

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 the archeological sites and other cultural artifacts.

Status and Trends

Carlsbad Caverns National Park (NP) is located in southeastern New Mexico in the Guadalupe Mountains. The park consists primarily of grassland and desert shrubland habitats, with scattered woodlands at higher elevations. The park contains more than 110 limestone caves, the most famous of which is Carlsbad Cavern. The 8.2-acre Big Room of Carlsbad Cavern is self-guided and partially wheelchair accessible. Other guided tours vary in the level of difficulty. In addition to participating in cave tours, visitors to the ~47,000-acre park can also hike, camp in the backcountry, attend programs in the visitor center, view the night sky, and watch the emergence

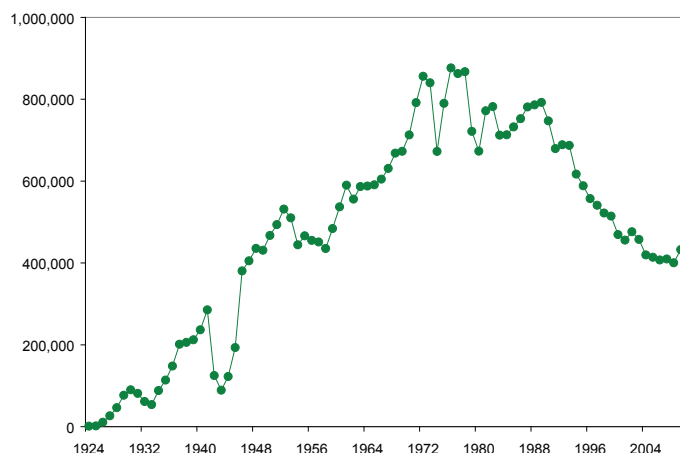


Figure 1. Annual visits to Carlsbad Caverns NP, 1924-2009.



NPS PHOTO

Visitors at the bat flight program

of the nearly 400,000 Brazilian (Mexican) free-tail bats from Carlsbad Cavern on summer evenings.

Visitation data for the park date back to 1924. Visitation at the park peaked in 1976-1978, with the highest number of visits recorded in 1976 (876,500; Figure 1). Over the last 10 years (2000-2009), the number of visits has ranged between about 400,000 and 475,000. In 2009, the park received the greatest number of visits in July, followed by June, March, and August (Figure 2). The number of visitors camping in backcountry sites was the highest in May, followed by October and February (Figure 2).

Information Source

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

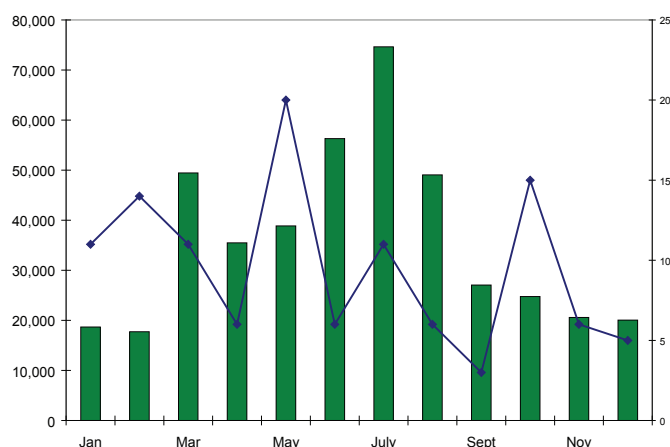


Figure 2. No. of monthly total visits (bars; labels on left axis) and backcountry stays (points; labels on right axis) in 2009.