

Ten Most Visited National Parks (NPs) in the National Park System in 2015

Based upon review of their General Management Plans (GMPs) and/or specific management or implementation plans

1. Great Smoky Mountains National Park (NP) was the most visited NP, and the third most visited place, in the National Park System (NPS) in 2015 with 10,712,674 recreational visits. Great Smoky Mountains NP has an outdated 1982 GMP that does not set a carrying capacity, but includes such language as –

“Visitor use will be permitted in this zone up to the capacity of the resource to carry it without significant deterioration.”; and

“Existing park programs for visitor use will continue with relatively little change in kinds and quantities of services, facilities, and operational practices. However, studies have indicated the cumulative degradation of certain key resources and of the quality of visitor experiences so that it will be necessary to take measures to curb such degradation. This probably can be accomplished without reducing the annual visitor total, but it will require drawing the line at certain peak use levels and increasing the management of some activities.”

The NPS Planning website lists new construction documents for Great Smoky Mountains NP, a foundation document, and one Development Concept Plan (“DCP”) for Cades Cove, a specific area of the NP. The DCP includes a Visitor Experience report which describes five alternatives that would impact visitor use in Cades Cove. The third alternative’s aim “would be to maintain a balance between the number of visitors and the capacity of the Cove through the use of a reservation system” during peak visitation periods. The fourth and fifth alternatives utilize a voluntary or required public transportation system in combination with a reservations system. More specific language regarding visitor management has not been found.

2. Grand Canyon NP was the second most visited NP, and the tenth most visited place, in the NPS in 2015 with 5,520,736 recreational visits. Grand Canyon NP has an outdated 1995 GMP. Grand Canyon Management’s “Vision for North Rim” was to provide an uncrowded atmosphere and the GMP stated that --

“The park expects to limit day visitor numbers on the North Rim sometime between 2005 and 2010...”

The GMP stated that the goal at Tuweep was to ensure uncrowded, primitive experiences. The park’s Corridor Trails’ goal was to maintain trails and minimize crowding.

That 1995 GMP set a limit of 22,500 visitors on the South Rim, 1700 on North Rim, and 85 visitors at Tuweep. It did not limit the number of hiking visitors on Corridor Trails, but stated that “resource impacts and user conflicts due to mule use will be reduced.”

Grand Canyon’s 1995 GMP also identified that establishing indicators and standards was an objective for the park going forward.

3. Rocky Mountains NP was the third most visited NP in the NPS in 2015 with 4,155,916 recreational visits. A GMP could not be located for this park. The park’s management website provides a 1976 Final Master Plan, a 2013 Foundation Document, and specific management plans, such as the Land Protection Plan.

The Final Master Plan mentioned carrying capacity levels were needed in concessions. It also stated that –

“Trends on a park-wide scale are amplified by the steadily increasing numbers of people: 1,774,000 visitors in 1962, rising to 2,520,000 in 1972. It now exhibits the greatest increases in the spring and fall along with the usual summer vacation peak period. There is an increasing impact on the environment as measured by the effects on vegetation and wildlife. And there is a growing impact on the experience, as demonstrated by crowding and conflicts in lifestyle. Both the land resource and man’s experience are endangered, and a way must be found to perpetuate the resource base, while enriching the park experience.”

The Foundation Document did not mention carrying capacity, but stated that a “visitor use management plan that would address capacities of several areas of the park and determine where use should be limited, where it could be expanded, and strategies for managing use” is needed.

4. Yosemite NP was the fourth most visited NP of the NPS in 2015 with 4,150,217 recreational visits. Yosemite’s 1980 GMP stated that the number of visitors will be limited to not “significantly affect” natural environments and not to inhibit visitor enjoyment or interfere with park values. The GMP pages on which Visitor Use was supposed to be addressed (according to the Table of Contents) are missing from the park-provided document (as of the date of this memo). The GMP lists goals, such as “Improve visitor safety,” and corresponding actions like “Replace existing three bridges with two bridges and remove sharp curves between bridges” for each area of the park.

Yosemite NP website’s Planning page lists specific management plans, including a 2014 Merced Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive Management Plan and Tenaya Lake Area

Plan. Merced Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive Management Plan provides a summary of user capacities in each management zone or segment of the Merced River for each alternative. For example, in the Little Yosemite Valley Wilderness Zone, visitor overnight camping capacity is set to 150 in the preferred alternative, about 100 people at one time for all alternatives in the Merced Lake Wilderness Zone, and about 10 people in the Mount Lyell and Clark Range Wilderness Zones. Visitor Day Use Capacity levels are also provided such as 225 day hikers using the Half Dome climbing cables per day. The Tenaya Lake Area Plan webpage states:

“Problems associated with visitor use, visitor safety, and resource impacts have been occurring for decades. [A] comprehensive analysis of, and solution to these issues is underway.”

5. Yellowstone NP was the fifth most visited NP of the NPS in 2015 with 4,097,710 recreational visits. A *National Parks Traveler* article cited Yellowstone management as indicating they will not be revising their GMP but instead will be focusing on specific park issues (<http://www.nationalparkstraveler.com/2011/11/joshua-tree-national-park-abandons-general-management-plan-revision-blue-ridge-parkway-proceeding-it8958>). No GMP was found for Yellowstone NP.

Yellowstone does have, however, a 2014 Foundation Document, a Strategic Plan effective 2001-2005, and specific management plans like a 2009 Winter Use Plan which limits the number of snow vehicles used in the park. Yellowstone’s 2000 Strategic Plan laid out the park’s resources, goals, and a “general section” on how goals will be accomplished. Long-term goals included visitor satisfaction and education. That Strategic Plan, however, did not address visitor management, indicators or standards, or user/carrying capacity. Nor do Yellowstone’s Lake Area Comprehensive Plan and Tower-Roosevelt Comprehensive Plan mention visitor management or indicators and standards.

6. Zion National Park was the sixth most visited NP of the NPS in 2015 with 3,648,846 recreational visits. Zion NP’s 2001 GMP stated that they would use “preliminary carrying capacities” (e.g., 80 day hikers and 70 overnight users in one area, and 50 people in another area) until a wilderness management plan and carrying capacity studies were completed. A Visitor Study was completed in 2006 and presented survey data regarding Zion’s visitors and their use of the park. This 2001 GMP stated:

“To set up a framework for addressing carrying capacity, the park was divided into zones that describe differing desired resource conditions and visitor experiences... a follow-up implementation plan is needed to identify key social

and natural resource indicators to be monitored in each of the park's zones, set standards [minimum acceptable conditions] for each indicator, and develop a monitoring program.)"; and

"The carrying capacity and wilderness management plans will identify which indicators should be monitored and when and where they should be monitored."

As of the date of this memo, Zion NP's website's Planning page was under construction. A wilderness management plan was not available on the Zion NP's website or the NPS planning website.

Zion NP's 2007 Backcountry Management Plan does, however, utilize management zones and indicators and standards for visitor experience and resource protection

7. Olympic NP was the seventh most visited NP of the NPS in 2015 with 3,263,761 recreational visits. Olympic NP's 2008 GMP does not set a carrying capacity but describes a need to establish indicators/standards to help address user capacity in each management zone of the park.

The GMP suggests possible indicators that could be used, such as "the physical user capacity of current facilities such as roads, parking lots, and buildings; the number of visitors at one time at popular destinations; the condition of natural and cultural resources; visible impacts such as the presence of visitor-created trails and unplanned widening of trails; the presence of invasive plants; and visitor satisfaction" in the Day Use Zone, and "the condition of important resources (riparian communities, indicator species, soils, vegetation cover, archeological sites, water quality, and natural soundscape) and visible impacts (such as the presence of visitor-created trails, trash, or invasive plants) in the Low-Use Zone, and "the condition of important resources (meadow condition, riparian communities, indicator species, soil erosion, vegetation cover, snow fields, historic structures, water quality, natural soundscape); visible impacts (the presence of social way trails, bare ground campsites, other campsite conditions, trash, down-wood availability, invasive plants); and visitor experience values (such as encounter rates, camp area capacity, human or stock excrement, and aesthetics)" in the Wilderness Zones.

8. Grand Teton NP was the eighth most visited NP in the NPS in 2015 with 3,149,921 recreational visits. A GMP could not be located for Grand Teton NP. Grand Teton NP has a 2015 Superintendent's Compendium, 2005 Strategic Plan, 1976 Master Plan, and management plans for specific areas of the park.

The Compendium does not address visitor management or carrying capacity directly, but includes such language as:

“The Superintendent has determined that for public safety, protection of park resources, weather and park management objectives that the requiring a boat permit for the launching and use a vessel within the park and parkway is necessary to adequately regulate park uses, properly inform users of park regulations, and reduce potential conflicts between user groups.”

The 2005 Strategic Plan does contain aspirational statements, such as:

“Grand Teton Discovery and Visitor Center: The Moose Visitor Center and Headquarters was built in 1961, when park visitation averaged 1.5 million visitors per year. Since that time, park visitation has risen by more than 2.5 million, for a total of 4 million visitors per year. The current visitor center is now woefully inadequate.”

“Grand Teton National Park and John D. Rockefeller Jr. Memorial Parkway have a total of 11,571 acres of wetlands, as determined by the National Wetland Inventory. The Park and Parkway presently have not determined the ‘condition’ or ‘health’ of their wetlands, nor do they have a "desired condition" for these wetlands in a current management plan. Therefore, the goal for the 2005-2008 Strategic Plan is to identify the desired condition for 10%, or 1200 acres, of existing wetlands by 2008. The parks are not expected to make any progress towards this goal until 2008 (*sic*). Hopefully funding will become available through the NPS-WRD Watershed Assessment Program by that time.”

“Long-term Goal Performance Target: By September 30, 2008, visitor satisfaction with appropriate park facilities, services, and recreational opportunities in Grand Teton National Park and John D. Rockefeller Jr. Memorial Parkway, as determined by Visitor Survey Cards, remains at 96% or better. 5-Year Results Plan: Grand Teton and the Parkway will provide the necessary staff to maximize visitor satisfaction. The parks will conduct the annual survey to monitor satisfaction. The survey cards will be processed and analyzed as appropriate. Visitor protection and maintenance services will be provided to maximize visitor satisfaction. The parks will assess these services and make recommendations/improvements as necessary.”

“Long-term Goal Performance Target: By September 30, 2008, the number of visitor accidents/incidents at Grand Teton National Park is no higher than its baseline number of 147 (the FY2000-FY2003 annual average), and at John D.

Rockefeller Memorial Parkway is no higher than its baseline number of 8 (the FY 2000-FY2003 annual average).”

Grant Teton NP has a Snake River Management Plan, which includes a section on carrying capacity. It provides:

“For the purposes of this plan, carrying capacity is... interpreted not as a prescription for numbers of people, but as a prescription for numbers of people appropriate for desired ecological and social conditions. Measures of appropriate conditions replace measures of maximum sustainable use often used in relation to other types of carrying capacities (e.g. range capacity for domestic ungulates of wildlife habitat).”

“Social Indicators and Standards” include: “Indicator: The number and frequency of boats encountered on the river. Standard: Seeing five or more other private scenic boats while floating the river 50% of the time. Action: Permit system will be developed for private users, better scheduling spacing of launch times. Institute the practice of not launching till previous boat is out of view for private users.”

“Indicator: Congestion at parking areas and launch ramps; time spent waiting to launch. Standard: 80% of the parties will have to wait longer than 15 minutes 8 days per month. Action: Staff launch sites, schedule staggered launch times.”

Grand Teton NP’s Snake River Management Plan is evidence that NPS units may address visitor management in specific implementation plans, if not in a GMP.

9. Acadia National Park (NP) was the ninth most visited NP in the National Park System (NPS) in 2015 with 2,811,184 recreational visits. Acadia NP has an outdated 1992 General Management Plan (GMP), which stated that crowding in the park was a recognized concern. That 24-year old GMP set a goal to implement a visitor management strategy with management objectives for specific areas of the park, balancing resource preservation and visitor experience. Acadia planned to implement a parkwide visitor management strategy by collecting baseline data (“the sociological and environmental impacts of visitor use”) and evaluating visitor impacts, developing management objectives, selecting and implementing management techniques, and monitoring visitor impacts. Language included:

“**Mitigate Resource Impacts from Visitor Use.** The National Park Service will manage use to protect Acadia’s resources. Use of offshore islands that serve as important nesting and breeding sites will be prohibited during critical seasons. Other areas where access might be limited include the summits of Cadillac ... Parking for these areas will be confined to existing lots with no overflow ...

Retain Opportunities for Low-Density Recreation on the West Side of Mount Desert Island and on Schoodic Peninsula and the Offshore Islands. Existing capacity of parking lots will be enforced ... and offshore islands will be patrolled in order to retain the natural environment and solitude of these parts of the park. Schoodic Peninsula and the offshore islands will not be actively promoted nor will additional facilities be provided in these areas. The intent is to retain current use levels and the existing naturalness and solitude of these parts of the park.

Limit Parking to the Capacity of Existing Lots. There cannot be a single carrying capacity for all of Acadia National Park. It is therefore important to identify subunits of the park and define specific management objectives for these areas. Defining specific numbers of visitors to be accommodated in each use zone is neither the only nor often the best technique to manage visitor impact. A variety of direct and indirect approaches may be implemented to deal with the causes of visitor impact. Management may, for example, prohibit use near nesting sites at certain times, separate incompatible uses at campgrounds, require reservations for programs, limit the size of personal vehicles allowed on Cadillac Summit Road, or promote high-density over low-density areas.

Monitor Visitor Impacts. Implementing management techniques will proceed with a standardized monitoring program. Key indicators identified for Acadia National Park will permit the social, physical, and biological impacts of visitors to be monitored and compared with standards adopted for specific areas of the park. Appropriate management techniques will be implemented following analysis.”

There is no available park document indicating that this visitor monitoring and management effort was ever completed.

10. Glacier NP was the tenth most visited NP of the NPS in 2015 with 2,366,056 recreational visits. Glacier NP’s 1999 GMP did not set a carrying capacity but committed to creating specific plans for each major area of the park that would address it. “A future implementation strategy will outline resource and social indicators and quantitative standards for various management areas and zones to determine acceptable levels of use.”

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