



IN REPLY REFER TO:

United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

P.O. BOX 37127

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20013-7127

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SEPTEMBER 15, 1986

MEMORANDUM

TO: ALL PARK SUPERINTENDENTS

FROM: SPECIAL ASSISTANT TO THE DIRECTOR (TOURISM)

SUBJECT: NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM ADVISORY BOARD
REPORT ON PARK "OVERCROWDING"

AS PROMISED, I AM SENDING YOU HERewith A COPY OF THE REPORT THAT HAS BEEN PREPARED BASED ON YOUR RESPONSES TO A SURVEY THAT I CONDUCTED FOR A COMMITTEE OF THE ADVISORY BOARD EARLIER THIS YEAR.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR HELP WITH THIS PROJECT. IF YOU HAVE ANY FURTHER COMMENTS TO MAKE ON THIS SUBJECT, I SHALL BE HAPPY TO RECEIVE THEM AND PASS THEM ALONG TO THE ADVISORY BOARD'S COMMITTEE.

Twiss L. Baker



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NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM ADVISORY BOARD

Report on

"OVERCROWDING" IN THE NATIONAL PARKS

Submitted by

George Barley, Committee Chairman

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with staff assistance by

Priscilla R. Baker, Special Assistant to Director Mott

The Committee held two meetings in Washington, D.C., reviewed reports of a recent National Parks & Conservation Association study of park carrying capacity, monitored media coverage relating to national park visitation, received and reviewed a report from the Conference of National Park Concessioners and conducted a survey of all national park areas.

As the National Parks & Conservation Association found and as many park Superintendents indicated, the term "crowding" or "overcrowding" is used to express an individual's personal judgment rather than to describe any scientifically-established measures of a park's visitation. As the Superintendent of Canyonlands National Park put it, the term "...is based on individual perspective and varies with locations. What is crowded to one person may seem to be wilderness and solitude to another."

On their survey instruments, park Superintendents had the same sort of difficulty trying to define "overcrowding" as the late Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart had many years ago when he needed to try to define the term "pornography".

Justice Stewart finally admitted that although he had not been able to establish a precise, acceptable definition of the condition, he most certainly could recognize it when he saw it.

When parks' campgrounds, parking lots and restrooms are full and more visitors are waiting in lines, the parks' staffs have no difficulty recognizing the problem.

Our survey results show that many parks need to add staff and/or redesign facilities to alleviate existing problems. However, since crowding occurs only sporadically and at fairly predictable times for most parks, the problem is not an overwhelming one systemwide. As more than one survey respondent indicated, the National Park Service cannot afford to design and maintain facilities for peak visitation periods any more than churches can afford to build with Christmas and Easter solely in mind. The alternatives are to regulate the flow of visitors using techniques appropriate to the site and to work through travel and recreation industry organizations to try to affect park visitation patterns where problems have occurred.

The results of the committee's survey of "overcrowding" show that few national park areas have engaged in scientific studies designed to measure human impacts on a specific natural

or historic resource. Accordingly, little (if any) data exist to indicate the effects of public use on natural and other resources.

Where funds and staff have been made available, scientific carrying capacity studies are underway. But as the Superintendent of Castillo de San Marcos National Monument put it, "...physical damage is slow and difficult to prove."

Although several Superintendents felt that it would be desirable to undertake more research in this area, some were concerned that it might be difficult to affect park operations based on the results of the research. As the Superintendent of the Gettysburg National Military Park put it, "except in extreme, dramatic cases, the use of 'carrying capacity' as a scientific justification for imposing restrictions on visitor use will probably not be widely accepted by park users in the near future."

It also is important to recognize that visitor counts do not provide accurate measures of resource use in all parks. The Great Smoky Mountains National Park's Superintendent stated that "to correlate crowded highway conditions to resource damage and impacts from those same visitors is incorrect. For example, we had a record year (over 9.3 million visits) in 1985, but our backcountry use tumbled 50% from its peak seven years ago. More people are driving through, but less people are physically 'using' the park."

The Superintendent of Tumacacori National Monument, after 22 years of service with the National Park Service, stated that he feels "we may put too much emphasis on the number of visitors, rather than on the quality of their experience." He and many others commented that with adequate staffing, the National Park Service can protect the resources within the parks and assure the visiting public of the best possible experiences. Under such conditions, most parks indicated that they would welcome aggressive efforts to increase visitation during periods when facilities are not already used to capacity.

September 1986

NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM ADVISORY BOARD
QUESTIONNAIRE ON "OVERCROWDING" IN THE PARKS

QUESTIONNAIRES WERE SENT TO ALL PARKS. NINETY-FOUR PERCENT OF THE PARKS RESPONDED.

FORTY-TWO PERCENT OF THE RESPONDENTS INDICATED THAT THEY HAVE NO OVERCROWDING PROBLEM. TWENTY-TWO PERCENT SEE CROWDS AS A PROBLEM ONLY IN SUMMER MONTHS. TWENTY-FOUR PERCENT ARE CROWDED OCCASIONALLY DURING THE SUMMER, ESPECIALLY ON WEEKENDS AND AT SPECIAL EVENTS.

THE MAJORITY INDICATED THAT THEY WOULD WELCOME ADDITIONAL VISITATION AT CERTAIN TIMES OF THE YEAR.

THE FOLLOWING METHODS ARE USED MOST FREQUENTLY TO DETERMINE WHETHER CONDITIONS OF OVERCROWDING HAVE OCCURRED (LISTED IN ORDER OF MOST FREQUENTLY MENTIONED):

- PERSONAL OBSERVATION/JUDGEMENT
- CONDITIONS OF PARKING LOT(S)
- VISITOR/VEHICLE COUNTS
- LENGTH OF WAITING LINES AT VARIOUS FACILITIES
- SCIENTIFIC STUDIES OF HUMAN IMPACTS ON RESOURCES; CARRYING CAPACITY STUDIES
- IMPACTS ON SEWER SYSTEMS; HUMAN WASTE ACCUMULATIONS
- VISITOR COMMENTS
- NUMBERS OF PERMITS ISSUED
- ATTENDANCE AT PROGRAMS
- CAMPGROUND USE LEVELS
- SURVEY OF VISITOR EXPERIENCES
- USE REPORTS FROM COMMERCIAL OPERATORS/CONCESSIONERS.

WITH FEW EXCEPTIONS, THE PROBLEM OCCURS ONLY IN THE DEVELOPED AREAS OF THE PARKS.

PARKS USE THE FOLLOWING TECHNIQUES TO CONTROL THE FLOW OF VISITORS WHERE OVERCROWDING HAS OCCURRED:

- TRAFFIC CONTROL: STAFF SUPERVISION OF TRAFFIC IN AND NEAR PARKING LOTS TO ENFORCE PARKING LIMITATIONS.
- LIMITS ARE SET ON NUMBERS OF VISITORS PERMITTED TO ENTER SPECIFIC AREAS/STRUCTURES.
- SHUTTLE BUS SYSTEMS ARE USED TO LIMIT ACCESS TO SOME SITES.

- VISITORS ARE PROVIDED WITH INFORMATION ON ALTERNATIVE SITES/PROGRAMS.
- GRASS IS LEFT LONG IN CERTAIN AREAS TO DISCOURAGE USE.
- SITE BULLETINS ARE POSTED.
- SCHOOL (AND OTHER) GROUPS MUST MAKE RESERVATIONS.
- NEW INTERPRETIVE PROGRAMS ARE DEVELOPED IN LESS-USED AREAS.
- ADDITIONAL STAFF ARE ASSIGNED IN CROWDED AREAS, IF AVAILABLE.
- ENTRY IS CONTROLLED IN SOME PARKS
- SOME PARKING LOTS AND CAMPSITES HAVE BEEN REDESIGNED.
- ILLEGALLY PARKED VEHICLES ARE TICKETED.

SEVERAL PARKS INDICATED THAT THEY WOULD NEVER HAVE OVER-CROWDING PROBLEMS IF THEY HAD ADEQUATE STAFF AND/OR IF CERTAIN FACILITIES (I.E. CAMPGROUNDS, PARKING LOTS, RESTROOMS, AUDITORIUMS) WERE RE-DESIGNED. ONE PARK, FOR EXAMPLE, HAS A THEATRE THAT CAN ACCOMMODATE MORE PEOPLE THAN THE PARKING FACILITIES CAN HANDLE. MOST PARKS WOULD RATHER REDESIGN OR ADD FACILITIES THAN TURN VISITORS AWAY.

SOME PARKS FEEL THAT INCREASES IN ENTRANCE AND USER FEES MAY AFFECT ATTENDANCE.

SOME SUPERINTENDENTS INDICATED THAT THEY ". . . BELIEVE THAT EFFECTIVE MARKETING OF UNDER-VISITED PARKS IS IN THE INTEREST OF THE PUBLIC AND OUR RESOURCES."

THE 306 SURVEY RESPONDENTS ARE LISTED BELOW ACCORDING TO THE
GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THEIR VISITATION PATTERNS.

<u>CATEGORY</u>	<u>NO. OF PARKS</u>	<u>PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS</u>
NO CROWDING PROBLEM	128	42%
SUMMER CROWDING PROBLEM	67	22%
OCCASIONAL SUMMER CROWDING	21	7%
SUMMER WEEKENDS/SPECIAL EVENTS	52	17%
SOME HOLIDAYS ONLY	11	3%
SPRING AND/OR FALL SEASON CROWDING	18	6%
WINTER CROWDING	6	2%
YEAR ROUND CROWDING	3	1%