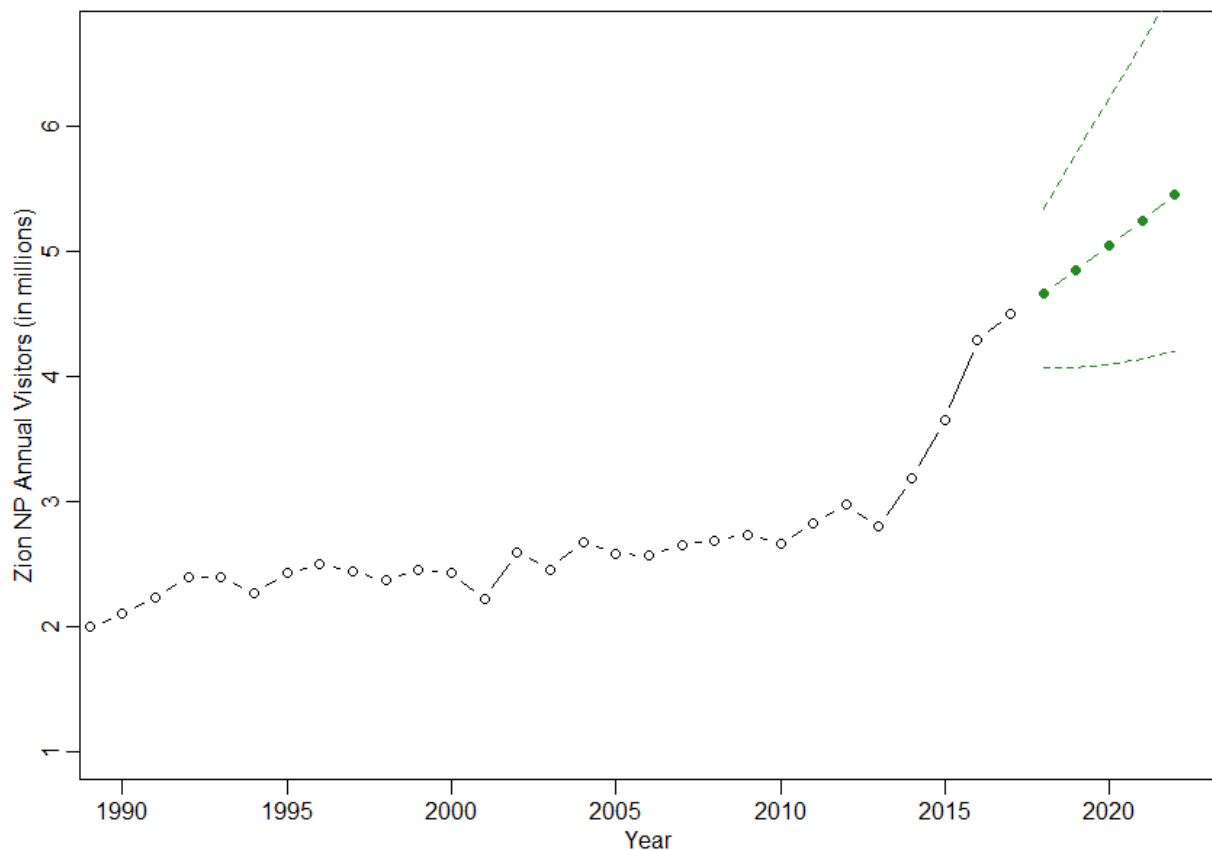
### **As visitor numbers grow at Zion National Park, what changes lie ahead?**



**Fig 1. Zion National Park**

Zion National Park is a popular destination for those who love hiking and rock climbing and is especially beloved by native Utah residents. Part of the appeal of Zion is its relative isolation and the ease with which visitors can reach backcountry areas. For years, this has allowed visitors to escape civilization and connect with nature even if they lack the equipment and knowledge to undertake a backpacking expedition. Since its creation in 1919 Zion has undergone many changes. Like many of the National Parks, Zion has become progressively more commercialized. What was once almost untouched wilderness is now crisscrossed with shuttles and trails and dotted with campsites and visitor's centers.

These developments have served to open Zion to a much larger number of people from many different demographics. It is more accessible, more visible and much more popular. As a result, it is also much more crowded. Some of the most popular hikes at Zion are so heavily trafficked that visitors rarely find themselves alone with nature as they once would have. When I visited Zion during Spring Break this year my group had to wait for long stretches at the narrowest points of the Angel's Landing trail. Hikers would take turns moving towards the summit and then allow those who were coming down to take their turn. The stream of visitors in both directions was unceasing. Our guide warned us that at times waits for the narrow sections of the trail could reach over two hours.



**Fig 2. Zion National Park Annual Visitors.** This figure shows the number of visitors to Zion National Park each year with predictions for the next five years in green, with prediction intervals shown in dotted lines. *Data from [irma.nps.gov](https://irma.nps.gov)*

While this experience was largely a result of going to the most popular hike in the park on one of the most popular weekends of the year, it does provide some insight into the trend that Zion visitation is following. Attendance has typically grown from year to year, but in recent years the growth rate has greatly increased. Due to this sharp increase in visitors, the campsites, parking lots and visitor's centers are frequently full, almost to capacity. Within the last twenty years visitor numbers at the park have more than doubled from about two million annual visitors to over four million in recent years. Within the next five years our ARIMA model predicts that annual visitors will exceed five million.

If this growth continues the park management will be faced with the decision to continue commercializing the park or find a way to regulate the quantity of tourists. Campsites could easily be added and the existing ones could be expanded. Existing trails could be made safer and wider and more trails can be developed. These changes, and others to the visitor's centers, parking lots and roads are possible, but the more the park develops the further it gets from that original feeling of being alone with nature that has made millions of visitors fall in love with Zion National Park.

There are still many unknowns related to how these changes will take place. We cannot be certain about the growth of visitation numbers in future years. We do not know what management decisions will be made by the National Park Service and the other organizations that protect Zion National Park. However, what is certain is that over time our ease of access to the famous beauties of Zion will gradually decline either as more and more tourists flood the park, or as park management is forced to control visitor numbers. In either case, the best time to enjoy Zion National Park is the present.