

Visitor Use

Importance

Use by visitors is both a primary reason for the establishment of national parks and a factor in the condition of many of the resources that the parks are intended to protect. The opportunity for visitors to enjoy our natural and cultural treasures remains a primary purpose of our parks; however, careful management of visitor activities and potential impacts is also necessary if we are to preserve these treasures for future generations. While some visitor impacts have immediate consequences (e.g., vehicle collisions with wildlife), most impacts are less obvious. Visitor activities and associated infrastructure may affect many park resources, including air and water quality, the natural soundscape, wildlife and their habitat, and archeological sites and other cultural artifacts.

Status and Trends

Big Bend National Park (NP), located within the bend of the Rio Grande in southwestern Texas, is larger than 800,000 acres in size. The park encompasses the largest protected area representative of the Chihuahuan Desert and includes 533,900 acres of recommended Wilderness. The park also administers the 190-mile (305-kilometer) Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River. Some of the many opportunities for visitors in the park include: exploring the more than 150 miles of dirt roads and 200 miles of hiking trails through hiking, mountain biking, or horseback riding; engaging in river related activities, such as floating the canyons or open water by raft, canoe, or kayak; birding and other wildlife viewing; and camping in one of the park's four campgrounds or numerous backcountry sites.

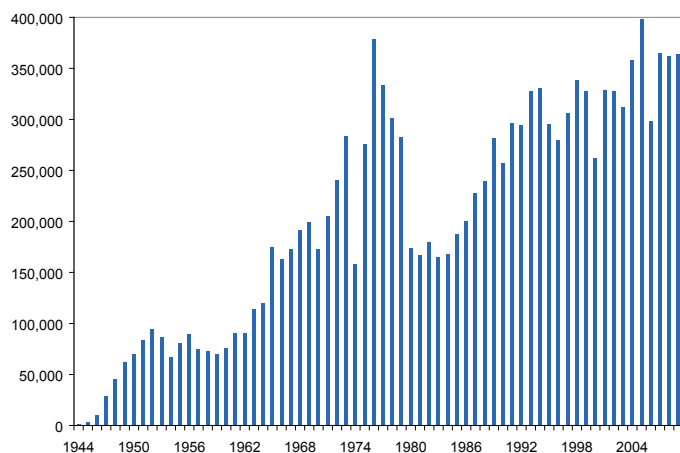


Figure 1. Annual number of visitors at Big Bend NP, 1944-2009.

RESOURCE BRIEF



NPS PHOTO/ERIC LEONARD

Visitors at a wayside exhibit at Big Bend NP

The park was established in 1944. Except for a jump in visitors in the late 1960's and most of the 1970s, visitation has generally steadily increased over time (Figure 1). The greatest number of visitors over the 65-year period was about 398,600 in 2005. Data from 2000-2009 indicate that in 90% of these years, March and April were two of the busiest three months of the year. In 2009, total overnight stays and camping (in campgrounds & backcountry sites) were highest in March, but also relatively high November to April of the year (Figure 2).

Information Source

NPS Stats, National Park Service Public Use Statistics Office, URL: <http://www.nature.nps.gov/stats/index.cfm>.

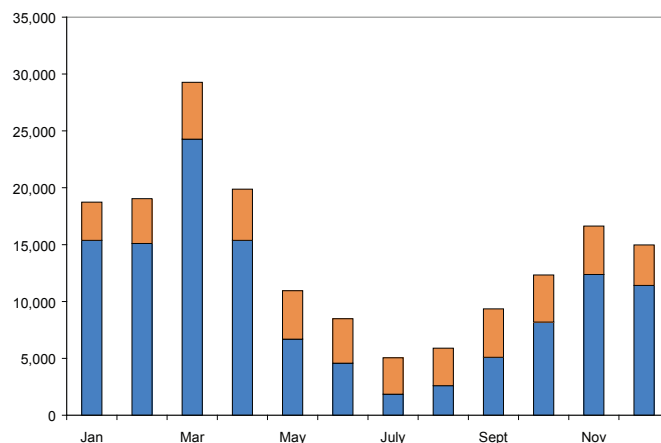


Figure 2. Total overnight stays in 2009 (with camping in blue and lodge stays in orange).