

# Managing Public Use and Services

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**Y**ellowstone National Park was established in 1872 as a place in which natural and cultural resources would be preserved for future generations—“for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.” Over time, it has become one of the best-loved and most famous of parks in the world.

In Yellowstone’s first decades, when the concept of a national park was still novel, the park’s managers realized that public support would be essential to its survival. They aggressively promoted the park and developed its infrastructure to provide a variety of services that would attract a broader range of visitors than those willing to rough it and fend for themselves in a wildland. Their efforts, along with the new convenience of travel by automobile, led to a steady increase in visitors during the 1920s and ‘30s, and an upsurge after World War II. By now, more than 110,000,000 visits to the park have been tallied, including many by people who have come back year after year. For countless more, Yellowstone exists as a vivid

icon of the imagination they hope to see some day.

But as Yellowstone has grown in popularity, so has the need for setting some limits on visitor activities. Gone are the days when a family could pull its wagon off into the woods anywhere they chose, pitch a tent, and set up housekeeping for several weeks. The ban against killing wildlife began in 1883 after thousands of elk and other animals had been shot in just one year. Visitors are now required to keep a safe distance from the dangerous geothermal features that once were damaged by visitors who climbed on them, bathed in them, and even used them to do laundry.



“...if it ever becomes the resort of fashion, if its forests are stripped to rear mammoth hotels, if the race course, the drinking saloon and gambling table invade it, if in short a sort of Coney Island is established there, then it will cease to belong to the whole people and will be unworthy of the care and protection of the national government.”

— Lt. Dan Kingman, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1883

Fishing and camping are subject to rules; collection of flowers, antlers, petrified wood, and artifacts is illegal except by permitted researchers; and the feeding of wildlife, once popular for visitors and staff alike, is strictly prohibited. When justified by concern for park resources and human safety, such restrictions have brought few objections from the public.

Until the 1960s, the solution to growing national park visitation was thought to be simply more rules and the construction of more facilities, which led to large developments like those at Grant and Canyon villages. But after a decade of “Mission 66” (a 1955 initiative to build national park facilities across the United States by 1966), a new era of environmental consciousness prompted a shift toward the view that visitor accommodations should be located outside the parks, in nearby communities.

Since the 1970s, some funding has been allocated to improve Yellowstone’s infrastructure through upgraded roads and facilities. Over the long term, however, the net effect has been to enable the park to accommodate more visitors without increasing the staff and facilities needed to maintain both the resources and the quality of visitors’ experiences. As at many other national parks,

burgeoning visitation at Yellowstone has led park managers and visitors to wonder if it is possible to satisfactorily provide the desired experiences for so many people.

Experiments with alternative transportation systems, day-use permits, and other restrictions on visitor use will increase in the future. While the park’s responsibility to both present and future park visitors may require such limits in order to protect its natural and cultural resources, Yellowstone must also remain a place of inspiration, rejuvenation, and learning. Decisions about how the park is to be managed must provide not only for the people who arrive at Yellowstone through its traditional entrances, but for those who want to experience Yellowstone through off-site programs and the use of evolving technologies such as the Internet, CD-ROMs, and television productions.

## *Visitation Trends*

**Annual visitation.** The number of visitors Yellowstone receives fluctuates from year to year in response to many factors—changes in the economy, world wars, the price of gas, and rainy summers—but the overall trend has been upward. The park’s estimated annual visitation first exceeded 10,000 in 1897, 100,000 in 1923, 1 million in 1948, and 2 million in 1965. The 3 million threshold was first crossed in 1992, when visitation

reached 3,144,045. That record has not yet been topped, although the count has continued to exceed 3 million in all but two years through 1998, when it was 3,120,830.

In late 1996, the entrance fee was raised from \$10 to \$20 per car for a seven-day pass, good at both Yellowstone and Grand Teton (\$40 for an annual pass). This fee increase was made in connection with the newly authorized “Fee Demonstration Program,” under which participating national parks are permitted to keep a portion of the entrance fees they collect instead of passing all of the revenues on to the U.S. Treasury. A 1997 visitor survey found that more than half of the 199 respondents were unaware of the program before coming to the park, but 71 percent thought the fee amount was about right.

In recent decades, the annual visitation estimate has been derived from a mechanical count of the vehicles coming through the park entrances (not including “non-recreational” vehicles using Highway 191) and the average number of people in each vehicle. Because many people who live or vacation in greater Yellowstone may make repeat visits to the park during the summer, the estimate represents the number of park visits made, not the number of different visitors.



#### When visitors come.

Seventy percent of the park’s visitors come from June through August. During the peak season (early July through mid-August), facilities such as campgrounds, lodging, visitor centers, restaurants, service stations, and shops are used at or beyond their capacity. In July 1998, the average daily visitation was 26,763, with about 18,000 people (including employees) spending the night in the park.



In recent decades, much of the visitation increase has come during the “off” season—fall, winter, and spring. From 1976 to 1996, while summer visitation rose 12 percent, winter visitation (December through March) doubled as the popularity of snowmobiling soared, with the park averaging 1,500 to 1,800 visitors a day in February.

**Where visitors come from.** Studies done in 1989 and 1992 estimated that 74 to 81 percent of all park visitors came from outside the surrounding states of Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming. The most recent detailed data on international visitors, collected in 1989, showed that 7 percent of all park visitors were international—almost half from Canada, with Germany contributing the second largest number. In a 1995 survey, however, the three adjacent states accounted for about 35 percent of winter visitors, and foreign countries about 3 percent.

**Typical park visitors.** Yellowstone receives more male than female visitors, and its visitors have on average more formal education than does the general public. The July 1989 survey of park visitors indicated a median age between 36 and 40. A survey of visitors who stayed in the park's hotels and cabins in 1994 found that the average age was 46; 44 percent of these guests were age 50 or over. Of the more than one million vehicles that entered park gates in 1996, 92 percent were private automobiles or recreational vehicles, seven percent were snowmobiles, and only one percent busses or snowcoaches.

About half of the people coming through Yellowstone's entrances are repeat visitors. A 1994 winter survey found that in deciding whether to visit Yellowstone, 36 percent of the respondents had based their decision on a previous visit to the area and 42 percent had relied on the experience of family or friends. Promotional materials, TV, and radio had the least influence.

**Frequent visitor activities.** For visitors surveyed in the summer of 1989, the most common activities while in the park included viewing wildlife (93 percent) and thermal features (85 percent), photography (83 percent) and walking for pleasure (75 percent), going to a visitor center or museum (73 percent), and shopping (67 percent). They also picnicked (41 percent), went to an interpretive program (15 percent), and took a backcountry hike (9 percent). Of these visitors, 48 percent spent one day or less in the park; about 30 percent spent more than two days; 21 percent spent at least one night in a developed campground and less than 1 percent used a backcountry campsite.

**Occasional visitor difficulties.** In 1998, when nearly 4 million people came through the park (3 million recreational visitors plus 1 million people entering for business or other non-recreational reasons):

- ⇒ There were 518 traffic accidents and 39 vehicle break-ins.
- ⇒ Park rangers gave out 3,888 violation notices, made 97 arrests, and conducted 31 search-and-rescue operations for missing visitors.
- ⇒ Of those reprimanded, 675 visitors were warned about carrying firearms in the park and 51 were cited for firearms violations, 222 were charged with camping violations, 201 for being in closed areas, 72 for snow-machine violations, 110 for fishing violations, 15 for swimming or bathing in thermal features, and 7 for hunting wildlife in the park.
- ⇒ About 9,000 visitors received treatment from clinic medical staff in the park; 361 were transported by land or air ambulance; and 6 died—2 from cardiac arrest, and 4 from traumatic injuries or accidents.

## VISITOR USE MANAGEMENT

Those who believe that national parks should be accessible to as many people as possible may regard them as a commodity to be marketed in the same way as other tourist activities. However, protecting both the park's resources and the quality of the visitor's experience means that public use has to be managed and in some cases restricted. Increasing public use has inevitably had some negative effects on the natural and cultural features that make Yellowstone the national treasure that it is. Just as important, visitors affect each other; the larger the number of people in the park, the less each person can be assured of the quality outdoor experience for which Yellowstone is valued.

Visitor use management is a process of determining what the desired experiences and resource conditions are, identifying the discrepancies between the desired and the existing situation, and developing a plan to reach the desired situation. However, the baseline data on natural and cultural resources needed to carry out this process are often lacking at Yellowstone. So far, the emphasis on visitor use management at Yellowstone has focussed on winter, which has seen the largest increase in visitation in recent decades. (See "Winter Use," page 6–38).



**Surveying for satisfaction.** Widespread support for the country's national parks has been indicated in opinion polls and in the outpouring of complaints during the federal government shutdown in December 1995, when Yellowstone kept the gates open but eliminated all but emergency services. Yet few efforts have been made to survey how well Yellowstone is meeting the expectations of its visitors. In 1997 NPS managers set a goal that 80 percent of park visitors will be satisfied with park facilities, services, and recreational opportunities by 2002. To reach this target, however, park managers need to know what their visitors want.

Although a variety of visitor surveys have been done at Yellowstone over the years, most have not used statistically sound sampling methods or have focused on specific issues such as winter use. In July 1998, for example, of the 110 visitors who completed a brief survey card, 95 percent thought that the overall quality of the park's facilities, services, and recreation opportunities was good or very good, but 32 respondents wrote comments on the poor quality of the park roads.

Balancing the needs of preservation and public use is difficult, and there is a wide divergence of public opinion on what the priorities should be. While the park's "products" cannot be constantly redesigned to meet public demand, Yellowstone needs to survey the public—both the people who come and those who have not—about the experiences, services, and facilities they would like to find in the park.