

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

White Sands National Monument (NM), in southeastern New Mexico, preserves a substantial portion of the world's largest gypsum dune field, as well as the plants and animals that live there. The entire dune field covers 275 square miles (712 square kilometers) of desert. The nearly 144,000-acre monument has many activities for park visitors, including hiking on one of the monument's four trails or on the glistening white dunes, touring the park by car, bicycling, camping, sledding on the dunes, stargazing, and participating in guided tours and special events. Camping opportunities are provided through 10 backcountry camping sites.

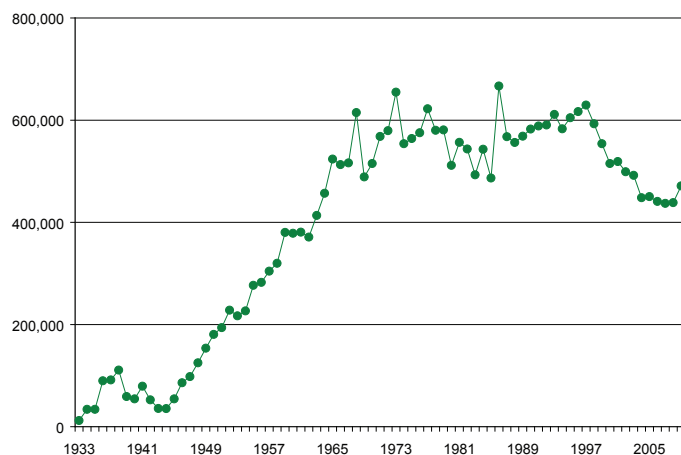


Figure 1. Annual no. of visitors at White Sands NM, 1933-2009.

RESOURCE BRIEF



NPS PHOTO

The glistening sands of White Sands NM

Nearly 80 years of visitation data are available for White Sands NM. The number of visits began to steadily increase starting in the mid 1940s (Figure 1). The number of visitors has been above 450,000 every year from 1964 to 2009, except for 2004 and 2006-2008. March (or April) and July have been the two busiest months in the last several years (e.g., 2009; see Figure 2). The number of backcountry campers varies considerably from month to month, with the greatest number of campers in 2009 occurring in March (Figure 2).

Information Source

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

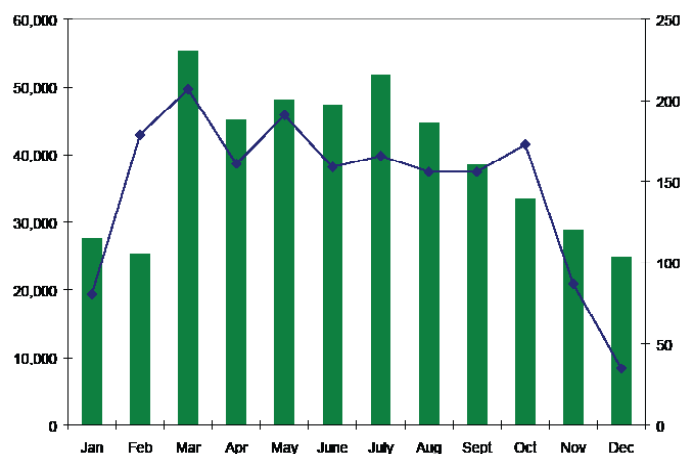


Figure 2. Total recreational visits (bars; labels on left axis) & backcountry campers (points; labels on right axis) per month in 2009.