

# Draft Visitor Access and Experience Plan/ Environmental Assessment

Arches National Park | Utah  
October 2024

National Park Service  
US Department  
of the Interior



## Dear Friends:

Thank you for your continued interest in visitor access and experience at Arches National Park (“the park”). In fall 2023, the National Park Service (NPS) sought your feedback on your experiences during the pilot timed entry reservation system. We also asked you for ideas on other long-term strategies the park might consider for providing a positive visitor experience while protecting the park’s resources. Your feedback is an important part of this process and was instrumental in helping us develop a range of alternative concepts and identify issues to address. Using that information, the NPS has prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) for its Visitor Access and Experience Plan (“the plan”) in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which assesses the environmental impacts of the draft plan and other alternatives. This newsletter includes updates on the draft plan and EA, instructions on how to provide comments, and information on how to participate in public meetings during the public review period.

This newsletter provides a brief introduction and overview of the draft plan and EA. The park encourages you to participate in the public review period by reviewing the draft plan and EA, attending a public meeting, and providing your feedback to the planning team. You can provide comments on our NPS Planning, Environment, and Public Comment website at <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/ARCHvisitoruse>. Comments will be accepted for 30 days after publication of the draft plan/EA, until November 23, 2024.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

**Lena I. Pace**

*Superintendent, Arches National Park*

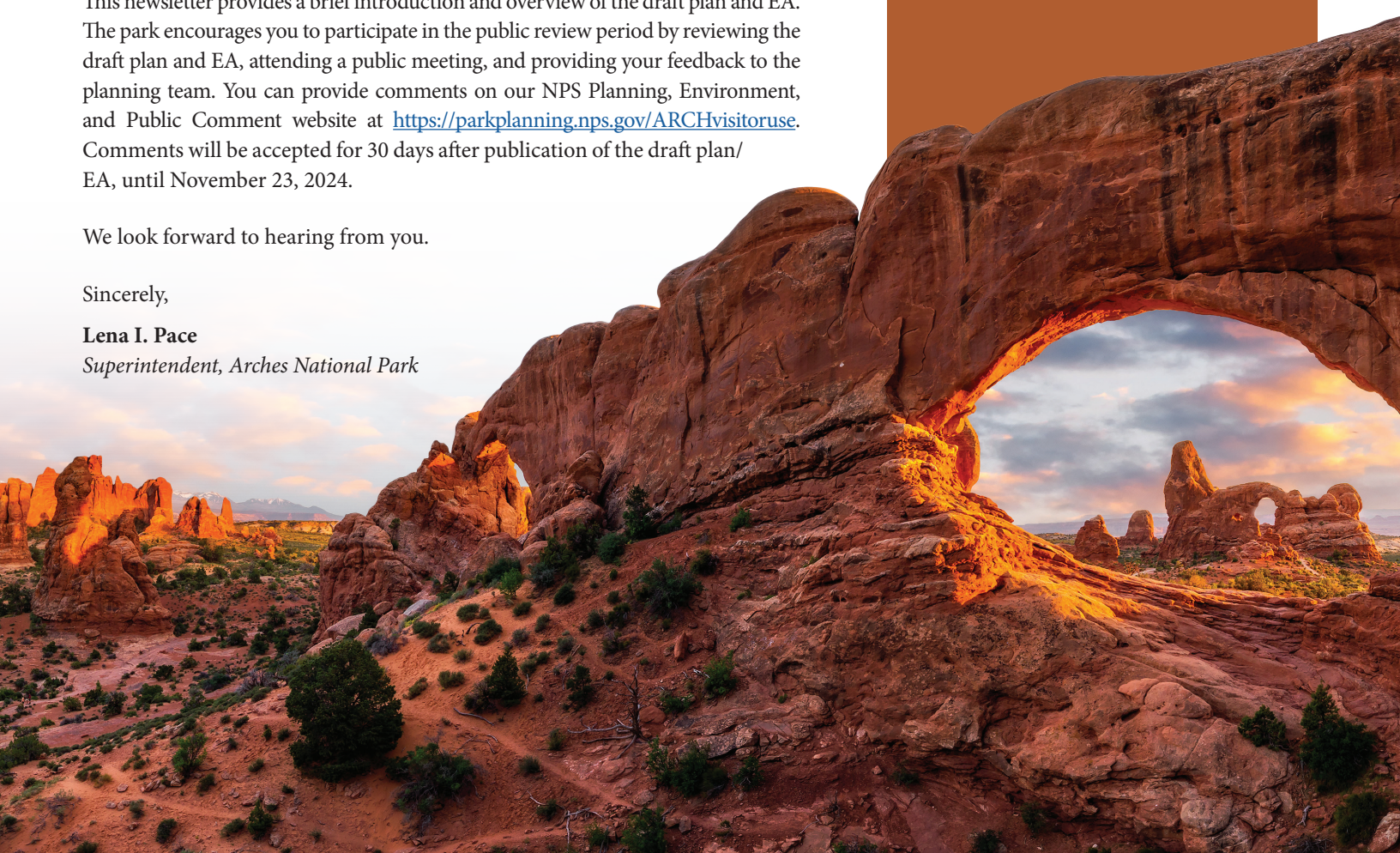
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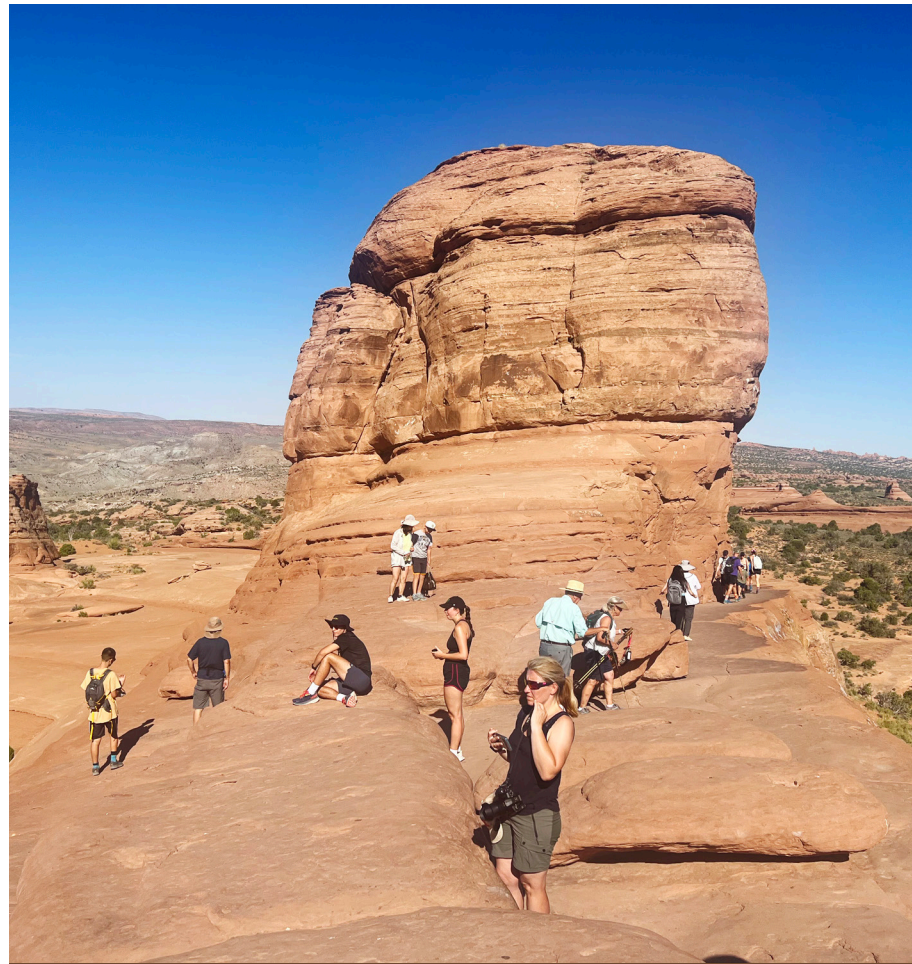


## Background Information

Visitors from across the world travel to Arches National Park to see amazing geologic formations, hike to outstanding viewpoints, and experience sunsets that inspire. Visitation to the park increased by 74% between 2011 and 2021, with record high visitation of 1.8 million visits in 2021. Nearly all visitors arrive by private vehicle, with daily arrivals during the busiest months averaging 2,500 vehicles; on peak days, more than 3,000 vehicles enter the park. Over the years, the peak season has expanded earlier into the spring and later into the fall. This growth in visitation has resulted in parking congestion, long wait times at the entrance station, and crowding at key sites in the park accessed from the scenic drive corridor. Visitors' frustration over these circumstances has diminished the quality of their experience in the park.

Past efforts to address congestion and its related issues have included: proactive planning before congestion or crowding became severe; providing trip-planning tips and suggesting alternative itineraries; expanding, reinforcing, or redesigning existing facilities in high-use areas; promoting alternative methods of transportation; increasing staffing to improve the flow of visitation; and adjusting operating schedules. Despite these efforts, congestion remained an issue, and in 2018, park staff began closing the main entrance for as long as 3 to 5 hours during times of high visitation (e.g., March through October) until congestion lessened.

These temporary entrance station closures were unpredictable and negatively affected visitor access to the park. As a result, the NPS has invested considerable time and effort over the last 5 years to monitor visitor use; collect additional socioeconomic data; conduct visitor surveys; and seek input from Tribal Nations, partner agencies, and members of the public to inform potential future options to address visitor use, access, and experience issues at the park. This included public and stakeholder meetings (2021 and 2022); a Visitor Use, Access, and Experience Study (2020); and consultation with Tribal Nations (2021, 2024). Additionally, through timed entry pilots at the main entrance in 2022, 2023, and 2024, the park tested the effectiveness of timed entry at reducing congestion. During each pilot, the park adjusted the times, length, and start and end dates of reservation periods; purchase lead times; and volume of tickets based on lessons learned and feedback received. The park is now prepared to implement a long-term strategy to address these issues, improve the visitor experience, and protect park resources.



## Purpose

The purpose of the Visitor Access and Experience Plan is to provide predictable, safe, and efficient access for visitors to experience Arches National Park along the scenic drive corridor, including providing visitor opportunities to enjoy the park in a way that achieves desired conditions for resources and visitor experiences in the park.

## Need

Action is needed to quickly address issues associated with congestion at the main entrance, along the scenic drive corridor, and at key sites accessed from the corridor. These issues include unpredictable temporary entrance station closures to manage congestion within the park, hazards posed by roadside parking and pedestrian travel along roadways, degraded resource conditions and visitor experience quality, and overburdened park infrastructure/facilities. Long-term strategies that can be implemented immediately are needed to reduce uncertainty and support predictable, safe, and efficient access for visitors.



## Alternatives

The EA evaluates three alternatives including a no-action alternative (alternative A) and two action alternatives (B and C). Under alternative B and C, the park would update the desired conditions for natural resources and visitor experiences in its visitor experience zones. Readers can find more information on the alternatives in chapter 2 of the draft plan and EA and appendix A.

### Alternative A (No-Action Alternative)

Under this alternative, park staff would manage visitor access similar to how it was managed before implementing the timed entry pilots (i.e., before 2022). The park would be accessed on a first-come, first-served basis, and staff would close areas of the park or implement temporary entrance station closures when visitor demand exceeds parking capacity.



### Alternative B (Preferred Alternative)

Under alternative B—the NPS's preferred alternative—all visitors in private vehicles would be required to obtain a timed entry reservation to access the main entrance to the park during certain hours of the peak visitor use season (with exemptions for campers, permit or tour ticket holders, authorized commercial use, etc.). Initially, the park expects to implement timed entry from April through October, 7:00 a.m. to 4 p.m. Outside of these times, visitors would be able to enter through the main entrance without a reservation. During periods when timed entry is in effect, visitors would be required to obtain a reservation to enter the park within a specific hourly time window (e.g., between 9:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m.) on a specific date, and could remain in the park as long as they like and access all areas except those requiring specific permits, such as Fiery Furnace. Alternative B is intended to distribute visitor use across the hours of each peak season day to achieve desired conditions. The ability to adapt the timed entry reservation system to changing use patterns is a key element of the draft plan. For example, the season and times of day when the reservation system is in effect may be adjusted annually based on monitoring data and visitation trends.

### Alternative C

Under alternative C, all visitors in private vehicles during the peak visitor use season would be required to obtain a daily reservation for entry into the park that would allow for arrival at any time of the day (with the same exemptions for campers, permit holders, authorized commercial use, etc.). Initially the park would implement this system from April through October, 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. Outside these times, visitors would be able to enter the park through the main entrance without a daily reservation. Unlike the timed entry reservations of alternative B that specify hourly entry windows (e.g., between 9:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m.), daily reservations for the park would allow for more flexibility and spontaneity of visitors' arrival times. However, because visitation could not be leveled across the day, the number of reservations available under alternative C would be kept lower than in alternative B to achieve desired conditions, including conditions related to resources and visitor experience, at peak use times. Like alternative B, alternative C allows for annual adjustment to the plan based on monitoring data and visitation trends.

# Environmental Issues

In the context of NEPA, “issues” or “environmental issues” can be problems, concerns, conflicts, obstacles, or benefits that result from implementation of the alternatives, including the no-action alternative. Based on internal agency discussions and feedback from Tribal Nations, partner agencies, and the general public, the EA focuses on issues and potential impacts related to visitor access, use, and experience and socioeconomics.

## Visitor Access, Use, and Experience



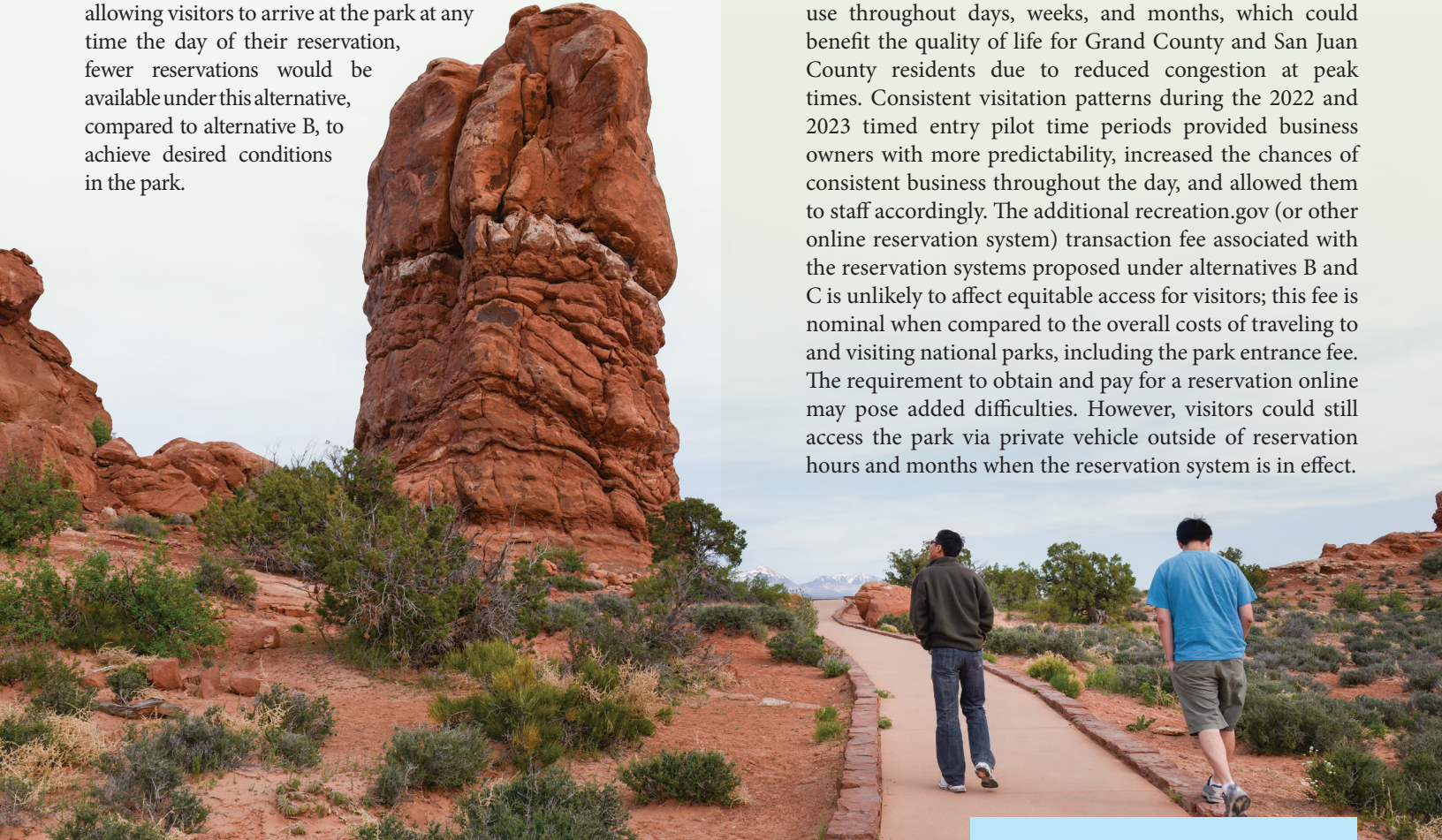
Alternatives B and C would provide predictable access to the park for those who obtain a reservation, and access would be improved by a reduction in long vehicle queues at the entrance station and less competition for parking at key attraction sites along the scenic drive. Similar to conditions during the pilots, the reduction in concentrated visitor use during peak times would lead to less crowding at trailheads and at primary attraction sites and likely reduce hourly encounter rates on trails. Compared to conditions prior to the timed entry pilots (no-action alternative), establishing a reservation system at the park would negatively affect visitors seeking unplanned access to the entire park; however, this requirement would maintain spontaneity for visitors accessing the park outside of the timed entry reservation periods and accessing desired sites once inside the park. While alternative C would provide flexibility allowing visitors to arrive at the park at any time the day of their reservation, fewer reservations would be available under this alternative, compared to alternative B, to achieve desired conditions in the park.

## Socioeconomics



Under the timed entry pilots between 2022 and 2024, economic health (as measured by total overall tourism spending, jobs, and tourism-related taxable sales) and quality of life in Grand County and San Juan County improved even with a 2022 decline in visitation compared to average visitation between 2016 and 2019. Alternatives B and C may shift some visitation from the period when reservations are in effect to the non-reservation period, providing business owners with increased changes for extending business operations beyond the summer season. In addition, the proximity of other high-quality recreation sites and an increasingly diverse economy likely help insulate local travel and tourism businesses from fluctuations in park visitation.

Alternatives B and C are designed to disperse visitor use throughout days, weeks, and months, which could benefit the quality of life for Grand County and San Juan County residents due to reduced congestion at peak times. Consistent visitation patterns during the 2022 and 2023 timed entry pilot time periods provided business owners with more predictability, increased the chances of consistent business throughout the day, and allowed them to staff accordingly. The additional recreation.gov (or other online reservation system) transaction fee associated with the reservation systems proposed under alternatives B and C is unlikely to affect equitable access for visitors; this fee is nominal when compared to the overall costs of traveling to and visiting national parks, including the park entrance fee. The requirement to obtain and pay for a reservation online may pose added difficulties. However, visitors could still access the park via private vehicle outside of reservation hours and months when the reservation system is in effect.



## EA Estimated Schedule:

<b>Fall 2024</b> ( October 24 - November 23, 2024)	30-day public review period
<b>November 13 &amp; 14, 2024</b>	Virtual and In-person public meetings
<b>Fall/Winter 2024</b>	Analyze comments and prepare public comment analysis report
<b>Winter 2024/2025</b>	Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) and Non- impairment Determination (NID) released (expected)

**Note:** Comments will not be accepted by fax, e-mail, or any other way than those specified in this newsletter. Bulk comments in any format (hard copy or electronic) submitted on behalf of others will not be accepted. Before including your address, phone number, email address, or other personal identifying information in your comment, you should be aware that your entire comment—including your personal identifying information—may be made publicly available at any time. While you can ask us in your comment to withhold your personal identifying information from public review, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so.

# WE WANT YOUR FEEDBACK

### How to Comment

Please submit ALL comments no later than November 23, 2024.



Submit comments electronically at:  
<https://parkplanning.nps.gov/ARCHvisitoruse>



Mail or hand deliver written comments to:  
2282 Resource Blvd  
Moab, UT 84532



**Virtual Meeting**  
November 13, 2024, from 12:00-2:00 p.m.  
[bit.ly/ArchesNPSmeeting](https://bit.ly/ArchesNPSmeeting)



**In-Person Meeting**  
November 14, 2024, from 5:30-7:30 p.m.  
at Grand Center,  
182 N. 500 W., Moab, UT 84532.

