

The national park system public use statistics

By TOM WADE

The National Park Service has been reporting recreation visits to its park system units since its creation in 1916. During those eight decades, the annual visitation has increased from 358,000 to 286.7 million in 1998. Many factors influence visitation to the 378 units including national and international economic conditions, local and national weather, and the ever-changing demographics of the population. So how did 1998 visitation compare to previous years?

The national park system received 286.7 million recreation visits in 1998. This was a 4.2% increase in public use or 11.5 million more visits than in 1997. The 1998 increase was directly influenced by major changes in the method of counting public use at six units in the Washington, D.C., area. These changes caused a higher annual percentage change for the park system than would have normally occurred.

The units in Washington, D.C., obtain their visitor counts by sampling the attendance at their units and not by trying to count every visitor. The physical layout of the monuments and memorials make counting every visitor an impossible task. Before 1998, staff counted visitors by making just one pass through the area, not by counting visitors for the entire 15-minute sample period. The correction for the proper sample period resulted in a 33% increase in reported visitation.

Without this administratively induced increase, the National Park Service would have received 274.7 million recreation visits (0.2% decrease). Because of the changes in counting procedures, the national visitation should be viewed as an adjustment and not as an actual increase in visitation. Visitation trends will have more value when examined on an individual park basis.

The national park system received 16.0 million more recreation visits from 1994 through 1998 (using the adjusted national total for 1998). This was a 6.1% increase over the five-year period or an average of 1.2% per year. When the last 10 years were examined, the rate of increase remained the same at 1.2% per year (256.1 million adjusted recreation visits were recorded during 1989).

Since January 1998, parks experienced an increase in visitation in 22 months when compared to the same month in the previous year. Except for September 1997, and December 1998, the park system had more recreation visits in every month than it received in the previous year. This increase occurred despite the influences of variable weather in the United States (affecting at least 50 units across the nation) and the troubled global economic condition, especially in Asia.

Recreation visits are skewed

Visitation to the national parks is highly skewed as the 10 most visited units (3% of the system) receive over 30% of the nation's visits and the 25 most visited units (7% of the system) receive 50% of the nation's visits. The full range of visitation to individual units extend from Blue Ridge Parkway's 19.0 million recreation visits to Aniakchak National Monument and Preserve's 209 recreation visits (table 1).

Recreation visits by region

The national park system is administratively divided into seven regions. This allows the agency to respond quickly to changing conditions within a limited geographic area. The change in recreation visits from 1997-98 ranged from +10 million in the National Capital Region to -847,000 in the Pacific West Region (table 2). Following is an overview of some factors that influenced the changes in the different regions.

Alaska—experienced its first year of decreasing visitation since 1989. The ongoing construction of a parking lot affected Kenai Fjords National Park (-43,000 visits) while a decline of 110,000 visits to Sitka National Historical Park was the result of an administrative change in the method of counting public use. Of course, the annual decrease for this region was only 23,000, which is less than half of the average daily visitation at the most visited unit of the national park system (Blue Ridge Parkway's average daily visitation is 52,000).

Intermountain—had its fourth year in a row with decreased visitation, as 66% of the units reported fewer visits in 1998 than in 1997. Grand Canyon National Park attributed its decrease of 552,000 recreational visits to inclement spring weather and the variable global economic situation.

Midwest—had 67% of the units report an increase in visitation, as it had beautiful weather in 1998 when compared with the El Niño weather-related problems in 1997. Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore (+625,000) is typical of this region as it had increased visitation in 11 of the 12 months.

National Capital—had the six major units in downtown Washington, D.C., report a combined 12.0 million more visits than they reported in 1997. The increase was the result of changes to the individual unit's counting procedures and should not be viewed as 12.0 million more people. All previous years, including 1997, were significantly under-reported. If the six units had received only

Table 1.
Most and least visited units of the national park system during 1998

Ten Most Visited Units		Ten Least Visited Units	
19,026,498	Blue Ridge Pkwy	4,451	Yukon-Charley Rivers NPRES
14,046,590	Golden Gate NRA	3,740	Bering Land Bridge NPRES
9,989,395	Great Smoky Mountains NP	3,616	Eugene O'Neill NHS
8,788,055	Lake Mead NRA	3,293	Alibates Flint Quarries NM
7,124,022	Gateway NRA	3,034	Thomas Stone NHS
6,584,802	George Washington Memorial Pkwy	2,960	Cape Krusenstern NM
5,810,094	Natchez Trace Pkwy	2,100	Noatak NPRES
5,200,633	Statue of Liberty NM	1,282	Nicodemus NHS
5,019,175	Delaware Water Gap NRA	462	Rio Grande WSR
4,804,185	Cape Cod NS	209	Aniakchak NM & Pres

Table 2.
National park system regional visitation statistics

Region	1998	Difference from 1997	% Change
Alaska	1,991,864	-22,986	-1.1
Intermountain	43,634,110	-631,333	-1.4
Midwest	22,140,343	1,208,121	5.8
National Capital	41,158,219	10,910,012	32.9
Northeast	54,629,311	1,186,428	2.2
Pacific West	57,737,486	-847,825	-1.4
Southeast	65,447,782	419,363	0.6

Table 3.
Visitation to national park system units by population center

Population Center	1998	Difference from 1997	% Change
Urban	89,963,908	11,589,831	14.8
Suburban	24,362,630	-537,763	-2.2
Outlying	51,152,721	-191,263	-0.4
Rural	90,809,767	30,365	0.0
Remote	3,629,097	90,905	2.6
Mixed	26,820,992	520,705	2.0

as many visits in 1998 as they reported in 1997, the region would have decreased by 5.8%.

Northeast—had its entire increase in four units: Castle Clinton National Monument (+281,000), Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area (+267,000), Statue of Liberty National Monument (+462,000), and Gateway National Recreation Area (+316,000). The region would have decreased by 0.3% without the increase in the four units.

Pacific West—experienced the largest decrease of all regions, reflecting the double influences of variable weather and the troubled global economy. Muir Woods National Monument (-686,000) had the largest decrease in visitation in the national park system but the decrease was the result of changes to its method of counting public use, not actually 686,000 less people.

Southeast—region and the nation was, as always, dominated by Blue Ridge Parkway (19,026,000), which accounts for 29% of the region's and 6.6% of the nation's recreation visits. Excluding Blue Ridge Parkway, the rest of the region decreased by 0.5%. Canaveral National Seashore was severely affected by the summer wildfires (-665,000), while Gulf Islands National Seashore (-403,000) also had weather-related problems. Meanwhile, Timucuan Ecological and Historic Reserve (+512,000 or +422%) opened up some new areas. This region received more recreation visits than the combined visitation

to the three least visited regions (Alaska, Midwest, and National Capital).

Recreation visits by population center

A major factor influencing visitation at all units of the national park system is their proximity to population centers (table 3). The more people who live within a day's drive of a unit and the ease with which people can get to a unit certainly affect the number of visits that a unit would receive. Following is a partial explanation as to what influenced visitation at the various geographical categories.

Urban—(located within the central city). The units in downtown Washington, D.C., that had counting procedure changes belong to this category. Because of these administrative changes and the inclusion of two new units in 1997 (Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial and Korean War Veterans Memorial), this category has increased 29% or 21 million recreation visits over the last two years.

Suburban—(located outside the central city but still within an area of greater than one million people). Of the nine units with more than one million visits, six reported a decrease in visitation. The combined visitation to the suburban and urban categories is 40% of the entire national park system.

Outlying—(located in an area of less than one million people). This category has a disproportionate number of units receiving

more than one million recreation visits (26%) resulting in a per unit average of over one million recreation visits.

Rural—(accessible by paved highway, scheduled air or marine transportation service). One hundred sixty-seven units, or almost half the national park system, are assigned to this category. As the largest and most visited group of units, its growth remains slow but constant, increasing by 4% over the last 10 years.

Remote—(requires special travel arrangements to reach). The 25 units that comprise remote units have the lowest average annual recreation visits (145,000) of any population center category. Despite the extraordinary measures that must be taken in order to visit these units, this category has grown by 86% over the last 10 years. Almost all the Alaskan units are in this category.

Mixed—(a mixture of urban, suburban, outlying, and remote areas). Blue Ridge Parkway dominates this category as it does in every category it is associated with. This is especially true of mixed units since there are only two other units designated as mixed (Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park and Natchez Trace Parkway). This category has decreased by 7% over the last 10 years.

Recreation visits in the future

The national park system has recorded approximately 11.2 billion visits (8.4 billion recreation visits and 2.8 billion non-recreation visits) from 1916-98. This means that the park system has received over 190 visits every second for the last 82 years. Assuming the current rate of increase, it should receive its 12 billionth visit some time in 2000. As the pressure increases to both maintain park resources and simultaneously provide the high quality of service that the public deserves, the sheer volume of visits to the national park system will be a major factor in the decision-making process. The need to control the number of people entering parks and provide for their safety will be an important aspect of future managerial decisions. **P**

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