

Problems in Paradise

Our nation's "crown jewels." That's how some people have described our national parks. Unfortunately, our parks face some big problems. Many people feel that if we don't take steps soon, our parks will suffer.

Inside Pressures

In 2003, more than 266 million visitors spent time in the historic homes and forts, recreation areas, seashores, memorials, and parks that make up our National Park System. That's more than eight times as many people as visited the parks in 1950. And park visitation is expected to rise.

Cars, campers, and motor homes already jam the most popular parks. Hikers often crowd trails. Visitors have destroyed trailside vegetation in many areas. Vandalism is a problem in almost every park: People steal Native American artifacts, plants, and other pieces of the parks to sell them to collectors; people spray graffiti on park rocks and walls; and vandals have even used park-protected items for target practice.

Accommodating so many people has put additional pressures on our parks. For example, more roads have been built to handle the increased traffic. New campgrounds have been built and existing ones have been expanded. More concessions, including snack bars, hotels, and souvenir shops, have been built in many parks. All of these developments mean less habitat for plants and animals that live in the parks.

Outside Pressures

Aside from the problems being caused by increasing numbers of park visitors, other problems are caused by activities outside the park boundaries. As the population

increases, civilization creeps closer and closer to park boundaries. Wild animals, whose natural ranges extend beyond park boundaries, are being squeezed together for living space as people develop land outside parks. In addition, resource extraction and other human activities have brought pollutants and invasive species into the parks. Let's look at a few threats facing certain parks:

- On some days, air pollution can be a major problem in Great Smoky Mountains National Park (Tennessee and North Carolina) and in Shenandoah National Park (Virginia).
- Copper smelters near Glacier National Park (Montana) have caused fluoride contamination in some parts of the park.
- Extensive development in Florida has drained, diverted, or polluted water necessary for the survival of many plants and animals in Everglades National Park. In the past 70 years, many wading birds that once nested in the Everglades have disappeared.
- Even in remote Isle Royale National Park (Michigan), non-native plants and animals are threatening the park's native species and habitats.
- People are flocking to the area near Joshua Tree National Park in California because of its lower cost of living (as compared to Los Angeles), to escape the problems of city life such as crime and traffic, or to simply reconnect with nature. Development is encroaching upon the park and depleting desert groundwater resources.

Finding Solutions

Many of these problems in the parks are being addressed, at least to some extent. For example, studies in Cape Cod National Seashore (Massachusetts) have led to a management plan with different zones,

protecting nesting seabirds and the beaches where people swim and allowing off-road vehicle use. And an Everglades Restoration Plan has been developed to reverse the changes that have diverted water away from the Florida Everglades.

However, it's going to take more action to completely protect all of our parks.

National parks belong to all people: young and old, able-bodied and disabled, those seeking complete solitude and those seeking a nice view. Most important, the parks belong to future citizens. Meeting the needs of people today while protecting our resources for the future is a big challenge for the National Park Service. How well it meets this challenge will determine whether, and in what condition, our parks survive.

