

Fort Scott

National Historic Site
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Threatened Skies

Air Quality in Our National Parks



When Captain Benjamin Moore and his patrol of U.S. Dragoons selected the site for Fort Scott in April 1842, the Great Plains of the midwest contained wide open spaces and clear blue skies. The United States was a young nation that would soon stretch from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. Within these boundaries,

natural, scenic, and cultural resources abounded. Surely Captain Moore's troopers never considered that the clear blue skies of their country could be threatened. Today, air pollution threatens many historic and natural areas, including those areas set aside for protection within the National Park Service.

National Park Service Concern

The National Park Service is very concerned about the quality of air in our parks. If clean air can not be found in our national parks, where can it be found? In 1916, Congress established the National Park Service (NPS) and gave the agency two primary objectives: to protect park resources and to ensure visitor enjoyment for future generations. Air pollution has diminished

visitor enjoyment at national parks, and is damaging and destroying resources the NPS was created to protect and preserve. The Clean Air Act, as amended in 1977, created a national program for managing America's air quality resources. Since that time, the NPS has worked to determine the causes and effects of air pollution in the parks.

Pollution in the Air



Air pollution is emitted from both man-made and natural sources. However, man-made emissions have a more extensive impact on the environment. Pollution released into the atmosphere from sources that burn fossil fuels contaminate the world we live in. Prevailing winds transport air pollutants from

their primary sources of emission into national parks, resulting in: the reduction of visibility at some of the country's most remote and scenic areas; harmful affects on vegetation and wildlife; and the deterioration of some of our country's most famous buildings, statues, and monuments.

Threatened Views

People from across the country and around the world travel long distances to see our national parks. Unfortunately, the scenic view they traveled to see may be obscured by the haze of air

pollution. For example, at Grand Canyon National Park, visitors sometimes are unable to see across the canyon, or into the canyon depths because of poor air quality.

Acidic Rains

Poor air quality does more than damage a view at a national park, it can result in contaminated precipitation, better known as acid rain. When fossil fuels (coal, gas, and oil) burn, sulfur dioxide

and nitrogen dioxide are emitted as by-products. These chemicals react with water in the atmosphere to form acid rain. This deadly rainfall has contaminated thousands of lakes in the United States and Canada. These lakes too often become lifeless bodies

of water, since fish and other aquatic life are unable to tolerate the acidified water.

A Damaged Heritage

Acid precipitation can come in many forms such as snow, fog, dew, and frost. In addition, sulfuric and nitric acids can fall to earth as dry chemical compounds. Precipitation, in any form, will activate these compounds. When deposited on buildings and monuments, this acid deposition attacks the marble, granite, sandstone, and bronze used in construction.

Irreplaceable cultural resources within the NPS are threatened with acid deposition. Accelerated decay has been documented at the Statue of Liberty, the Washington Monument, and on statues at Gettysburg. Once ruined, these and other cultural resources will be gone forever, and Americans will lose a vital part of their heritage.



The Future of Our Air

Most Americans would agree that we have an air pollution problem, but what can be done about it? We can all help to conserve energy and reduce the consumption of fossil fuels by carpooling, walking short distances, and using public transportation. Recycling aluminium, glass, and paper helps too.

In June 1989, President Bush proposed legislation to reduce acid rain pollutants and to curb urban smog. The president's proposals to reduce pollution from sources such as power plants and automobiles have heightened public awareness on the need for cleaning the air.



The National Park Service has been monitoring air and water pollution in many parks for several years. This research program is providing necessary information to help protect and manage air resources in NPS areas. We must realize that air is a shared resource. Airborne pollutants are not restricted by boundaries, but can travel hundreds of miles to

foul the air in remote areas. In fact, all NPS monitoring stations in the lower 48 states have detected pollutants in the air! The United States faces a formidable challenge for the future. By reducing the levels of air pollution in our country, we can keep our national parks — our national treasures — intact for future generations to enjoy.