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The National Parks Have Never Been More Popular

But you can still avoid a crowd if you head for the Arctic Circle.

By Andrew Flowers

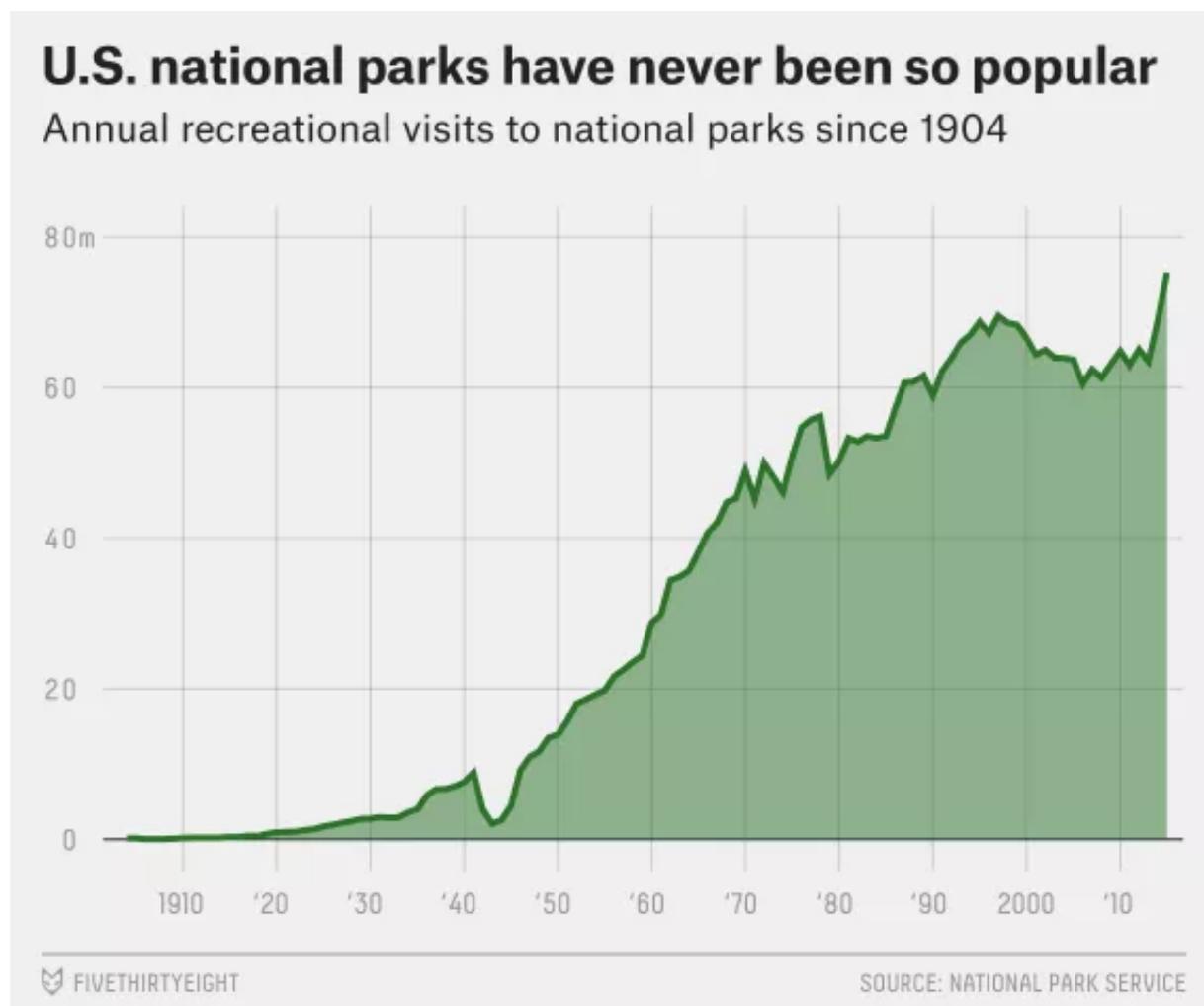
Filed under Recreation



A sunrise view from the Oconaluftee Overlook in Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

As the National Park Service prepares to celebrate [its centennial](#) in August, the national parks have never been more popular.

Total recreational visits to all NPS sites [topped 300 million](#) in 2015, an astounding 14 million increase from 2014. (In addition to the national parks, NPS sites include national historic sites, national monuments, national lakeshores and seashores, and so on.) Homing in on [just the 58 national parks](#) that reported visitation in 2015, recreational visits¹ totaled 75.3 million, besting the 1997 record of 69.5 million.



I've contributed to this trend, having visited 12 national parks in 15 visits since 2004. Some of my family members have lived outside Yellowstone for more than 20 years, and they report seeing the park grow increasingly busy during peak season (June through August). That's backed up by the numbers: Visitation to national parks is up 12 percent since 1996 and grew 18.6 percent in just the past two years (to 75.3 million from 63.5 million).

(Although total visitation is at an all-time high, visitation has declined on a per capita basis — as some researchers [have pointed out](#) — to 21.6 visits per 100 people in the U.S. in 2014 from a peak of 25.8 visits per 100 people in 1995.)

What explains this burst in popularity of the national parks?

“You mean besides the price of gas?” said Jeff Olson, a National Park Service spokesman. With [gas prices below \\$3 per gallon last year](#), visitation surged. “When the price of gas goes up, visitation stutters. Then visitors get used to the price of gas, and visitation returns,” he said.

Pam Ziesler, the program coordinator for the NPS’s [visitor use statistics](#), voiced another theory: “Visitors are saying it has to do with good weather. We had a beautiful spring and fall last year.” Weather can greatly affect visitation, particularly in the shoulder seasons (early spring and late fall). “But we have no firm, data-driven evidence” explaining the growing popularity of the parks, she said.

The NPS, in concert with the National Park Foundation, a charitable foundation, recently launched a promotional campaign including a [platform](#) to display Twitter and Instagram posts of people enjoying the parks ahead of the centennial, and that could be driving up visitation too. “We targeted the millennials. Those are the people we want to connect with and cultivate as the next generation of park visitors, supporters and activists,” Olson said.

The most popular park, by far, in terms of recreational visitors is Great Smoky Mountains National Park, in Tennessee and North Carolina. It has averaged nearly 10 million visitors per year since 1996, more than double that of Grand Canyon National Park, the second most visited. What makes Great Smoky Mountains so popular? Olson points out that it’s one of the few national parks that [charge no fee](#), and it’s near Interstate Highway 40. That makes it an [accessible drive](#) from big cities including Atlanta; Charlotte, North Carolina; Nashville, Tennessee; and Louisville, Kentucky.

After Grand Canyon National Park, next in popularity are Yosemite, Olympic and Yellowstone national parks. The least-visited parks are in American

Samoa and Alaska. [Kobuk Valley National Park](#), above the Arctic Circle in northern Alaska, did not report visitation in 2015 (and is not included in the table here).

The most popular national parks over the past 20 years

PARK	LOCATION	AVERAGE ANNUAL VISITORS
Great Smoky Mountains	NC, TN	9,572,089
Grand Canyon	AZ	4,449,030
Yosemite	CA	3,615,372
Olympic	WA	3,216,918
Yellowstone	WY, MT, ID	3,155,627
Rocky Mountain	CO	3,061,745
Cuyahoga Valley	OH	2,803,247
Zion	UT	2,674,496
Grand Teton	WY	2,620,022
Acadia	ME	2,421,256
Glacier	MT	1,944,050
Hawaii Volcanoes	HI	1,440,608
Hot Springs	AR	1,379,952
Joshua Tree	CA	1,356,098
Haleakala	HI	1,346,916
Shenandoah	VA	1,278,292
Mount Rainier	WA	1,215,781
Mammoth Cave	KY	1,199,348
Bryce Canyon	UT	1,163,925
Everglades	FL	1,026,046
Death Valley	CA, NV	980,140
Sequoia	CA	959,333
Badlands	SD	932,074
Arches	UT	925,767
Saguaro	AZ	685,738
Petrified Forest	AZ	660,023
Wind Cave	SD	655,503
Capitol Reef	UT	631,291
Virgin Islands	VI	570,028

Kings Canyon	CA	549,517
Mesa Verde	CO	528,569
Theodore Roosevelt	ND	501,255
Biscayne	FL	485,730
Crater Lake	OR	460,761
Carlsbad Caverns	NM	444,142
Canyonlands	UT	436,859
Channel Islands	CA	420,067
Glacier Bay	AK	417,135
Denali	AK	405,998
Redwood	CA	402,224
Lassen Volcanic	CA	385,168
Big Bend	TX	333,408
Great Sand Dunes	CO	274,835
Kenai Fjords	AK	272,669
Voyageurs	MN	230,550
Pinnacles	CA	187,639
Guadalupe Mountains	TX	187,455
Black Canyon of the Gunnison	CO	184,520
Congaree	SC	105,020
Great Basin	NV	87,343
Dry Tortugas	FL	64,414
Wrangell-St. Elias	AK	53,110
Katmai	AK	48,403
North Cascades	WA	23,059
Isle Royale	MI	18,216
Gates of the Arctic	AK	9,358
Lake Clark	AK	8,524
National Park of American Samoa	AS	7,067

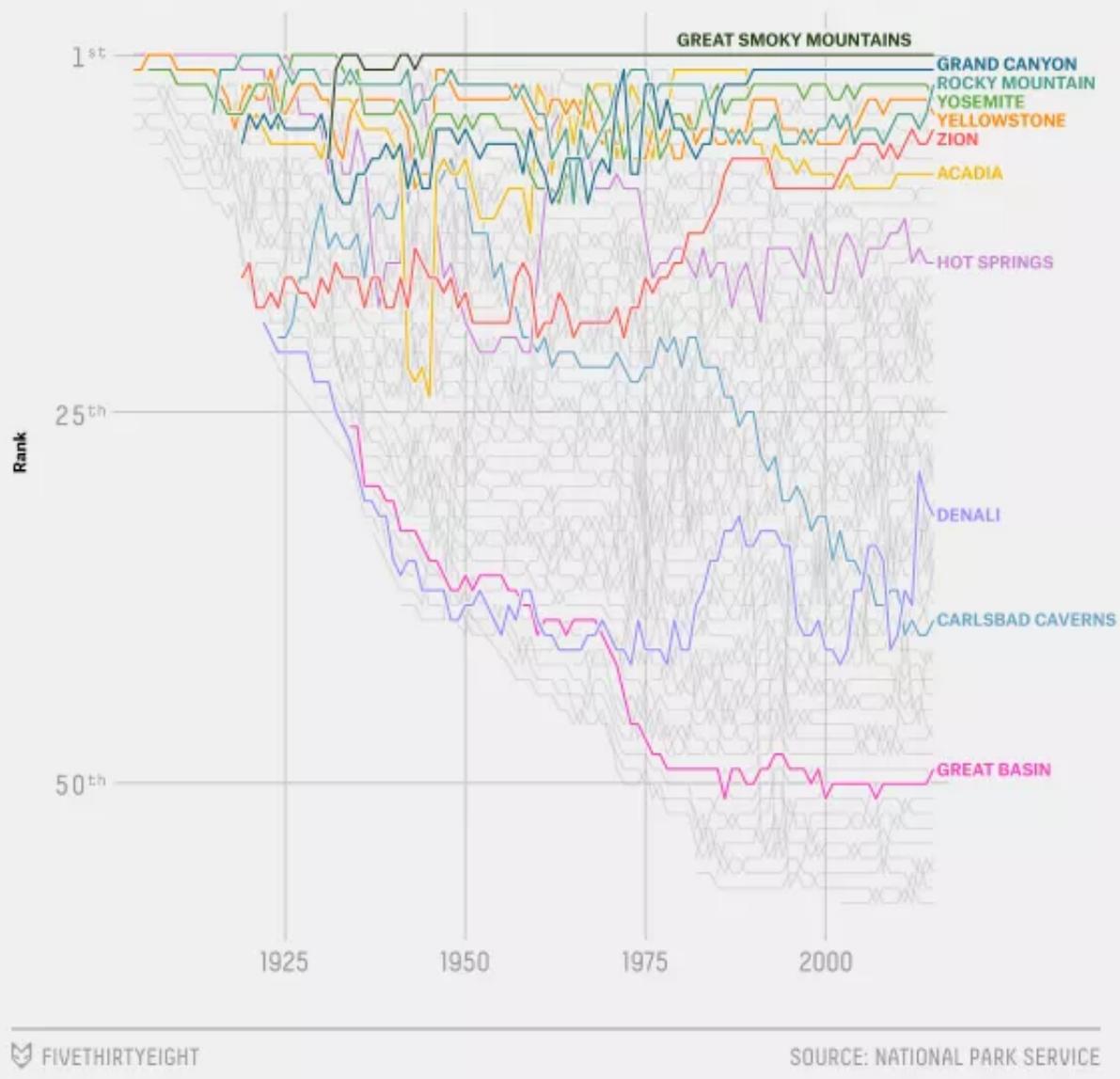
Average annual recreational visitors, 1996-2015

SOURCE: NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

The Great Smoky Mountains National Park has kept its title as the most-visited park since 1944. Grand Canyon National Park, however, has been No. 2 since only 1990. Acadia (in Maine) was the second-most-visited national park from 1979 to 1989 but has fallen to No. 9.

The most popular national parks

National parks ranked by number of visitors in a given year



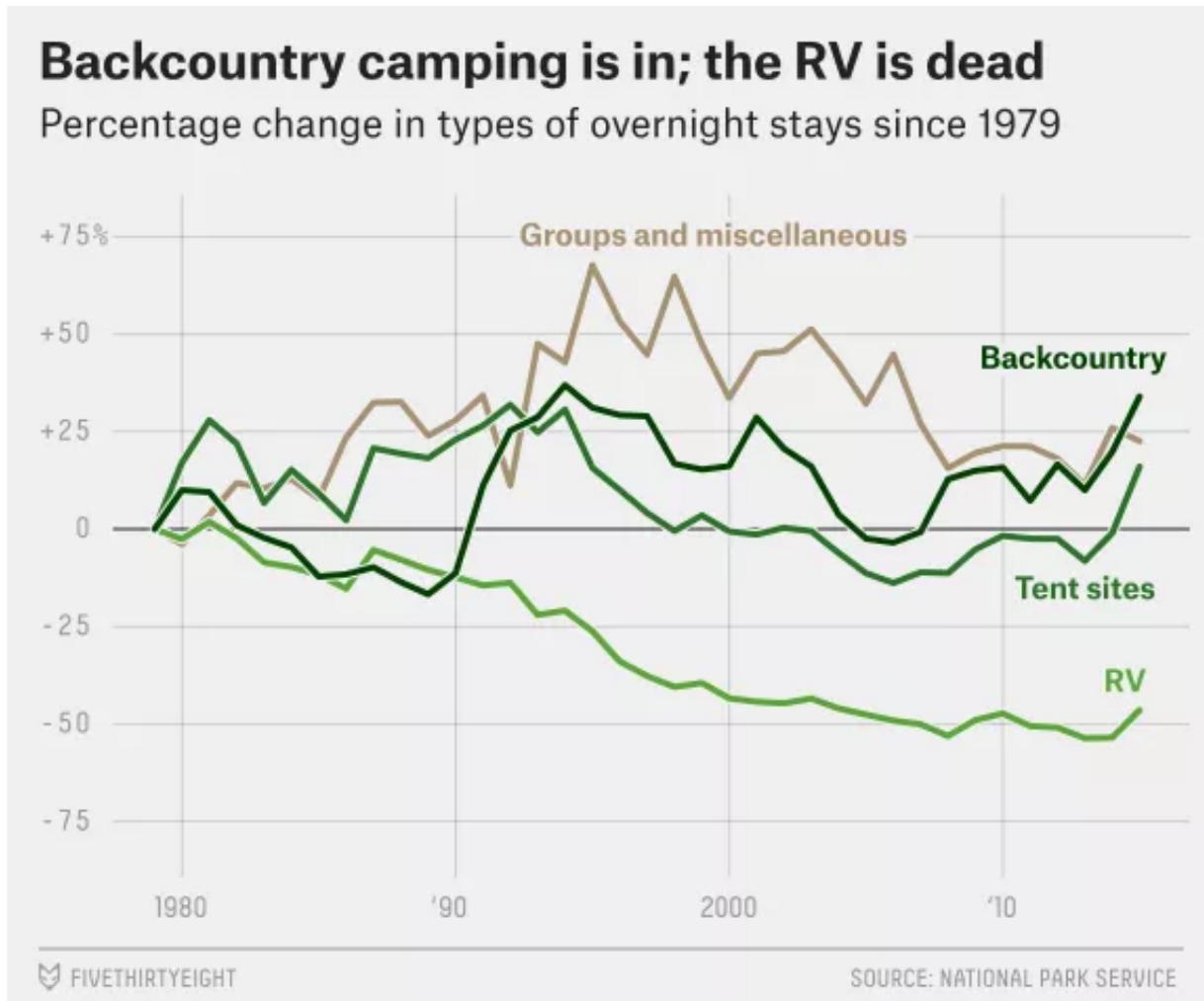
The NPS has [data on recreational visits](#) going back to 1904, more than a decade before the agency was created,² but began tracking more detailed data on visits, including overnight stays, in 1979. Total overnight stays are down 6 percent since 1979, to 6.3 million from 6.7 million. But overnight stays are up 21 percent since bottoming out at 5.2 million in 2008.

Backcountry and tent overnight stays have increased in recent years, up 34 percent and 16 percent, respectively, since 1979. (Since I have backcountry camped at Yellowstone and Grand Teton in the past three years, this rings true. Even the remote campsites are sometimes hard to reserve.)

Miscellaneous overnight stays, referred to in the chart here as “groups and

miscellaneous,” are primarily camping in organized groups, such as a work retreat or Girl Scout trip. They make up 9 percent of all overnight stays and have also grown (23 percent since 1979).

RV camping, however, is dead — or dying, at least. It has declined 46 percent since 1979 and now makes up less than one-quarter of all overnight stays across the national parks.



But this is just recreational visitors, who make up about three-quarters of all visitors to the national parks. The other quarter are nonrecreational visits, and they have more than doubled in number since 1979. Nonrecreational visitors include commuters, conference attendees, research scientists and employees who work at businesses within the park.

More nonrecreational visitors, not more hours

Percentage change by type of visitor since 1979



FIVETHIRTYEIGHT

SOURCE: NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Visits — defined as “a person in a park on a day” — are just one way to measure park usage. Total hours spent tell a different story. “Visitor hours are equally important when looking at impacts on facilities, roads, staffing, etc.,” Ziesler said. Total hours include overnight stays and better reflect intensity of use. By this metric, Grand Canyon and Yellowstone national parks had the highest recreational hours in 2015. Overall, total recreational hours are up 37 percent since 1979, while nonrecreational hours are about flat.

Although the rock-star parks such as Yellowstone, Grand Tetons, Zion and others are incredible, they’re also equally busy. In my experience, some of the best times can be had at the less-visited parks. Cumberland Island National Seashore in Georgia, for example, was one of the wildest and most beautiful places I’ve ever visited.

Footnotes

1. The NPS defines a recreation visit as the entry of a person onto lands or waters administered by the NPS. From the NPS’s 2015 Statistical Abstract: “Visits originating on surface vehicles (trains, boats, other) and aircraft may be counted if they stop and disembark passengers on NPS administered territory. The applicable rule is that one entrance per individual per day is

countable.” ^

2. President Woodrow Wilson signed the [law establishing the NPS in 1916](#), formalizing control over several parks that preceded the agency (such as Yellowstone, established in 1872, and Yosemite, in 1890). ^