

August 1995

NATIONAL PARKS

Difficult Choices Need to Be Made About the Future of the Parks





United States
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

**Resources, Community, and
Economic Development Division**

B-261848

August 30, 1995

Congressional Requesters

This report responds to your request that we review the current condition of the national parks. Specifically, the report discusses (1) what, if any, deterioration in visitor services or park resources is occurring at the 12 park units that GAO visited; (2) what factors contribute to any degradation of visitor services and parks' natural and cultural resources at the 12 park units that GAO visited; and (3) what choices are available to help deal with identified problems.

As agreed with your offices, unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we will make no further distribution of this report until 10 days after the date of this letter. At that time, we will send copies to the Secretary of the Interior and the Director of the National Park Service. We will make copies available to others on request.

Please contact me at (202) 512-7756 if you or your staff have any questions. Major contributors to this report are listed in appendix II.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'James Duffus III'. The signature is written in a cursive style with a large 'J' and a stylized 'III' at the end.

James Duffus III
Director, Natural Resources
Management Issues

B-261848

List of Requesters

The Honorable Frank H. Murkowski
Chairman, Committee on Energy
and Natural Resources
United States Senate

The Honorable Ben Nighthorse Campbell
Chairman, Subcommittee on Parks,
Historic Preservation, and Recreation
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
United States Senate

The Honorable Craig Thomas
United States Senate

The Honorable James V. Hansen
Chairman, Subcommittee on National
Parks, Forests, and Lands
Committee on Resources
House of Representatives

Executive Summary

Purpose

In recent years, concern has grown over the health of America's national parks, which now serve more than 270 million visitors a year. These parks contain many of the country's most significant natural areas and historic sites. In response to several congressional requesters, GAO reviewed the National Park Service's efforts at meeting its dual missions of serving visitors and protecting the natural and cultural resources entrusted to it. The review focused on determining (1) what, if any, deterioration in visitor services or park resources is occurring at the 12 park units that GAO visited; (2) what factors contribute to any degradation of visitor services and parks' natural and cultural resources; and (3) what choices are available to help deal with identified problems.

Background

The Department of the Interior's National Park Service manages 368 park units that together cover more than 80 million acres. Thirty-one of those units have been added in the last 10 years. The units are diverse in size and purpose, ranging from large natural areas to battlefields and monuments. Balancing the dual objectives of providing for the public's enjoyment and preserving the resources for future generations has long shaped the debate about how best to manage the system.

GAO's review focused on 12 park units—4 national parks, 2 historic parks and 1 historic site, 2 monuments, 1 battlefield, 1 recreation area, and 1 seashore. Chosen for the diversity they present in size, type, and geographic location, these units represent a cross section of units in the system.

Results in Brief

There is cause for concern about the health of national parks for both visitor services and resource management. The overall level of visitor services was deteriorating at most of the park units that GAO reviewed. Services were being cut back, and the condition of many trails, campgrounds, and other facilities was declining. Trends in resource management were less clear because most park managers lacked sufficient data to determine the overall condition of their parks' natural and cultural resources. In some cases, parks lacked an inventory of the resources under their protection.

Two factors particularly affected the level of visitor services and the management of park resources. These were (1) additional operating requirements placed on parks by laws and administrative requirements

and (2) increased visitation, which drives up the parks' operating costs. These two factors seriously eroded funding increases since the mid-1980s.

The national park system is at a crossroads. While the system continues to grow, conditions at the parks have been declining, and the dollar amount of the maintenance backlog has jumped from \$1.9 billion in 1988 to over \$4 billion today. Dealing with this situation involves making difficult choices about how parks are funded and managed. These choices call for efforts on the part of the Park Service, the administration, and the Congress and center on one or more of the following: (1) increasing the amount of financial resources going to the parks, (2) limiting or reducing the number of units in the park system, and (3) reducing the level of visitor services. Additionally, the Park Service should be able to stretch available resources by operating more efficiently and continuing to improve its financial management and performance measurement systems.

Principal Findings

Visitor Services Cut Back, and Condition of Many Park Resources Is Unknown

Eleven of the 12 parks in GAO's review had cut visitor services. For example, at Shenandoah National Park in Virginia, programs to help visitors understand the park's natural and scenic aspects were cut by more than 80 percent from 1987 to 1993. At Padre Island National Seashore in Texas, no lifeguards were on duty along the beach during the summer of 1994 for the first time in 20 years. Such cutbacks can affect the visitors' safety and health as well as their enjoyment of and access to a park's amenities.

In addition, at those parks with significant cultural resources, the condition of these resources was generally declining. For example, at Ellis Island in New York, the nation's only museum devoted exclusively to immigration, 32 of 36 historic buildings have seriously deteriorated, and according to park officials, about two-thirds of these buildings could be lost within 5 years if not stabilized. In some parks, the location and the status of cultural resources—primarily archeological—were largely unknown. For example, at Hopewell Furnace National Historic Site—an 850-acre park in Pennsylvania that depicts part of the nation's early industrial development—the Park Service has never performed a complete archeological survey of the park to identify and inventory all its cultural resources.

Likewise, officials at large natural parks, such as Yosemite and Glacier, knew little about the condition of many natural resources. At Yosemite, for example, officials knew little about the condition of birds, fish, and such mammals as badgers, river otters, and wolverines. The Park Service has not systematically collected scientific data to inventory its natural resources or monitor changes in their condition over time. As a result, the agency cannot now determine whether the overall condition of many key natural resources is improving, deteriorating, or remaining constant.

Park Service policy directs that park management be based on knowledge of the parks' cultural and natural resources and their condition. The Park Service's lack of progress in addressing this decades-old concern is threatening its ability to preserve and protect the resources entrusted to it.

Two Main Factors Contribute to the Current Situation

Although many parks have received operating budget increases since 1985, laws, administrative rules, and other policy changes have given parks many additional operating requirements. While not disagreeing with the merits of these requirements, park managers said that the requirements affected the availability of funds for visitor services and resource management activities because parks often had not received enough funds to cover the entire cost of compliance and managers therefore had to use funds from existing operating budgets. For example, in fiscal year 1994, Yosemite spent \$42,000 to meet several Occupational Safety and Health Act requirements and \$80,000 to identify and remove hazardous waste. The park did not receive additional funds to cover this \$122,000 expense. Officials also cited required cost-of-living increases and employer retirement contributions that were not accompanied by sufficient additional funds to pay for them. Because salaries and benefits constitute such a large percentage of a park's budget—in most cases, over 75 percent for the parks in GAO's review—nearly any such increase can have a major impact.

Increased visitation was the second main factor eroding the parks' ability to keep up with visitor and resource needs. Eight of the 12 parks that GAO reviewed experienced increased visitation since 1985; the average increase was 26 percent. At some parks, the substantial increase in visitation has driven up costs for such activities as waste disposal, general maintenance and supplies, utilities, and employee overtime. Moreover, the expanded length of the tourist season at many parks requires providing at least minimal visitor services for longer periods. To address this need, some

parks have cut back on the scope and amount of services available during the peak season.

Choices for Addressing Park Conditions Center on Three Alternatives

If current circumstances continue, further deterioration in park conditions is likely. Choices to deal with this situation center on three alternatives: (1) increasing the amount of financial resources going to the parks, (2) limiting or reducing the number of units in the park system, and (3) reducing the level of visitor services.

One alternative to address the deteriorating conditions is to increase the amount of financial resources available to the parks. While increased appropriations are one source of dollars, they are unlikely in today's tight fiscal climate. Other revenue sources are potentially available, including increased park entrance and other user fees, higher returns from in-park concessioners, and funds from partnership agreements with nonfederal entities. Less than 8 percent of the system's annual operating budget is currently generated through such means. However, for parks to benefit from such changes, the increased revenues would need to stay within the park system and not be returned to the U.S. Treasury, as now occurs. Imposing or increasing fees may also affect park visitation and use, a consequence that would need to be considered.

A second alternative would limit or perhaps even cut back the number of units in the national park system. As the system keeps growing, associated infrastructure and development needs will also increase, putting more park units in competition for the limited federal funding available. While not an answer to all the current problems, limiting or cutting back park units until conditions could be adequately addressed would help ease the Park Service's financial pressures.

A third alternative would reduce the visitor services provided by the parks to more closely match the level of services that can be realistically accomplished with available resources. This could include, for example, limiting operations to fewer hours per day or fewer days per year, limiting the number of visitors, or perhaps temporarily closing some facilities to public use.

The Park Service Can Better Focus Resources

Previous work by GAO and the Department of the Interior's Inspector General has shown that the Park Service lacks (1) necessary financial and program data on its operations, (2) adequate internal controls on how its

funds are spent, and (3) performance measures on what is being accomplished with the money being spent. Currently, the Park Service is taking corrective actions to resolve its problems with financial data and internal controls and is in the process of developing performance measurement systems. While these actions alone will probably not be sufficient to meet all of the Park Service's funding needs, they should increase efficiency so that the Park Service can do more under current funding levels.

Recommendations

GAO is making no recommendations in this report.

Agency Comments and GAO'S Evaluation

GAO provided a draft of this report to National Park Service officials for their review and comment. On July 13, 1995, GAO met with Park Service officials—including the Park Service's Director and Associate Directors of Administration and Professional Services—to obtain their comments. Overall, the officials agreed with the factual content and conclusions of the report. They suggested several technical clarifications throughout the report and provided updated information. Changes to the report were made as appropriate. The officials also offered several comments relating to the alternatives to deal with the problems identified in the report. Park Service officials said that increased appropriations was an alternative that was not delineated in the report. GAO agrees that it is an alternative, but an unlikely one in today's tight fiscal climate. The report was revised to reflect this comment. Park Service officials also commented that private capital is another alternative. GAO agrees and believes that this point is included in the report's discussion of more entrepreneurial management by park managers.

Park Service officials further commented that increasing fees at national parks would not make the system self-sufficient, although they support the need for increased fees. They also said that there may be some units for which fees should not be charged because of their national significance. GAO agrees that increasing fees will not solve all of the parks' financial problems. GAO also recognizes that charging fees may be undesirable or infeasible for some units. The report has been revised to reflect both points. Park Service officials also commented on the alternative of limiting or reducing the number of park units. They said that there is no evidence that the addition of new units has affected the amount of resources for existing units. GAO believes that given the current tight fiscal climate, future growth in appropriations is unlikely; accordingly, new units would

be competing for available funds. Finally, Park Service officials commented that the types of parks likely to be closed would not provide much, if any, savings and that substantial savings could only be achieved by closing some large units, which is unlikely. The Park Service's opinion has been acknowledged in the report.

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Abbreviations

GAO	General Accounting Office
NB	National Battlefield
NHP	National Historical Park
NHS	National Historic Site
NM	National Monument
NP	National Park
NPR	National Performance Review
NRA	National Recreation Area
NS	National Seashore
PRES	Preserve

Introduction

The Department of the Interior's National Park Service is responsible for managing a large and diverse array of park units that include some of the most significant natural and cultural resources in the nation. In recent years, concern has grown that the parks' responsibilities and popularity might be hampering the parks' ability to serve visitors and manage resources. The national park system now hosts about 270 million visitors a year—an increase of more than 20 percent since 1985.

Background

The National Park Service is the caretaker of many of the nation's most precious natural and cultural resources. Today, more than 100 years after the first national park was created, the national park system has grown to include 368 units. These units cover over 80 million acres of land and include an increasingly diverse mix of sites. In fact, there are now 20 different categories of park units. These include (1) national parks, such as Yellowstone in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming; Yosemite in California; and Grand Canyon in Arizona; (2) national historical parks, such as Harpers Ferry in Maryland, Virginia and West Virginia; and Valley Forge in Pennsylvania; (3) national battlefields, such as Antietam in Maryland; (4) national historic sites, such as Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C.; (5) national monuments, such as Fort Sumter in South Carolina and the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island in New York; (6) national preserves, such as Yukon-Charley Rivers in Alaska; and (7) national recreation areas, such as Lake Mead in Arizona and Nevada and Golden Gate in California.

The Park Service's mission has dual objectives. On one hand, the Park Service is to provide for the public's enjoyment of the resources that have been entrusted to its care. This objective involves promoting the use of the parks by providing appropriate visitor services and the infrastructure (e.g., roads and facilities) to support them. On the other hand, the Park Service is to protect its natural and cultural resources so that they will be unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations. Balancing these objectives has long shaped the debate about how best to manage the national park system.

The debate has also been shaped by a number of other developments. Despite the fiscal constraints facing all federal agencies, the number of parks continues to expand—31 parks have been added to the system in the last 10 years. In addition, the maintenance backlog at national parks has increased substantially. In 1988, we reported that the dollar amount of the

backlog of deferred maintenance stood at about \$1.9 billion.¹ This backlog included items that ranged from such routine activities as trimming trees, maintaining trails, and repairing buildings to such major capital improvements as replacing water and sewer systems and reconstructing roads. While agency officials acknowledged that they do not have precise data on the backlog, they estimated that it exceeded \$4 billion in 1994.

Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

As agreed with the congressional requesters (see p. 2), we focused our review on 12 park units within the national park system. We judgmentally selected four national parks, two historic parks and one historic site, two national monuments, a national battlefield, a recreation area, and a national seashore. These units represent a cross section of units within the national park system. They include both large and small parks, natural and scenic parks, culturally and historically significant parks, and parks from 7 of the 10 Park Service regions in the country. However, because they are not a random sample of all 368 park units, they may not be representative of the system as a whole. Table 1.1 lists the 12 park units that we visited.

¹See Parks and Recreation: Park Service Managers Report Shortfalls in Maintenance Funding (GAO/RCED-88-91BR, Mar. 21, 1988).

Table 1.1: National Park Service Sites That GAO Visited

Park unit	Primary features	Location
Antietam NB	Civil War battlefield	Maryland
Bandelier NM	Indian ruins and cliff dwellings	New Mexico
Denali NP and PRES	Scenic park: glaciers, mountains, and wildlife	Alaska
Glacier NP	Scenic park: glaciers, mountains, and wildlife	Montana
Harpers Ferry NHP	Industry, Civil War, and black history themes	Maryland, Virginia, and West Virginia
Hopewell Furnace NHS	Industrial development site	Pennsylvania
Lake Mead NRA	Water and desert recreation area	Arizona and Nevada
Padre Island NS	Barrier island: recreation area and wildlife	Texas
Pecos NHP	Indian, colonial, and Civil War site	New Mexico
Shenandoah NP	Scenic park: mountains and valleys	Virginia
Statue of Liberty NM and Ellis Island	Historic immigration site	New York
Yosemite NP	Scenic park: waterfalls, mountains, and wildlife	California

Legend

NB = National Battlefield
NHP = National Historical Park
NHS = National Historic Site
NM = National Monument
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PRES = Preserve

For each of the 12 parks, we collected available data on the condition and the trend of visitor services and park resources. We obtained visitor service data on facilities (e.g., visitor centers, campgrounds, trails, and roads); personal services (e.g., interpretive programs and other face-to-face programs); nonpersonal services (e.g., self-guided tours and exhibits); and visitor protection (e.g., emergency medical aid, search and rescue assistance, and law enforcement). Concerning resources, we collected condition and trend data on natural resources (e.g., native animals and plants, air and water, exotic species, and threatened or endangered species) and cultural resources (e.g., sites, structures, objects

or collections, and cultural landscapes). We also interviewed officials at Park Service headquarters and regional offices as well as at each park visited.

This report builds on our March 7, 1995, testimony before a joint hearing of the Subcommittee on Parks, Historic Preservation, and Recreation, Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, and the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Lands, House Committee on Resources.² It also draws on the 26 reports and testimonies that we have issued over the last 5 years on a wide range of Park Service activities and related programs. (For a list of related GAO products, see the end of this report).

We conducted our review from April 1994 through July 1995 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

²See National Park Service: Difficult Choices Need to Be Made on the Future of the Parks (GAO/T-RCED-95-124, Mar. 7, 1995).

Visitor Services Are Declining and the Condition of Many Park Resources Is Largely Unknown

The natural beauty and historical settings of the national parks make visits by most people a pleasurable and often inspiring experience. Surveys by the Park Service and others show that, in general, visitors are very pleased with their experience at national parks.³ Nonetheless, we found cause for concern about the health of the park system in terms of both visitor services and resource management. The scope and quality of visitor services provided by the Park Service are deteriorating, and a lack of sufficient data on the condition of many natural and cultural resources in the parks raises questions about whether the agency is meeting its mission of preserving and protecting the resources under its care.

Visitor Services Are Being Cut Back

Of the 12 parks included in our review, 11 had recently cut back the level of visitor services. This reduction is particularly significant considering that managers at most of the parks told us that meeting visitors' needs gets top priority, often at the expense of other park activities. The following are examples of the cuts in service:

- At Padre Island National Seashore in Texas, no lifeguards were on duty along the beach during the summer of 1994 to help ensure the safety of swimmers for the first time in 20 years, according to a park official. The beach is one of the primary attractions of the park and hosted an average of 1,300 visitors during summer weekend days in 1991-92.

³See *Serving the Visitor: A Report on Customers of the National Park Service*, Cooperative Park Studies Unit, University of Idaho, 1994, and *National Public Opinion Survey on the National Park System: Executive Summary Report*, National Parks and Conservation Association (Feb. 1995).

Figure 2.1: Conditions at Padre Island National Seashore, Texas



This beach had no lifeguard protection during the summer of 1994 for the first time in 20 years.

Source: National Park Service.

- At Shenandoah National Park in Virginia, interpretive programs to assist visitors in understanding and appreciating the natural and scenic aspects of the park were cut by over 80 percent from 1987 through 1993. According to park officials, cutbacks included not having interpreters stationed at busy overlooks and trailheads, considerably fewer guided nature walks, and considerably fewer evening campsite talks about the park's wildlife and cultural resources. One popular campground of 186 campsites (about one-fourth of all campsites in the park) has been closed because of funding limitations since 1993 and, according to park officials, is scheduled to remain closed until at least 1998. In addition, because of limited funding, park staff have been unable to remove numerous trees that pose a hazard to visitors because they hang precariously over hiking trails.

Figure 2.2: Conditions at Mathews Arm Campground, Shenandoah National Park, Virginia



Because of funding limitations, this campground is slated to remain closed until at least 1998.

- At Bandelier National Monument in New Mexico, the main museum—one of the most popular stops at the park—was closed for more than a year because of problems with repairing a leaky roof and an improperly installed security system.
- At the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island in New York, the extended hours of operation to meet visitor demand during the peak summer season have been reduced by 3.75 hours each day—a reduction of about 30 percent. We were further told that the length of the season for which hours are usually extended was reduced from 3 to 2 months.
- At Lake Mead National Recreation Area in Arizona and Nevada, park law enforcement personnel are often faced with a backlog of up to 12 calls each in responding to the needs of visitors during the summer months. According to park officials, enforcement personnel respond to such problems as motor vehicle and boating accidents, alcohol and drug incidents, and increasing gang violence.

As these examples illustrate, the cutbacks in services not only adversely affect visitors' convenience and enjoyment, but also the Park Service's ability to meet basic visitor safety needs. Table 2.1 provides more details

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on the condition of visitor services at each of the parks included in our review.

Table 2.1: Examples of Cutbacks in Visitor Services at Parks That GAO Visited

Park unit	Cutbacks in visitor services
Antietam NB	•No cutbacks
Bandelier NM	•Although funding was not insufficient, museum closed for more than a year because of problems with repairing a leaking roof and improperly installed security system. •Campfire talks reduced from about six to three per week.
Denali NP and PRES	•Hours reduced by about 20 percent at main visitor center in 1994. •Fewer campfire talks and park programs. •Permanent interpretive staff reduced from three to two.
Glacier NP	•Two campgrounds closed.
Harpers Ferry NHP	•Restored buildings and new exhibits often closed to the public.
Hopewell Furnace NHS	•Summer guided tours eliminated.
Lake Mead NRA	•Boat ramps blocked off to visitors. •At times, law enforcement rangers have a backlog of 12 calls when responding to emergency and other situations.
Padre Island NS	•In 1994, no lifeguards at popular beach for first time in 20 years.
Pecos NHP	•Visitor center's hours reduced during summer months.
Shenandoah NP	•Visitor center days and hours reduced. •Popular campground to be closed for 5 years. •Interpretive programs cut by over 80 percent from 1987 through 1993.
Statue of Liberty NM and Ellis Island	•Summer extended season cut from 12 hours daily to less than 9 hours. •Ellis Island interpretive program for children will end in 1995.
Yosemite NP	•Roving information vans and off-site information stations discontinued. •Fireside chats, overnight hikes, nature walks reduced or discontinued.

(Table notes on next page)

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Legend

NB = National Battlefield
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Source: Park Service officials and documents at the 12 parks that GAO visited and GAO's observation.

Information on the Condition of Many Park Resources Is Insufficient

Park Service policy directs that parks be managed on the basis of knowledge of their natural and cultural resources and their condition. Without sufficient scientific data depicting the condition and trends of park resources, the Park Service cannot adequately perform its mission of preserving and protecting its resources. However, our review indicated that by and large, the condition and trend of many park resources are largely unknown because of the absence of sufficient information—particularly for parks featuring natural resources, such as Glacier in Montana and Yosemite in California.

The effective management of park resources depends heavily upon scientifically collected data that enable park managers to detect damaging changes to the parks' resources and guide the mitigation of those changes. This approach involves collecting baseline data about key park resources and monitoring their condition over time to detect any changes. A park official told us that without such information, damage to key resources could go undetected until it is obvious, at which point, mitigation may be impossible or extremely expensive.

While park officials, as well as an official from the Department of the Interior's National Biological Survey, emphasized the need for this kind of information, we found that information is insufficient or lacking for many of the parks' resources. This situation is not new. Over the past 30 years, more than a dozen major reviews by independent experts as well as the Park Service have concluded that resource management must be guided by more scientific knowledge. From the so-called "Leopold" and "Robbins" reports of 1963⁴ to the report on the 75th Anniversary Symposium on the

⁴A.S. Leopold, S.A. Cain, C.M. Cottam, I.N. Gabrielson, and T.L. Kimball, Wildlife Management in the National Parks, Natural Resource Conference (1963) and W.J. Robbins, A Report by the Advisory Committee to the National Park Service on Research, National Research Council (1963).

National Park Service (the “Vail Agenda”) in 1992⁵ to a Natural Research Council report of 1992,⁶ concerns have been raised about the lack of scientific data on park resources. Similar concerns have been echoed by park advocacy groups, such as the National Parks and Conservation Association,⁷ and by two former Park Service Directors.

Condition of Cultural Resources

Overall, managers at the culturally oriented parks we visited, such as the Statue of Liberty National Monument and Ellis Island in New York and Hopewell Furnace National Historic Site in Pennsylvania, reported that (1) the condition of cultural resources was declining and (2) the location and status of many cultural resources—primarily archeological—are largely unknown.

Ellis Island is an example of a park where the condition of cultural resources is declining. It was reopened in 1990 as the country’s only museum devoted exclusively to immigration. While a few of the island’s structures have been restored, 32 of 36 significant historic buildings have seriously deteriorated. According to park officials, about two-thirds of these buildings could be lost within 5 years if they are not stabilized. These structures are currently not available for public access. They include the former hospital, quarantine area, and morgue. In addition, although some new storage space is being built, some of Ellis Island’s large collection of cultural artifacts is stored in deteriorating facilities. As a result, in one building, much of the collection is covered with dirt and debris from crumbling walls and peeling paint, and leaky roofs have caused water damage to many artifacts.

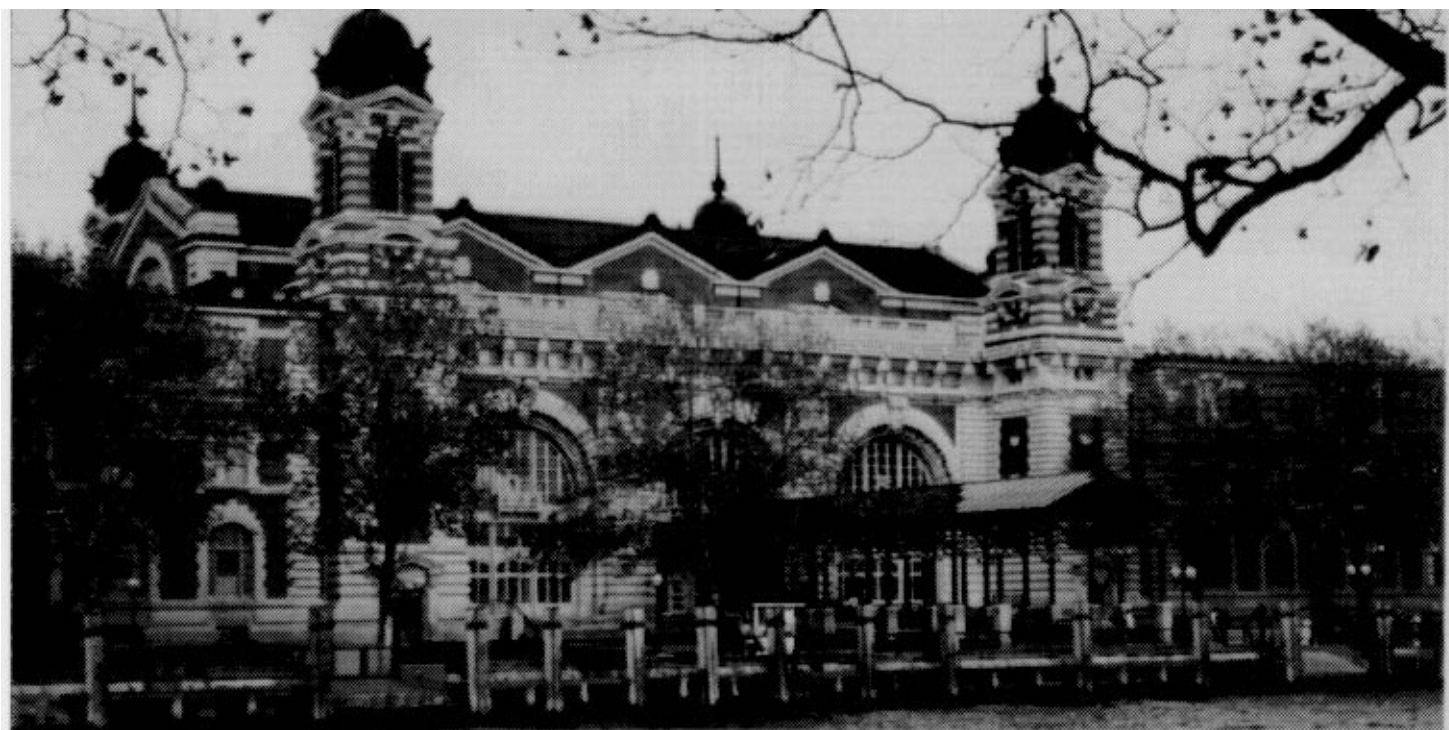
⁵National Parks for the 21st Century: The Vail Agenda, a report of the steering committee and working groups following an international symposium commemorating the 75th anniversary of the National Park Service (Mar. 1992).

⁶Science and the National Parks, National Research Council (1992).

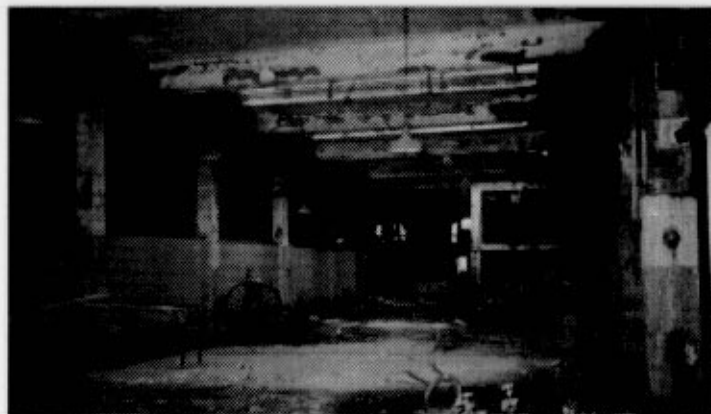
⁷Investing in Park Futures: The National Park System Plan: A Blueprint for Tomorrow, National Parks and Conservation Association (1988).

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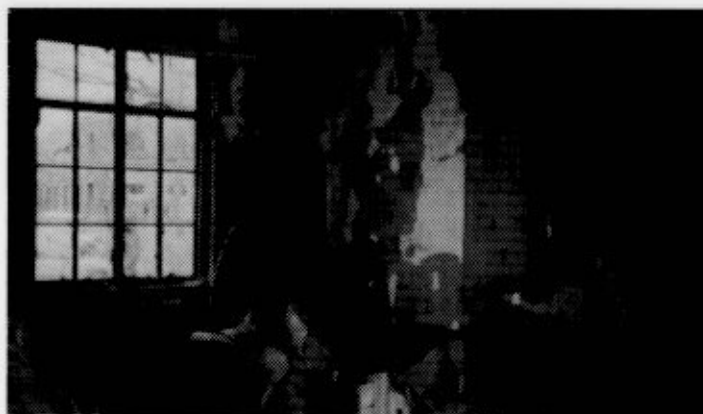
Figure 2.3: Conditions at Restored and Unrestored Buildings, Ellis Island, New York



The Immigration Museum is one of a few buildings that has been beautifully restored.



About twenty other structures, however, remain in seriously deteriorated condition.



Some artifacts are stored in rooms that have leaking roofs and peeling walls.

An example of a park where the location and status of cultural resources—in this case, archeological—is largely unknown is Hopewell Furnace National Historic Site. This is an 850-acre park that depicts a portion of the nation’s early industrial development. The main features of the site are a charcoal-fueled blast furnace, an ironmaster’s mansion, and auxiliary structures. Although Hopewell Furnace has been a national historic site since 1938, a park official advised us that the Park Service has never performed a complete archeological survey of the park to identify and inventory all of its cultural resources. According to a park official, without comprehensive inventory and monitoring information, it is unknown whether the best management decisions about resources are being made. Also, the park does not have a current general management plan, which is required by the Park Service and serves as a central component of effective resource management.⁸ A general management plan provides basic management guidance on how a park unit and its resources will be protected, developed, and used and documents compliance with the Park Service’s management policies and regulations. Table 2.2 shows examples of cultural resource conditions at each of the 12 parks that we visited.

Table 2.2: Examples of Cultural Resource Conditions at Parks GAO Visited

Park unit	Conditions
Antietam NB	•Structures, collections, and landscapes in at least good condition. •Unknown number, location, and condition of archeological sites.
Bandelier NM	•Structures and collections considered to be in fair condition; condition of landscapes unknown. •No archeological site survey for about one-half of park. •Seventy percent of known cultural sites affected by severe, largely irreversible erosion.
Denali NP and PRES	•No comprehensive survey of cultural sites. •Most cultural resource surveys done for proposed construction projects along main road corridor. •Known structures considered in fair condition.
Glacier NP	•Most known archeological sites in good or better condition but some subject to theft and erosion. •Over 75 percent of structures in fair or poor condition. •Collections and landscapes in generally good condition.
Harpers Ferry NHP	•Sites, structures, and collections in good condition. •Most cultural landscapes identified but some considered in poor condition because of encroachment and enforcement problems.
(continued)	

⁸Officials at the park told us that they had not received funding for their general management plan. Park Service headquarters officials told us that given congressional allocations and direction, other general management plans had higher priority.

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Largely Unknown

Park unit	Conditions
Hopewell Furnace NHS	•Total number, type, and condition of sites and landscapes unknown. •No overall cultural landscape plan. •Historic furnishings deteriorating because of mold and mildew caused by lack of a climate control system.
Lake Mead NRA	•Condition of 94 percent of nearly 1,500 sites unknown; only 1 percent of park has had an archeological survey. •Unknown condition for about two-thirds of structures. •Most collections (40,000+) in good condition but stored generally off-site.
Padre Island NS	•Ninety percent of park has not had an archeological survey. •Many known archeological sites covered by shifting sands.
Pecos NHP	•Sites in fair condition; structures in poor condition; collections in good condition; and landscape condition unknown. •Over 5,000 acres added in the last 5 years—not yet surveyed.
Shenandoah NP	•Many culturally significant sites and structures destroyed; remaining structures allowed to “melt into the landscape.” •Fair condition for most collections and known landscapes; unknown condition for over 90 percent of identified sites.
Statue of Liberty NM and Ellis Island	•Thirty-two of 36 historic buildings on Ellis Island are seriously deteriorated and over two-thirds could be completely lost in 5 years if not stabilized. •Many collections covered with dirt and debris from crumbling walls and peeling paint, and leaky roofs have caused water damage.
Yosemite NP	•No comprehensive parkwide assessment of cultural resources. •Only 6 percent of park surveyed for archeological sites; estimated total sites may be more than double known sites. •Sixty-five percent of museum collection of 1 million items believed to be in fair or worse condition because of inadequate protection from fire, rodents, and climate conditions.

(Table notes on next page)

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Visitor Services Are Declining and the
Condition of Many Park Resources Is
Largely Unknown

Legend

NB = National Battlefield
NHP = National Historical Park
NHS = National Historic Site
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PRES = Preserve

Source: Park Service officials and documents at the 12 parks that GAO visited and GAO's observation.

**Condition of Natural
Resources**

Even at the parks we visited that showcase natural resources, little was known about natural resource conditions and trends. This situation existed because the Park Service has not systematically collected scientific data to inventory its natural resources or monitored changes in their condition over time. As a result, the agency cannot scientifically determine whether the overall condition of many key natural resources is improving, deteriorating, or remaining constant.

For example, at both Yosemite and Glacier National Parks, data about many of the parks' natural resources have not been collected. As a result, the condition and trend of these resources are largely unknown. At Yosemite, officials told us that virtually nothing was known about the types or numbers of species inhabiting the park, including birds, fish, and such mammals as badgers, river otters, wolverines, and red foxes. These officials acknowledged that the extent of their knowledge was poor because it was not based on scientific study. At Glacier, baseline information on park wildlife was similarly inadequate. Park officials indicated that most monitoring efforts were directed at four species protected under the Endangered Species Act. They did not have data on the condition and trend of many other species.

Another example is Padre Island National Seashore in Texas. According to managers at this park, they did not have information on the condition of four of the seven categories of wildlife within the park. Specifically, they lacked detailed data on the condition of such species as reptiles and amphibians—except for endangered sea turtles—and such terrestrial mammals as white-tailed deer, coyotes, and bobcats. Furthermore, except for certain species, such as endangered sea turtles that use portions of the park as nesting areas, park managers had little knowledge about whether

the condition of wildlife within the park was improving, declining, or remaining constant.

Within the last decade, the Park Service has begun efforts to gather better information about the condition of the parks' natural resources. According to the Deputy Director of the Park Service, it took the environmental movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s and national attention to the resource problems in the parks during the early 1980s for the Park Service to start seriously addressing natural resource concerns. However, according to the Deputy Director, progress has been limited because of insufficient funding and competing needs and the completion of much of the work is many years away. In the meantime, park managers often make decisions about the parks' operations without knowing the impact of these decisions on the resources. For example, according to a park manager at Yosemite National Park, after 70 years of stocking nonnative fish in various lakes and waterways for recreational purposes, park officials realized that indiscriminate stocking had compromised the park's waterways. Nonnative fish introduced into the park now outnumber native rainbow trout by four to one. According to a park official, this stocking policy, which continued until 1990, has also resulted in a decline of at least one federally protected species.⁹ Table 2.3 provides examples of the conditions of natural resources at each of the 12 parks included in our review.

Table 2.3: Examples of Natural Resource Conditions at Parks That GAO Visited

Park unit	Conditions
Antietam NB	•Condition of wildlife generally unknown. •No baseline data on wildlife distribution, threats, or habitat. •Significant adverse impact on landscape from some nonnative plants.
Bandelier NM	•Condition of most wildlife species rated poor or unknown. •No baseline data on most species. •At least 10 species have become extinct in park. •Past livestock grazing and uncontrolled elk population have caused widespread adverse impact on native vegetation.
Denali NP and PRES	•Condition of most wildlife and plant resources unknown. •Animal and plant studies generally limited to main road corridor and localized developed areas.

(continued)

⁹The mountain yellow-legged frog.

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Park unit	Conditions
Glacier NP	•Baseline information on wildlife is inadequate overall and unknown for some species. •Most monitoring directed at four federally protected species. •Significant adverse impacts from nonnative fish and plants.
Harpers Ferry NHP	•Condition of wildlife unknown. •Significant adverse impact from insect infestation on hemlocks.
Hopewell Furnace NHS	•Condition of wildlife and plant resources generally unknown. •High deer population believed to be impacting other mammals and birds by destroying ground cover.
Lake Mead NRA	•Existing baseline inventories not comprehensive or sufficiently tied to serve inventory needs. •Significant erosion and vegetation loss owing to livestock grazing, feral burros, off-road vehicle use, and nonnative vegetation.
Padre Island NS	•Unknown condition for most resources except fisheries, birds, and sea turtles. •Scientific surveys for birds, sea turtles, and some marine fish.
Pecos NHP	•Condition of most wildlife considered fair. •Park still gathering baseline data on resources. •Significant adverse impacts on vegetation from livestock grazing and exotic plants.
Shenandoah NP	•Condition of mammals and reptiles/amphibians generally unknown; other species believed by park officials to be in good condition. •Unknown trend for several threatened or endangered wildlife and plants. •Significant tree mortality from insect infestation.
Statue of Liberty NM and Ellis Island	•Condition of wildlife unknown. •Most plant species considered nonnative but not invasive.
Yosemite NP	•Condition of most resources unknown. •Unknown trend for two of four identified threatened or endangered species. •Last comprehensive mammal survey done between 1914 and 1920.

(Table notes on next page)

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Source: Park Service officials and documents at the 12 parks that GAO visited and GAO's observation.

Conclusions

The National Park Service is mandated to provide for the enjoyment of visitors to some of the nation's greatest natural and cultural resources and, at the same time, to preserve and protect those treasures. However, cutbacks in the scope and quality of services provided to visitors and a lack of sufficient information about the condition of many natural and cultural resources within national parks are affecting the Park Service's ability to meet its mandate. While a visit to the nation's parks is still an enjoyable and pleasant experience for most visitors, reduced park operating hours, less frequent or terminated interpretation programs, fewer law enforcement personnel, and less timely attention to visitors' safety needs is seriously diminishing the quality of this experience. Moreover, the Park Service's lack of progress in addressing a decades-old problem of collecting scientific data to properly inventory park resources and monitor their condition and trend over time is threatening its ability to preserve and protect the resources entrusted to it.

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

Officials at the National Park Service generally concurred with the information presented in this chapter. They provided some clarifying language that we incorporated where appropriate.

Major Factors Contributing to the Current Situation

From fiscal year 1985 through fiscal year 1993, the Park Service's operating budget rose about 14 percent, when adjusted for inflation. At most of the parks we visited, the funding increases over this period outpaced inflation. Despite these increases, the Park Service has not been able to keep up with visitor services and resource management needs. Our work identified two factors common to most of the parks we visited that substantially affected the level of visitor services and resource management activities. These factors were additional operating requirements and increased visitation.

Budget Overview

From fiscal year 1985 through fiscal year 1993, the Park Service's operating budget rose from about \$627 million to about \$972 million—or by about 55 percent.¹⁰ After factoring in inflation, the increase still amounts to about 14 percent. At 10 of the 12 parks we visited, funding increases outpaced inflation during this time period. Increases ranged from about 2 to 200 percent. Despite these increases, additional demands on the parks are eroding the Park Service's ability to keep up with visitor services and resource management needs.

To more fully understand the management of parks, it is important to note that the majority of the operations budget—in most cases, over 75 percent for the 12 parks we visited—goes toward salary and benefit costs. The remaining amount—usually 25 percent or less—funds all other ongoing operating needs, such as utilities, supplies and materials, equipment, training, and travel. Table 3.1 shows the fiscal year 1993 operations budget and the breakdown of salary and benefits versus other costs for each of the 12 parks we visited. In order for these data to be comparable with the 1993 data we collected on park conditions, we used fiscal year 1993 as the basis for our budget analysis.

¹⁰For the Statue of Liberty NM and Ellis Island, we used 1987 through 1993 because the Statue was closed for renovation for much of 1985 and 1986.

Chapter 3
Major Factors Contributing to the Current Situation

Table 3.1: Information on Fiscal Year 1993 Operations Budgets for the 12 Parks That GAO Visited

Park unit	Fiscal year 1993 operations budget ^a	Salary and benefits		Remaining funds available	
		Percent ^b	Dollars	Percent	Dollars
Hopewell Furnace NHS	\$636,000	90	\$572,000	10	\$64,000
Glacier NP	6,980,000	85	5,933,000	15	1,047,000
Bandelier NM	1,412,000	83	1,172,000	17	240,000
Antietam NB	1,269,000	81	1,028,000	19	241,000
Lake Mead NRA	9,184,000	76	6,980,000	24	2,204,000
Harpers Ferry NHP	3,490,000	79	2,757,000	21	733,000
Padre Island NS	1,909,000	79	1,508,000	21	401,000
Yosemite NP	15,430,000	78	12,035,000	22	3,395,000
Shenandoah NP	7,058,000	77	5,435,000	23	1,623,000
Pecos NHP	1,014,000	67	679,000	33	335,000
Denali NP and PRES	6,696,000	60 ^c	4,018,000	40	3,496,000
Statue of Liberty NM and Ellis Island	8,322,000	58 ^c	4,826,000	42	2,678,000

Legend

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^aDollar figures are rounded.

^bThese percentages were provided by park managers. Percentages may include small amounts of nonoperating budget funds. Because we calculated the salary percentages on operating funds only, the actual percentage and dollar calculations for the remaining available funds may be slightly different from those shown for some parks.

^cSome activities that would be carried out by park personnel are contracted out at this park. Contracted functions are funded primarily from the remaining funds available.

Source: National Park Service.

Additional Operating Requirements

Many additional operating requirements are passed on to the parks through federal laws or administrative requirements. In many cases, funds are not made available to the parks to cover the entire cost of complying

with these requirements. Park managers cited numerous requirements from such laws as the Occupational Safety and Health Act and the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act. At the 12 parks we visited, park managers cited many different federal laws affecting the parks' operations. (See app. I for a listing of these laws and their requirements.) While some of these laws were enacted over 20 years ago, the requirements to comply with them may change over time. To the extent that this occurs, the result may lead to increased operating requirements for parks. In addition, to the extent that they are not fully funded, other requirements, such as changes in employee benefits and ranger certification procedures, can significantly affect parks' budgets and the level of visitor services and resource management activities that the parks can undertake.

Park managers told us that meeting the requirements of numerous federal laws frequently means diverting personnel and/or dollars from other day-to-day park activities, such as visitor services or resource management. For example, according to a park official, in fiscal year 1994, Yosemite officials spent about \$122,000 to address two federal requirements—\$42,000 to correct violations of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's regulations and \$80,000 to identify and remove hazardous waste. These costs included both personnel and nonpersonnel expenditures. Officials at Yosemite told us that no additional funds were provided to the park for these expenses and that the personnel and dollars needed to meet these requirements were therefore diverted from other planned visitor and resource management activities.

At Glacier, federal requirements for lead paint abatement, asbestos removal, surface and waste water treatment, and accessibility for disabled visitors required park managers to divert staff time and operating funds from visitor and resource management activities. For example, to comply with provisions of the Safe Drinking Water Act, we were told by park officials at Glacier that they must test the water in the park's systems for bacteria more frequently. Beginning in fiscal year 1992, instead of submitting one sample for bacterial testing each month, they were required to submit two. Additionally, the cost of each test doubled from about \$7 to \$15. With 27 separate water systems to test monthly, the cost of testing for bacteria only (many other tests are required for other substances) has risen from about \$2,268 to \$9,720 per year. The park had to absorb the \$7,452 increase per year from the nonsalary portion of its operating budget—about 1 percent of the fiscal year 1993 amount. In addition, the Safe Drinking Water Act imposed new requirements that did not exist before, such as chlorinating the main water system and then

dechlorinating it prior to its discharge into a river. This has added about \$10,000 to \$12,000 per year to the park's water costs—about another 1 percent of the park's nonsalary budget amount.

In addition to operating requirements placed on parks by a variety of federal laws, park operating budgets are affected by required changes in personnel costs, such as compensation and benefits. Because salaries and benefits constitute such a large percentage of a park's budget—in most cases, over 75 percent in most cases for the parks we visited—almost any increase affecting salaries that is not fully funded (e.g., cost-of-living raises, employer retirement contributions, and increased compensation for certain types of employees) will have a major impact on a park's budget. For example, according to a headquarters official, in fiscal year 1994, the National Park Service requested and the Congress approved an upgraded civil service classification for rangers. The upgraded classification resulted in increased compensation for park rangers, beginning in the last quarter of fiscal year 1994. Although most parks received additional funds to partially offset the increased compensation costs in the first full year, some parks had to absorb large amounts from their operating budgets. Lake Mead, for example, absorbed about \$200,000 in fiscal year 1995, while Shenandoah absorbed about \$50,000 out of its budget for that year. We were also advised that unless additional funds are provided, future increased ranger costs will be paid by the parks. Unless park managers are willing to reduce park staffing, these additional personnel costs that the parks must absorb are diverted from the 25 percent or less of the annual operating budget that they have available after salaries and benefits. In the case of Lake Mead, the \$200,000 represented about 9 percent of the fiscal year 1993 nonsalary total; for Shenandoah, the additional cost represented about 3 percent.

Finally, the parks must also absorb other increases in nonpersonnel costs for activities that they are required to undertake. For example, in 1991, the Department of the Interior required that its nonseasonal law enforcement officers undergo a higher-level background check than had previously been done to better ensure their qualifications. As a result, the cost of each background check jumped from under \$100 to about \$1,800. Since 1991, that cost has risen to over \$3,000, according to several Park Service officials. In addition, the cost of background checks for seasonal law enforcement employees is now about \$1,800. In fiscal year 1994, Yosemite spent about \$200,000 on background checks. This represented about 6 percent of the fiscal year 1993 operating budget available after salaries and benefits.

While park managers did not disagree with the merits of the various laws and other requirements with which they must comply, they believe that when taken as a whole, operating funds available for park activities relating to visitor and resource management are significantly hampered by complying with these requirements.

Increased Visitation

The second factor eroding the parks' ability to keep up with visitor and resource needs is the increase in visitation. Eight of the 12 parks showed increases in the number of visitors; the average increase was about 26 percent since 1985. The four parks where decreases occurred were small historical parks, where visitation for all four parks averaged less than 200,000 in 1993. In addition, in many parks, the length of the tourist season has been expanding. Thus, not only are more people at many parks, but the length of time for which at least basic services must be provided is increasing. Table 3.2 shows the changes in visitation at the 12 parks we visited.

Chapter 3
Major Factors Contributing to the Current Situation

Table 3.2: Visitation Changes at the 12 Parks That GAO Visited, Fiscal Years 1985-93

Park unit	1985 visitation	1993 visitation	Percent change increase or decrease ^a
Bandelier NM	238,000	367,000	54
Yosemite NP	2,832,000	3,840,000	36
Glacier NP	1,603,000	2,142,000	34
Statue of Liberty NM and Ellis Island	3,093,000 ^b	4,112,000	33
Lake Mead NRA	7,092,000	9,022,000	27
Denali NP and PRES	437,000	506,000	16
Padre Island NS	669,000	766,000	15
Shenandoah NP	1,933,000	1,951,000	1
Pecos NHP	45,000	43,000	(4)
Harpers Ferry NHP	567,000	426,000	(25)
Hopewell Furnace NHS	154,000	109,000	(29)
Antietam NB	585,000	182,000	(69)

Legend

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^aDecrease is shown in parentheses.

^bThis figure is for fiscal year 1987 because the Statue of Liberty was closed for renovation for much of 1985 and 1986.

Source: National Park Service.

Substantial increases in visitation drive up costs for many operations that directly support visitor activities, such as waste disposal; general maintenance and supplies; road, trail and campground repair; employee overtime; and utilities. Additionally, staff are sometimes diverted from other activities to manage the increasing crowds. For example, according to a park official at Bandelier, because of increased visitation, comfort stations must be cleaned more frequently and litter must also be picked up more often, resulting in the allocation of more of the park's budget to maintenance personnel and less to resource management activities. Park

officials at Bandelier also told us that especially on weekends, resource management, visitor protection, and interpretive staff are assigned to direct traffic or perform other crowd control activities. An official at Lake Mead told us that because of increased visitation and staffing limitations, some law enforcement rangers work 125 hours over a 2-week period and earn \$2,000 to \$3,000 per month in overtime during the summer. In total, the park officials at Lake Mead indicated that they spend about \$150,000 annually on summer overtime for law enforcement rangers.

In addition, the expansion of the visitor season has created increased demands on parks. At Glacier, for example, September visitation now rivals that of historically high June, and almost 20 percent of the park's annual visitation occurs in September and October. Officials at many of the parks we visited spoke of an expanded visitor season. This expansion requires at least minimal visitor services and facilities for longer periods than had traditionally been the case. Combined with current budget and personnel ceilings, this expansion has sometimes necessitated cutting back on the scope and amount of services available during the peak season (e.g., fewer interpretive programs and shorter visitor center hours) or diverting staff from other activities to handle the longer visitor season. For example, at Glacier, the variety of walks and hikes offered during the peak season of fiscal year 1993 declined so that some services could be provided in September. Even so, officials at some of the parks told us that they are able to provide only a limited amount of visitor services during the extended season. Some park officials also told us that the increasing visitation levels and seasons are a major factor in absorbing the operating budget increases in recent years.

Conclusions

The National Park Service received increased operating budgets from fiscal year 1985 through fiscal year 1993. During this time, the agency's operating budget, adjusted for inflation, has increased about 14 percent. At 10 of the 12 parks we visited, funding increases outpaced inflation. However, at the same time, new requirements and demands that have seriously eroded the impact of these budget increases have been placed on the parks. These include additional operating requirements imposed on park managers by a number of laws and administrative requirements and additional operating demands associated with increasing levels of visitation. Cumulatively, these factors have contributed to declining levels of visitor services and resource management activities and have limited the parks' ability to stem this decline. As a result, many park needs are not being met.

**Agency Comments
and Our Evaluation**

National Park Service officials provided no comment on this chapter of the report.

Choices for Addressing Park Conditions Will Be Difficult

Many of the problems facing the National Park Service are not new. At the same time that visitor services are being cut back and parks are operating without sufficient information on the condition of many of their resources, the Park Service faces a multibillion-dollar maintenance backlog and, like all federal agencies, tight budgets. In addition, infrastructure and development needs for the park system continue to grow as new units are added—31 since 1985. Under these circumstances, an improvement in the short term is unlikely. Dealing with this situation calls for the Park Service, the administration, and the Congress to make difficult choices involving how the parks are funded and managed. However, regardless of which, if any, of these choices are made, the Park Service should seek to stretch available resources wherever possible by operating more efficiently, continuing to improve its financial management and performance measurement systems, and broadening the scope of its current restructuring plans.

Choices for Addressing Park Conditions Center on Three Alternatives

The choices available to deal with the conditions within the national park system center on three alternatives: (1) increasing the amount of financial resources for the parks, (2) limiting or reducing the number of units in the park system, and (3) reducing the level of visitor services. The alternatives can be considered individually or in combination.

The Amount of Financial Resources for the Parks

If the national park system is to maintain its size and traditional level of visitor services, additional financial resources will be necessary. Today, the annual operating budget for the national park system is over \$1.1 billion. Of this amount, less than 8 percent is derived from revenues generated by entrance and other in-park fees. The Park Service estimates that during fiscal year 1995, it will receive about 33 cents in fees, on average, from each park visit. In comparison, it will cost the Park Service about \$4.12 for each park visit.¹¹ One way to increase financial resources to the parks is for the Congress to increase the Park Service's annual appropriations. However, given today's tight fiscal climate, it is unlikely that substantially increased federal appropriations will be available to fill the gap between park revenues and park operating expenses. To fill the gap, additional sources of revenues would have to be found. Sources of increased revenues to the parks could include (1) increasing park fees, (2) receiving better returns from in-park concessioners, and

¹¹The amount "about 33 cents" was derived by adding estimated recreation, entrance, and user fees for fiscal year 1995 and dividing the total by the estimated number of fiscal year 1995 visits. The \$4.12 amount was derived by dividing the estimated fiscal year 1995 operating budget by the fiscal year 1995 estimated visits.

(3) encouraging park managers to be more entrepreneurial by providing them with authority to enter into partnership agreements with nonfederal entities. These alternatives are not new; the Park Service has initiated and/or supported similar proposals in the past.

Increased park fees would come primarily from two sources— entrance admissions and fees for camping, backcountry, and other in-park activities. Regarding park entrance fees, 186 of the 368 park units charge entrance fees. Of those, fewer than 10 percent charge the maximum allowable admission rate of \$3 per person or \$5 per vehicle.¹² Table 4.1 shows the fee status and fees charged at the 12 parks included in our study.

Table 4.1: Noncommercial Single-Visit Entrance Fees Allowed and Charged at the 12 Parks That GAO Visited

Unit	Fee allowed? ^a	Fee charged	
		Vehicle	Per-person
Antietam NB	Yes	None	\$2.00
Bandelier NM	Yes	\$5.00	3.00
Denali NP and PRES	Yes	5.00	3.00
Glacier NP	Yes	5.00	3.00
Harpers Ferry NHP	Yes	5.00	3.00
Hopewell Furnace NHS	Yes	None	2.00
Lake Mead NRA	Yes	None	None
Padre Island NS	Yes	4.00	2.00
Pecos NHP	Yes	None	2.00
Shenandoah NP	Yes	5.00	3.00
Statue of Liberty NM and Ellis Island	No	Not applicable	Not applicable
Yosemite NP	Yes	5.00	3.00

Legend

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^aThe maximum fee allowed at these parks is \$5.00 per vehicle or \$3.00 per person. Visitors pay one or the other, not both. Some parks may have a maximum family fee.

Source: National Park Service.

¹²Yellowstone, Grand Canyon, and Grand Teton National Parks are permitted to charge higher rates by law.

In some cases, those park units that do not charge entrance fees are legislatively precluded from doing so. The Statue of Liberty National Monument and Ellis Island is one such example. On the basis of the number of visitors to the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island in 1993, imposing an entrance fee of about \$2 per visitor would allow the park to cover its operating costs.¹³ Using the same formula, we found that considerably higher fees would be required at other parks. For example, on the basis of 1993 visitation levels at Pecos National Historical Park, a fee of about \$23 per visit would be required to fully fund operating costs.

In addition to entrance fees, charging fees for an array of other in-park activities also presents opportunities to increase park revenues. Many in-park activities, such as fishing, backcountry hiking and camping, climbing, and commercial filmmaking, place special demands on park resources. These activities put pressure on the park's human and physical resources, as well as infrastructure, beyond that created by visitors who merely go to the parks to look at the resources. Yet, additional costs associated with these activities are only partially passed on to the users of these services or not at all. For example, according to park officials, neither Harpers Ferry nor Antietam charges fees for issuing commercial filming permits, although they do recover any actual costs incurred because of the filming. (Harpers Ferry recovers costs only if the filming takes more than 2 days). In Glacier and Shenandoah National Parks, which have a substantial amount of backcountry camping, no fees are charged for the required permits. In 1994, Shenandoah issued over 8,300 permits for more than 23,000 people. Currently, throughout the national park system, fees cover only about 5 percent of the costs of providing in-park activities.¹⁴

Imposing fees where none exist and/or increasing fees at those park units that now have them may affect visitation. However, a recently published 1995 survey indicated that most people—79 percent—would not mind paying increased fees if the fees stayed within the park system.¹⁵ At the same time, while increasing the amount of fees going to the parks will not solve all of the parks' financial problems, it could help stem the

¹³This figure was derived by dividing the park's fiscal year 1993 operating budget by the number of fiscal year 1993 visitors. It is subject to fluctuation as budget and visitation numbers change annually. Additionally, the calculation includes all visitors, such as babies and senior citizens, for whom the fee structure might be different. The calculation is used to provide a rough estimate of cost per visit.

¹⁴See Accompanying Report of the National Performance Review: Department of the Interior (1993), p. 18.

¹⁵National Public Opinion Survey on the National Park System: Executive Summary Report, National Parks and Conservation Association (Feb. 1995).

deteriorating conditions identified in this report and would shift some of the cost burden from general taxpayers to the beneficiaries of the services. While entrance fees may not be desirable or feasible at some units, to the extent that fees are permitted or increased, the revenues would need to stay within the park system and not be returned to the U.S. Treasury, as now occurs.¹⁶ In this regard, the Department of the Interior proposed in 1994 to increase park entrance fees for fiscal year 1995. However, the proposed legislation was not enacted. Interior has made a similar proposal in fiscal year 1995 that calls for the majority of the revenue generated from increased fees to be retained in the national park system.

Better returns from concessioners' contracts throughout the national park system would also expand the revenue base available to parks. Similar to entrance and user fees, increased revenues from concessioners' contracts, if returned to the parks, could be used to help fund the parks' operations. However, like entrance fees, for the parks to benefit from increased concession fees, these fees must remain in the Park Service and not be returned to the U.S. Treasury, as now occurs.

Historically, the Park Service has not viewed concessioners' contracts as business assets but as customer service obligations. Accordingly, the agency has not approached concessions management with the objective of realizing a fair return for the taxpayer. Instead, the return to the government has averaged under 3 percent of gross concession revenues. Current and past administrations have acknowledged that these returns are too low.

Another way to expand the revenue base for operating and maintaining the national park system is to encourage more entrepreneurial approaches by park managers by providing them with more flexibility to enter into partnership agreements with the private sector and other parties. As pointed out in the administration's report on the National Performance Review (NPR), private donations, even more than park fees and concessioners' contracts, represent a source of untapped revenue for the Park Service.¹⁷ Although more than 200 nonprofit groups and many corporations give money to the parks, the Park Service is hindered in its dealings with them. Currently, park managers have no authority to directly

¹⁶According to Park Service officials, fees charged for special uses, such as filming, stay in the park where they were collected. These fees are a small part of any park's budget. In addition, up to 15 percent of entrance and user fees are allocated back to fee-collecting parks for fee-collection activities. The remaining 85 percent are deposited into a special treasury account and allocated back to all parks using a predetermined formula. The allocation is part of their base budget.

¹⁷See Accompanying Report of the National Performance Review: Department of Interior (1993), p. 19.

solicit funds and may not enter into cooperative agreements with nonfederal partners unless specifically authorized by law. Donations can currently be made directly to the Park Service or through the National Park Foundation, which was established by the Congress in 1976 to solicit, accept, and administer donations for the benefit of the Park Service. At the park level, some Park Service officials believe that if provided with broader authority to enter into partnerships with nonfederal organizations and to solicit donations, the Park Service could be more entrepreneurial in its efforts to close the gap between its current funding sources and park needs.

Limit the Number of Park Units

In lieu of, or in conjunction with, permitting an increased flow of revenues to the parks, another alternative that could be considered—assuming stable funding levels—is limiting or perhaps even cutting back on the number of units in the national park system. To the extent that the system is permitted to grow, associated infrastructure and development needs will also grow. As this occurs, more park units will be competing for the limited federal funding that is available. One way to help ease the financial pressures now facing the national park system until current park conditions can be adequately addressed is to limit the number of parks added to the system, perhaps by implementing a more rigorous review and approval process or by better defining what types of units should be included. Another way to ease financial pressures is to reduce the number of units currently in the system, taking into account the costs, benefits, and savings that would be achieved by specific decisions. In commenting on this report, Park Service officials stated that substantial cost savings could only be achieved by closing some of the largest park units, which is unlikely.

Reductions in Visitor Services

Another alternative, in the absence of increased financial support, would be to reduce the level of visitor services provided by the parks to more closely match the level of services that can be realistically accomplished with available resources. This could include, for example, limiting operations to fewer hours per day or fewer days per year, limiting the number of visitors, or perhaps temporarily closing some facilities to public use.

The Park Service's Management Can Better Focus Park Resources

Regardless of which, if any, of the choices mentioned above are made, the Park Service should seek to stretch available resources by operating more efficiently, continuing to improve financial management and performance measurement systems, and broadening the scope of its current restructuring plans. While these actions alone will probably not be sufficient to meet all of the Park Service's funding needs, they should result in increased efficiencies so that the Park Service can do more under current funding levels.

As we reported earlier this year, our work, as well as that of Interior's Inspector General, has shown that the Park Service lacks (1) necessary financial and program data on its operations, (2) adequate internal controls on how its funds are spent, and (3) performance measures on what is being accomplished with the money being spent.¹⁸ Accurate data and adequate financial controls are prerequisites for developing reliable management reports and measures of performance that could help the agency operate more efficiently. Accurate data, effective controls, and useful measures of performance would lower the agency's costs by permitting managers to focus on results.

The Park Service has reached agreement with the Department of the Interior's Inspector General on how to address the concerns relating to necessary financial data and adequate internal controls. The Park Service is currently implementing an accounting system improvement project plan agreed to by the Inspector General. Additionally, the Park Service is in the process of developing reliable performance measures.

With proper implementation of these management tools, the Park Service will be able to know (1) whether funds are being used for their intended purpose, (2) the nature and the extent of the problems associated with the resources it is mandated to protect and preserve, (3) the effectiveness of measures taken to deal with the problems, and (4) the activities and programs for which limited resources can be allocated to do the most good. The need for improved systems of performance management is particularly critical in light of the highly decentralized nature of the Park Service, where individual park managers have broad discretion to determine how to spend operating funds. Moreover, if the Park Service receives a broader revenue base by increasing fees, getting a higher return on concessioners' contracts, and/or permitting park managers more flexibility to solicit funds by entering into partnerships with nonfederal

¹⁸See National Park Service: Better Data and Controls and Broader Restructuring Efforts Are Needed (GAO/T-RCED-95-101, Feb. 9, 1995).

entities, the need for better systems of performance management is even greater.

Another way the Park Service can stretch its resources is to broaden the scope of its current plan for restructuring the agency. To respond to the streamlining objectives of the administration's NPR initiative, the Park Service has prepared and is currently implementing a restructuring plan. Essentially, the restructuring involves relocating some headquarters personnel to field units and decentralizing certain functions while at the same time protecting on-the-ground employees who deliver services directly to the public. This plan is to be implemented over the next 4 fiscal years.

As we testified in February 1995, we believe that the current plan should achieve some improvements; however, we are concerned that it does not go far enough because it only addresses gains to be derived from sharing resources within the Park Service. In our view, the current fiscal climate demands that the Park Service work with other federal land management agencies¹⁹ to reduce costs, increase efficiency, and improve service to the public by collocating or combining activities wherever possible. The Park Service has begun to do this with several agencies—federal, state, and local—and needs to continue to look beyond its own organizational boundaries and work closely with the Congress and other federal land management agencies to develop a coordinated interagency strategy to link Park Service reforms to reforms being proposed by other federal agencies. The ultimate goal of this strategy would be to coordinate and integrate the functions, systems, activities and programs of the Park Service with those of the other federal land management agencies so that they operate as a unit at the local level.

Moreover, as its restructuring plan proceeds, the Park Service is now being asked to respond to the second phase of the NPR initiative. This second phase, announced in January 1995, is asking the Park Service to identify functions and programs that it could terminate, privatize, or devolve to state or local governments. To the extent that these determinations result in relieving the Park Service of functions or programs not essential to its mission, costs should be reduced.

¹⁹Other land management agencies include the Bureau of Land Management, the Bureau of Reclamation, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, within the Department of the Interior; the U.S. Forest Service, within the Department of Agriculture; and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, within the Department of Defense.

Conclusions

The national park system is at a crossroads. While more people are visiting parks, the scope and quality of the services available to these visitors are deteriorating. In addition, the National Park Service, as the steward for many of the nation's natural and cultural treasures, has a myriad of problems to address, ranging from insufficient data on the conditions of resources to an ever-increasing, multibillion-dollar maintenance backlog. While the Park Service has recognized these problems and has taken some actions to address them, the magnitude of the problems calls for difficult choices to be made by the Park Service, the administration, and the Congress. Choosing among the various alternatives for funding and managing the parks will be difficult. However, unless choices are made, further cutbacks in visitor services will have to occur, and the Park Service's ability to preserve and protect national treasures for the enjoyment of future generations may be in jeopardy. Regardless of which, if any, of these choices or combination of choices is made, the Park Service needs to continue to look for ways to stretch its resources by operating more efficiently and improving its financial management and performance measurement systems.

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

National Park Service officials provided both technical clarifications and substantive comments on this chapter. The report was revised to reflect their comments. Substantively, Park Service officials stated that increased appropriations is an alternative for dealing with the parks' lack of adequate financial resources but that our report implied it was not. We agree that increased appropriations is a choice. However, we think it is an unlikely one in today's tight fiscal climate and have revised the report accordingly. In addition, Park Service officials mentioned that private capital is another alternative to increase revenues. We agree; private capital is already addressed as part of our discussion of possible ways to increase the flow of revenues to the parks. Specifically, we note that donations and partnerships with private entities could help close the funding gap in the parks.

Park Service officials also commented that increasing fees at the national parks would not make the system self-sufficient, although they support the need for increased fees. They also said that there may be some units, such as Independence Hall, which should not charge fees because of their national significance. We agree that increasing fees is not going to fix all of the problems in the parks and have revised the report to reflect that point. We believe, however, that it is an alternative that can provide more

revenue to parks. We also recognize that charging fees may be undesirable or infeasible at some units and have revised the report accordingly.

Park Service officials further commented on our discussion of limiting and/or reducing the number of park units. They said that there is no evidence that the addition of new units has taken away from resources for existing units. We believe that given the current tight fiscal climate, future growth in appropriations is unlikely; accordingly, new units would be competing for available funds. The officials also said that closing units could be costly and that the size of units likely to be closed may not provide substantial cost savings. We agree that net cost-savings should be considered in any closure decisions and have revised the report to reflect this. Park Service officials also said that to achieve any substantial cost savings, large units would have to be closed, which is unlikely. This comment has been reflected in the report.

Finally, Park Service officials identified efforts that they felt needed to be acknowledged in the report. We agree and have revised the report to acknowledge Park Service's efforts in the areas of (1) developing various fee legislation proposals, (2) working in partnership with other agencies, and (3) addressing prior findings of the Inspector General relating to financial management and internal control issues.

Selected Federal Laws Affecting the National Parks

Law	Park requirements
American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978	Requires that access to and use of park lands and resources not unduly interfere with Native Americans' use of historically traditional places or sacred sites within a park. Parks must identify sacred resources in consultation with relevant populations.
Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990	Requires that people with disabilities have equal access to employment, services, programs, and facilities at parks. Parks must complete annual evaluations using disabled consumers or knowledgeable experts.
Antiquities Act of 1906	Requires permits for examination or excavation of historic or prehistoric ruins.
Archeological and Historic Preservation Act of 1974	Authorizes spending of up to 1 percent of project costs for mitigation of impacts to cultural resource sites and properties.
Archeological Resources Protection Act of 1979	Requires the development of plans for surveying lands to identify and evaluate archeological resources, the establishment of public education programs, and the preservation and custody of excavated materials, records, and data.
Architectural Barriers Act of 1968	Requires that facilities and programs be made accessible to persons with disabilities.
Clean Air Act of 1970 (as amended)	Requires the preservation, protection, and enhancement of air quality. Parks must comply with states' air quality implementation plans; establish monitoring and/or research programs; provide responses to permit applications; and provide for a section on air quality in park management documents.
Clean Water Act of 1977	Requires control and abatement of water pollution, including monitoring effluent discharge, obtaining required permits, and monitoring water quality.
Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act of 1980	Provides funding and enforcement for cleaning hazardous waste sites and spills. Applies to air, surface, groundwater, and soil.
Endangered Species Act of 1973	Provides for the conservation of threatened and endangered species of fish, wildlife, and plants. Parks must maintain an inventory of endangered or threatened species, consider impacts of projects or programs on such species, and consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service about activities that could affect listed species. Parks must implement tasks to recover listed species, monitor their status, and report such expenditures annually to the Congress.
Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972	Defines responsibilities for nondiscrimination and affirmative action.
Historic Sites, Buildings, and Antiquities Act of 1935	Authorizes the Park Service to conduct historical research; restore, reconstruct, rehabilitate, preserve, and maintain historical properties; and establish museums.
Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965	Provides source of funds for acquisition of lands or interest in land so that resources are protected and preserved.
Mining in the Parks Act of 1976	Regulates the development of federal mining claims to prevent adverse impacts to park resources. Parks must monitor and report on landmarks threatened by surface mining.

(continued)

Appendix I
Selected Federal Laws Affecting the
National Parks

Law	Park requirements
National Environmental Policy Act of 1969	Requires parks to review all proposed actions to determine potential impact on the human environment. Actions can require environmental assessments or full environmental impact statements. Public participation and review may be required.
National Historic Preservation Act of 1966	Establishes a national policy of historic preservation. Parks must identify resources, evaluate their significance, assess the impact of any proposed actions, and mitigate adverse affects.
National Park Service General Authorities Act of 1970	Provides for additional improvement to and authorization for the administration of the national park system. Provides the general authority for many of the activities undertaken in parks, such as law enforcement.
Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990	Requires protection for Native American burial areas and return of items to affiliated tribes. Parks must summarize funerary, sacred, and cultural objects and prepare detailed inventories of human remains and associated funerary objects. Parks must consult with relevant Native Americans in preparing documents.
Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970	Defines safety and occupational health policies, programs, and standards for parks.
Resource Conservation and Recovery Act of 1976	Governs the disposal of hazardous and/or solid waste and establishes guidelines for collecting, transporting, separating, recovering, and disposing of such waste.
Safe Drinking Water Act of 1974	Assures safe drinking water supplied by public water systems. Parks must provide water within established quality standards and provide testing to assure compliance.
Solid Waste Disposal Act (as amended)	Regulates the disposal of solid or hazardous waste, including requirements for permits and reporting.
Toxic Substances Control Act	Requires testing of chemical substances that may present an unreasonable high risk to human health or the environment.

Source: Descriptions and requirements of laws provided by the Park Service.

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Appendix II
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Related GAO Products

Park Service Management Issues

National Park Service: Difficult Choices Need to Be Made on the Future of the Parks (GAO/T-RCED-95-124, Mar. 7, 1995).

National Park Service: Better Management and Broader Restructuring Efforts Are Needed (GAO/T-RCED-95-101, Feb. 9, 1995).

National Park Service: Reexamination of Employee Housing Program Is Needed (GAO/RCED-94-284, Aug. 30, 1994).

National Park Service: Activities Outside Park Borders Have Caused Damage to Resources and Will Likely Cause More (GAO/RCED-94-59, Jan. 3, 1994).

Department of the Interior: Transfer of the Presidio From the Army to the National Park Service (GAO/T-RCED-94-64, Oct. 26, 1993).

Department of the Interior: Transfer of the Presidio From the Army to the National Park Service (GAO/RCED-94-61, Oct. 26, 1993).

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