

WHY ASSESS THE

By RONALD R. SWITZER

FOR MANY YEARS TRADITIONAL park managers have done remarkably good jobs of protecting park resources and serving park visitors. Unfortunately, some stopped managing at park boundaries. That is to say, although they may have interacted with communities in their spheres of influence, too little time was dedicated to convincing those communities that the national park was an important neighbor, not just as a resource steward, but as a driving force in their local and regional economies. As such, the parks heavily influenced the quality of life over large areas, and needed to be recognized and brought to the table as equal players in long-range opportunity planning and economic development discussions, discussions that set the tone for compatible development, and that have the potential to reduce unwanted threats to the parks.

Many park managers grew their careers under the notion that those who visited national parks were just *visitors*, people who passed briefly through the resources and left no impact on the resources or the economy. In truth, the National Park Service has been in the tourism business since before it was officially designated in 1916, and what we do has dramatically affected local development and economics adjacent to all parks. Seldom have we taken stock of our contributions, and less frequently have we let our neighboring communities know the extent of those contributions.

While serving as tourism coordinator for the 13 national parks in Texas in a collateral duty capacity to the

ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF NATIONAL PARKS?

position of Superintendent of Big Thicket National Preserve, the Texas superintendents began helping me assemble economic impact information on an annual basis. This information was made known to the local communities, and synthesized as educational information for the Texas Departments of Commerce and Transportation. The significance of the economic contributions of the parks became a catalyst for the formation of a federal-state tourism coordinating committee involving more than a dozen agencies. Eventually, this group split into the Federal Tourism Council and the State Tourism Council, both of whom signed a memorandum of agreement to participate as partners in the Texas strategic tourism plan and to work toward accomplishing mutual goals and objectives.

At the local level, Big Thicket National Preserve assumed the leadership of a potent group of federal and state agencies, local chambers of commerce, tourism bureaus, and businesses in the private sector, to further resource-sensitive tourism and outdoor recreation, economic development, and environmental education. This same approach is currently being pursued in Kentucky, and while it is too early to assess whether it will succeed, indications are positive. The current Kentucky tourism master plan calls for the formation of a federal tourism council, and one is in the making.

Assessments of economic impact applied in positive ways can draw the national parks closer to the communities they serve. While past and current assessments in Texas and Kentucky have been based largely on the NPS *Money Generation Model* (contact Ken Hornback of the Washington Office Socioeconomic Studies Division at (303) 969-6977), the results tend to be very conservative

Figure 1. Mammoth Cave National Park, Kentucky, is the single largest resource attraction in the state.

Assessments of economic impact applied in positive ways can draw the national parks closer to the communities they serve.



because they are based on low multipliers, and do not take full account of all economic factors. State generated models (and the one described in the preceding feature article) generally yield much higher impact figures, higher by 25-40%. Whatever model is used, the results are extremely important as barometers of the economic worth of the national parks locally, regionally, and even statewide. Because Mammoth Cave National Park is the single largest resource attraction in Kentucky (fig. 1), the impacts it generates are noticed at the highest levels of state government. When the impacts of the four Kentucky national park units are considered, our worth to the economic well-being of the commonwealth is fully appreciated.

We have made good use of the Money Generation Model, but you should be aware of some of its shortcomings. As already mentioned, the multipliers are applied very conservatively, probably under-estimating economic benefits by a considerable factor. Furthermore, the full impacts of concessioners are not taken into account because of the danger of counting visitor impacts twice in the same model. The calculations do not recognize that concessions operations contribute more than the capital improvement expenditures used in

the formula for "other" expenditures when concessions operations *do* contribute more. Similarly, it fails to fully assess the impacts of employee expenditures for housing, health care, education, recreation, and living expenses locally. In addition, most models do not take into consideration the contributions of the National Park Service in funding and grants for urban park and recreation projects executed under statewide plans.

If the Money Generation Model does not fulfill your needs, I encourage you to work with your nearest cooperative park study unit, university department of park or outdoor recreation planning, or state department of travel development to develop one that measures critical economic impact. This helps assure that the information becomes a visible and appreciated part of growing partnerships with your local constituencies. Trust me, this works.

PS

Ron Switzer is Superintendent of Mammoth Cave National Park, Kentucky; (502) 758-2251. His e-mail address is "ron_switzer@nps.gov".